

KEITH MITCHELL¹

Q: Literary history, be it national, local, or regional, is perhaps the most conservative form of literary study, with many claiming that the method is outmoded. What can literary histories do to overcome both the risk of obsolescence and their inherent conservatism?

A: One of the primary advances that literary history as an ideal and a practice can do is to become far more diverse than perhaps what it currently is. What I mean by this is that at the national, local, and regional level, literary history needs to be more inclusive in highlighting underrepresented writers and intellectuals. If we're looking at periodization, within the field that I teach—American literature—I always include many diverse, underrepresented voices. I do so not only because of the importance of representation. I do so to emphasize that these underrepresented voices are *always* in dialogue with those writers who comprise the American literary canon.

Q: Literary histories are known for their preoccupation with identity. Canons are made or broken by them, ideologies are affirmed or restored, and writers are recovered or left out. As intellectual enterprises that hold a certain authority over a segment of culture, can they become a culture in and of themselves?

A: Yes, they absolutely can become a culture within themselves; and unfortunately, they can sometimes become a closed culture in which underrepresented voices are excluded. Identity is very important in the construction of literary canons; however, those scholars and intellectual who hold the keys to the kingdom often are unable to understand the importance of mining various voices who have gone out of favor. For example, I just read an article on the rise and decline of teaching Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetry in literature classes; that she has been consigned to the dustbin of literary history. I am hoping that with a newly

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published collection of her diary entries that her work will come back into favor and that literature professors will begin to teach her extraordinary work again. However, this kind of thing is far from the course in literary studies, regardless of a writer's race or gender. For example, it took many decades for important American writers like Herman Melville to come back into favor after he published *Moby Dick*. Likewise, Gloria Naylor is one of the most important Black women writers of the 1980s and 90s, but her brilliant work is not taught nearly as much as it had been in past decades. Certainly, her work and others who have been "forgotten" need to be.

Q: For literary histories, literary periods are, first and foremost, instruments of contrast and vehicles of legitimization. Oftentimes, periodization speaks more of literary historiography's status anxiety and disciplinary autonomy than of their function in describing and investigating literary histories. Does periodization still matter beyond preserving the authority of periodization itself?

A: I think periodization does still matter. However, I also recognize that it is constructed. I often raise questions in my American literature classes regarding distinctions among traditionally demarcated literary periods. For example, when I introduce American postmodernism to my students, I use specific texts to get students to see not only perhaps the (constructed) differences among the periods but also on a pragmatic level, many of the students at my university go on to teach high school and middle school English. Students' teacher certification exams (MTELEs) emphasize literary periodization and the courses these students will eventually teach also emphasize literary periodization. Therefore, as a teacher and mentor, I feel that it is my obligation to ensure that they have an excellent understanding of American literary history and its periodization. Nevertheless, I do teach them strategies to make periodization less structured by teaching them how to work around certain strictures inherent in periodization. For example, the first few weeks of class, I'll have students read several foundational texts by early colonial American writers, including Captain John Smith, William Bradford, Anne Bradstreet, and Phillis Wheatley, among numerous others. Then, towards the end of the course, we'll read Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy*, which is a "postmodern" text that is set in the colonial period. So, we not only discuss intertextuality but ways to break away from the rigidity inherent in periodization. My objective is to show them that writers and these so-called American literary periods are often in dialogue.

Q: How is contemporaneity, as a historiographic milestone, negotiated in a global context?

A: Perhaps there needs to be less emphasis on national literatures that tend to silo texts as belonging to a specific country as opposed to the world. We are all globally connected and engaged in one way or another, as are writers around the world. One of things we should all have noticed in contemporary literature is references to all kinds of new technologies in contemporary literature. I also think we are seeing an uptick in historiographic metafictional novels that are set in the past but that also commenting on our contemporary condition.

Q: How do you comment on the legitimacy of literary histories written by a single author? Should literary histories become the domain of research collectives?

A: I don't believe that literary histories should be the domain of research collectives. These research collectives would, I feel, become gatekeepers to what they might see as "legitimate histories" as opposed to so-called illegitimate histories—usually histories of silenced or underrepresented voices. And even if these research collectives consisted of a coterie of liked-minded, underrepresented individuals, I imagine that they could just as easily fall into the trap of excluding dissenting ideas and voices that have a stake in presenting counter narratives to their understanding of so-called "legitimate histories."

