

Why Emergent Literatures Matter

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This talk is drawn from a book project that grows out of my work for the *Cambridge History of American Literature*. It's going to be talk about what it means to write literary history and also about what we might call the theory of emergent literatures.

Thinking about these subjects brought me back to the time when I was in graduate school, and back further to a moment in the spring of 1984 when the *Harvard Crimson* published a piece about a conference being convened by Sacvan Bercovitch that was meant to inaugurate a project called *Cambridge History of American Literature*. It was intended to be a five year, five-volume project, and the thing that was going to be distinctive about it was that, unlike many literary histories which are collections of fairly short (say, thirty-page) essays, the *Cambridge* featured larger pieces of near-monograph length, about four in each volume, written by younger scholars. And it was not going to attempt to get rid of the seams between the sections, in contrast to the literary history that many of us used to prepare for our graduate exams, Robert E. Spiller's 1948 *Literary History of the United States*, which really tried to smooth over its narrative, to make sure that there was a continuous, consistent narrative voice. This new history was going to do the opposite: it was a time of contention in literary studies – the beginning of the so-called culture wars in the U.S. – and what Bercovitch decided to do was to allow people to develop their ideas and their methods at length. It turned out to be something longer than a five-year, five-volume project: it turned out to be eight volumes and more than twenty years. In fact the final volume just came out last year. I often make jokes about *Gilligan's Island* when I'm talking about this project.

Why was a new literary history necessary in 1984?

Let me answer this by reminding you of the now infamous assessment of Harriet Beecher Stowe and her writing made by George F. Whicher in Spiller's *Literary History of the United States*. Whicher's contribution to the Spiller *History* is called "Literature and Conflict," and it is filled with judgments like this one about Stowe's family: "Any of the Beechers, if cast away on a cannibal island, would have been capable of organizing a church, a school, a temperance movement, and a ladies' aid society before help could arrive."

Whicher's main point about Stowe turns out to be that "Mrs. Stowe knew human nature instinctively and thoroughly, but she was constantly hampered in her presentation of the figures that she could create at will by her desire to make them illustrate the moral prepossessions that she had been brought up to regard as sacred." In the end, however, disparaging the moral commitment of Stowe and her extended family isn't enough for Whicher: he must turn her into a hypocrite as well.

And so after a series of damning innuendoes and anecdotes, Whicher finally tells us this one: So after suggesting that a "Freudian analysis" of Stowe's late works *Agnes of Sorrento* and *Lady Byron Vindicated* "might cast a startling light on long repressed urges in Harriet Beecher Stowe," he turns once again to anecdote and gives us three that are said to illustrate "conflicts between the rigid standard of conduct in which the Beechers had been reared and the desires natural to opulent and creative personalities." I'll describe the third and final one:

Mrs. Thomas Bailey Aldrich records a delicious anecdote of Mrs. Stowe's early arrival at an afternoon party on a sweltering day, of her innocent partaking of a refreshing punch and feeling a subsequent drowsiness, and of the hostess' horror when she had to receive her guests in the small drawing room close to the alcove where on a sofa, in hoop skirt and lace mitts, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* lay sleeping off her potatoes."

"Obviously," Whicher moralizes in the concluding paragraph of his essay, "Harriet Beecher Stowe was neither a great personality nor a great artist."

This is the kind of thing that doctoral students were reading to prepare for their exams in 1984.

Whicher's essay was an extreme embodiment of many of the major faults of the Spiller history. And I'd say that my work on emergent literatures is founded on a conception of history that is diametrically opposed to Whicher's belief that there is some Archimedean point that the literary historian can adopt in order to gain a view that is perfectly balanced, impartial, and objective. Of course, it should be clear, from the excerpts that I've presented, that Whicher's essay itself belies his assertion of objectivity. He says at one point that "the historian must avoid hyperbole," but his own practice seems to violate that theory.

I believe that today's literary historians generally recognize the impossibility of the sort of historiographical objectivity that the Spiller history attempted to create. Indeed in 1986, Bercovitch predicted that "the problem of ideology" would "become increasingly important to all of [his] contributors in the course of writing the [*Cambridge*] *History*."

What Whicher would probably have called "common sense" or "received wisdom" today's literary historian is more likely to identify as ideology at work. Whicher's condescension toward women and blacks mirrors his condescension to art that possesses a social purpose. For literary historians during the past twenty years, however, the methodological challenge involved in assessing the roles that categories like gender, race, ethnicity, or class play in literary history requires a reconsideration of precisely what the nature of these categories is, what they've been traditionally conceived as. In the old days, they were conceived as extrinsic to the literary text. If you talked about them, students might accuse you of "reading into" the text. Now, of course, we believe that they are intrinsic, that they are a necessary part of formal analysis.

(Stephen Greenblatt has a wonderful essay called "Culture," which "teaches" really well. It's very helpful if you ever need to explain to students why they're doing all this close reading stuff, while you're talking about "culture." It makes a marvelous argument about the relationship between cultural analysis and close reading, why close reading is the bedrock of any cultural analysis. For Greenblatt, it's precisely close reading that enables to see the kind of ideological and cultural forms that have been encoded into "great" literary works.)

I think that our ability to recognize the importance of the categories I mentioned categories shifted over the time that the *Cambridge History* was written. The *Crimson* article noted that the “20 leading Americanists” who would be writing the *History* were all “under 45 years old” and added – as if it were especially worthy of note – that “the contributions of these younger scholars . . . include feminist and Black interpretations of literary history, as well as interdisciplinary approaches.” (Having just turned 45 myself, I find it comforting to know that I still just qualify as a “younger scholar.”)

This assertion was followed by a cautionary comment from the esteemed cultural historian Leo Marx, who taught down the river at MIT, and said that using such younger scholars carries with it “the danger” of “overemphasizing contemporary fashions” of literary criticism. By the time the 1980s turned into 1990s, the *Cambridge History* had grown to eight volumes and its completion was nowhere in sight. And it had become quite clear that feminism and Black studies were much more than merely “contemporary fashions” and had found a place within the canon of what is regular taught at colleges and universities.

When the *Cambridge History* was in its planning stages in its planning stages in the early 1980s, a fair and progressive approach to contemporary American fiction meant foregrounding the importance of texts written by women, as Wendy Steiner was doing in her section of the seventh volume (which was devoted to prose writing after 1940), or African American writers, as Morris Dickstein was were doing in. his contribution to that volume.

As time passed, however, it became increasingly clear to me as the then-associate editor of the *History* that no account of American fiction after World War II could seem anything but hopelessly dated without an extended treatment of what I began to call “emergent American literatures.” (As associate editor, I was responsible for tracking our “coverage” of the field and tracking changes in the profession and in what people were interested in talking about at conferences like the MLA and ASA). I began to argue that some of the most vital writing in American fiction after the Second World War is being done by writers who are conscious of belonging to groups that have been constructed as minorities by American culture and who, as groups, have less cultural standing than

the Jewish American or the African American. Indeed, in Morris Dickstein's account of the novel between 1940 and 1970, which takes a resolutely biographical approach to literary history, the big story was the interplay of these two traditions. Bellow, Baldwin, Ellison and Roth emerged as the heroes of his section of the *History*.

I suggested that these other minority traditions needed to be included and needed to be included in a comparative way that made clear the structural affinities among them bodies of literature. I'd been reading Abdul JanMohammed and David Lloyd's introduction to the volume *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1990). "Cultures designated as minorities," they wrote there, "have certain shared experiences by virtue of their similar antagonistic relationship to the dominant culture." In this statement, I heard echoes one of Raymond Williams's model of culture as the interplay of dominant, emergent, and residual forms, with emergent culture serving as locus for the creation of "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship."

My arguments eventually prevailed, and we looked around for someone who could do this. Now these days, almost all aspirants for jobs in twentieth-century American literature feel that they need to be able to teach ethnic or minority literatures of some kind, preferably in a kind comparative way. There's a good reason for that, and the good reason is what I'm going to try to talk about: the affinities among these traditions. The bad reason, of course, is it seems to deans and administrators that you can kill many birds with one stone. Instead of getting separate people who specialize in individual literatures, you get one person who can do several of them. But very few people were doing this kind of comparative work at that time.

In fact, in an article entitled "The Politics of Literary History" and published in *American Literature* in 1987, Emory Elliott had promised that the then-forthcoming *Columbia Literary History of the United States* would include a path-breaking essay on "comparative literary cultures" that would be "team-written" and would examine "the emergence of Asian, Hispanic, and black literatures in the nation." When the volume was published in 1988, there were three separate essays called "Asian American Literature," "Mexican American Literature," and "Afro-American Literature." Six years later, when we were rethinking the

Cambridge History, there was still no comparative history of the ethnic literatures of the United States in the twentieth-century, let alone an account that sought to understand the structural affinities between literatures based on ethnicity and gay and lesbian literatures.

And so the job fell to me, and the *Emergent Literatures* section was born. I set myself the task of historicizing and comparing the fiction produced in the latter half of the twentieth century by Native Americans, Chicanos, Asian Americans, and gay and lesbian Americans. I sought to delve into the process of literary emergence that has marked all of them.

I understood the problem faced by all U.S. minority cultures to be this: how to transform themselves from marginalized cultures, often regarded as “foreign” or “un-American,” into *emergent* cultures capable of challenging and reshaping the U.S. mainstream: both mainstream culture and the canonical American literary tradition.

My conception of cultural emergence was drawn from Raymond Williams’s analysis of the dynamics of modern culture, an analysis that served, I believe, as the foundation for minority discourse theory in the 1990s. Williams characterizes culture as a constant struggle for dominance in which a hegemonic mainstream – what Williams originally calls “the effective dominant culture” and later, following Gramsci, calls “hegemony” – seeks to defuse the challenges posed to it by both residual and emergent cultural forms. According to Williams, residual culture consists of those practices that are based on the “residue of ... some previous social and cultural institution or formation,” but continue to play a role in the present. When I talk to people about this, I always need to stress that this doesn’t mean that residual cultures are minor or gone and not really noticeable. In fact, they’re major. One example that I frequently give is Emerson in the 1830s. With the rise of Jacksonian market society, you would think that we’re in a post-Enlightenment culture, when the influence of the old republican Biblical culture has fallen away, and Emerson is trying to think something new. But he writes in his journal that audiences will accept his doctrine of “the infinitude of the private man,” except when he’s talking about religion. The old-time religion is still powerful, even if it’s not longer part of a dominant consensus, and Emerson has to take it into account, as he tries to push the envelope of cultural forms. Residual culture is still powerful culture.

Emergent cultures are powerful, but on the other end of the spectrum. Williams characterizes emergent culture as the site or set of sites where “new meanings and values new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created.” Moreover, he writes, “since we are always considering relations within a cultural process, definitions of the emergent, as of the residual, can be made only in relation to a full sense of the dominant.” Which means that it makes no sense to think of the emergent apart from the dominant: the very definition, or self-definition, of the emergent depends on the existence of the dominant. culture. And it’s that relation that became interesting to me, because it seemed to me to be a way of reading what these different literatures were trying to do: trying to be inspired by a dominant tradition that didn’t want to include them, so feeling one foot in, one foot out – and that seemed to be the kind of situation that many of the writers that interested me were finding themselves in.

I believe that the literary historian can use this conception of the *emergent*, because it offers a dynamic model of the interaction of literary cultures, a model that focuses our attention on the fact that literatures are not simply sets of texts but rather institutions of culture with settled practices that evolve over time, institutions that get taught and reproduced on college campuses among other places. Thus, the negotiations that take place between marginalized ethnic literatures and whatever canon of literature occupies the center always involve not only questions of literary influence among writers but also other factors, again things that previous literary historians might have considered simply to be background or context or extrinsic. Things like practices of higher education, publishing practices, the creation of anthologies, and the awarding of literary prizes. For example, as the critic Héctor Calderón has noted, the history of twentieth-century Chicano literature is marked by the fact that “almost all Chicana and Chicano writers of fiction have earned advanced degrees in the United States.” Although Chicano literature “may inform the dominant culture with an alternative view of the world filtered through myth and oral storytelling or offer an oppositional political perspective,” Calderón argues that “this is done . . . from within educational institutions. We must realize,” he writes, “how institutionally Western” Chicano literature is. As a result of both their training and their teaching, these authors find

themselves deeply influenced by canonical traditions of U.S., English, and European literature, and the literature that they produce is almost necessarily hybrid in form.

So for example the protagonist of Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* is named Wittman Ah Sing, a reference to the great poet of individualism. The reference isn't only by Kingston, by the way: it's by the character's parents, who now exactly what they're doing in naming him. Or think of N. Scott Momaday, the Native American novelist and poet who won the Pulitzer Prize for 1968 – so unexpectedly, that his publisher had to make sure that, in fact, they had published the novel. Momaday cites not only the different Native American traditions to which he belongs as influences, but also Emily Dickinson, Melville, and Faulkner. Without these writers, his novel – and as a result the Native American novel as we know it – would not have been possible. So that's one thing that the emergent model does for us: it helps us understand how texts and authors interact with one another and the ways in which there are bodies of literature that get produce.

The emergent model also gives us a way of understanding what we might call developmental inequalities among the literatures that are produced by different emergent traditions. It helps to explain why a progressive approach to American prose fiction after 1940 would immediately identify the contributions of African American writers and women writers, but somehow neglect the writers who were interesting to me. The concept of the *emergent* helped to identify a set of literatures that I thought were fighting for canonical notice even as they were engaged in critique of U.S. literature. On the other hand, it allowed me to exclude certain other kinds of writing that had not yet coalesced into coherent bodies of literature (such as writings oriented around the consciousness and experiences of the working class). It seemed to me a way of drawing a certain set of fluid boundaries.

Students have asked me over the years used to ask me when literatures stopped being emergent, and I used to say jokingly, when one of their writers wins a Nobel Prize. So Jewish American literature, no; African American literature, no; but all these other guys, yes. I meant it jokingly, but actually I think there's more than a little truth to it in the sense that a lot of these writers, when they think of themselves as participating in

something called a “literature,” are really thinking of the ways in which literatures are given notice by formal things, such as prizes. The Native American novel, as I mentioned, was in some real way instantiated by Momaday’s winning of the Pulitzer Prize. The Chicano novelists looked around and thought to themselves, “Nobody’s giving us any prizes, so we’ll make up one of our own and we’ll make up an anthology of our own.” The writer Tomás Rivera once remarked to the critic Juan Bruce-Novoa that the Chicanos were the first people to have an anthology before they had a literature (202).

Furthermore, the emergent model encourages us to investigate the ways in which U.S. culture’s reception of previous texts by emergent authors influences the production and reception of future texts from emergent literary cultures. So, for example, it enables us to understand a moment, early on in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*, when we find the protagonist, Wittman Ah Sing, beginning his literary career by imitating the poetry of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). He writes poetry that sounds very “black.” To him that’s a slot that’s called “radical” that he can put himself into, and the novel is in part about how he learns to grow away from that particular set of imitative tendencies.

In addition to helping us to conceptualize the strategies used by these literatures to gain audiences during the mid-twentieth-century, the idea of the *emergent* also focuses attention on the change that has occurred in the attitudes held by these writers in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement. No longer is “dehyphenation” the abiding goal of the U.S. ethnic or gay writer. Ethnic writers of the early part of the twentieth century often sought to understand and represent the ways in which they and those like them were portrayed as different, incomprehensible, inscrutable, uncivilized – in short, portrayed as “others” who could not be assimilated. They sought a solution to what I’ve come to call *the impasse of hyphenation*, the idea that the American who belongs to a minority group is caught between two incompatible identities, the minority (Jewish, Black, Asian, Hispanic, Native, etc.) and the majority (“American”). The writer Frank Chin called this, in the Asian American context, the “dual personality,” as if somehow all Asian Americans were split down the middle and made schizophrenic by U.S. culture. Identity thus becomes a

matter of either/or: either “American” or whatever it is that precedes the hyphen.

In “The Hyphenate Writer and American Letters,” first published in 1964, Daniel Aaron described a three-stage process “by which the ‘minority’ writer [passes] from ... ‘hyphenation’ to ‘dehyphenation.’” “(Those of you who know Frantz Fanon’s work might find it interesting to compare Aaron’s account to the account that Fanon gives in *The Wretched of the Earth*, though I don’t think that Aaron himself knew Fanon’s work. Citing Aaron in this way makes him seem reactionary, by the way, which he wasn’t: he was the author of a superb book called *Writers on the Left* that is still essential reading for anyone interested in radical writing in the early twentieth century in the United States). According to Aaron, in the final stage, “the minority writer . . . no longer feels hyphenated, because he has . . . linked himself with his illustrious literary predecessors to the degree that he can now speak out uninhibitedly as an American. . . . Without renouncing his ethnic or racial past, he has translated his own and his minority’s personal experiences . . . into the province of the imagination” (73). Aaron’s essay argues that the process of dehyphenation is both desirable and inevitable for ethnic writers who seek to be literary artists.

Emergent writers think of themselves differently. They think of themselves as writing from the margins of U.S. culture, but feel themselves to be sufficiently empowered to offer a challenge to the center. So the goal is not to enter the mainstream but to divert and transform it. For example, like such earlier examples of Asian American writing as Sui Sin Far’s story “The Wisdom of the New” or John Okada’s *No-No Boy*, Kingston’s novel *Tripmaster Monkey* registers the pain of being caught between two cultures. But Wittman Ah Sing, the protagonist, is not interested in kowtowing to mainstream attitudes about either identity or art. Instead, he wants to define an identity for himself that can truly be called “Chinese American,” an identity in which the “Chinese” is no longer marginalized by the “American.” So “Chinese American” would no longer be some kind of oxymoron: it would simply be another way of talking about the “American.” The idea of the *emergent* highlights the fact that U.S. ethnic writing has become less interested in strategies of assimilation than in strategies of negotiation.

With its emphasis on practices that are produced by cultural groups, the idea of the *emergent* helps us to gain insight into one subject of these negotiations between margin and center, namely the relationship between the universal and the particular in U.S. writing. Emergent ethnic writers no longer accept without question the universalizing logic of individualism that lies at the heart of U.S. liberal culture.

This logic is based upon what political theorists call *ontological individualism*, the belief that the individual has an *a priori* and primary reality and that society is a derived, second-order construct. From Ralph Waldo Emerson to John Rawls, U.S. theorists of individualism have typically sought to shift the ground of inquiry from culture and society to the individual, translating moments of social choice into moments of individual choice. This strategy is a literal application of the motto *e pluribus unum* – “from many, one” – which expresses the idea that the United States is nation formed through the union of many individuals. In the hands of thinkers like Emerson and Rawls, the customary sense of this motto is reversed: they move from the many to the one, to the single individual, paring away differences in order to reach a common denominator that will allow them to make claims about all individuals.

So Emerson will talk about “the soul,” and once he can establish that every person has a fundamental equality in the soul, then he can start to make generalizations about human beings: it’s not the he ignores social questions, but it’s the soul that gives him purchase on social questions. Likewise Rawls reinvents contract theory to create what he calls “the original position of equality,” a thought experiment in which you know you’re going to live in a society there are going to be inequalities – of class, race, gender, talent, intelligence, hair color, whatever it is – but you don’t know how you are going to be marked by those inequalities. So you go behind a blindfold that he calls “the veil of ignorance” and you argue with people about how the best society should be constructing, not knowing what attributes you’re going to have when you become part of that society. It’s a kind of rigged game, because he believes that in the end you would only choose one kind of society: that would be the society in which the lot of the least well-off is maximized. Just in case you’re going to be at the very bottom of society, you’d choose a society where that bottom was not as bad as it would be in other societies. You might choose,

for example, a non-slave state instead of a slave state, because the person worst-off in a non-slave state would still not be a slave. For Rawls, it comes down to one set of arguments; he believes that every single individual, if he or she were rational, would choose in the same way. That's his way of shifting the ground to the individual.

This view underwrites Aaron's account of dehyphenation. For Aaron, dehyphenation is not only a process of Americanization, but also a process of individuation and universalization. Aaron argues that the dehyphenated writer "is not "necessarily conciliatory and apolitical. His protest or revolt, however, is made as a man and as a writer—not as a self-appointed spokesman for a minority, a class, a race. It is the human condition and the human predicament, finally, that engage him" (83). Aaron's either/or logic suggests that you can be either "hyphenate" or "American," but not both, and that ultimately, to be a literary artist, you must be neither. The solution to the problem of hyphenation is, for Aaron, ultimately a universalist humanism. In contrast, emergent writers like Kingston have discovered not only that their cultural identities are necessarily hybrid, but also that that every so-called "American" identity is, in fact, necessarily hybrid, though mainstream U.S. culture has worked hard to deny that fact.

Thus one of the most powerful things about reading emergent writing is that it enables us to rethink what it means to write in the American grain; it allows us to rethink what we mean by the category "the American." So it gives us a model with which to discuss the relationship between mainstream U.S. culture and those practices that it deems "deviant." It thus immediately points us to the structural similarities between ethnic writing Americans and the writing of gay and lesbian Americans. The experience of being in the closet – an abiding subject for gay and lesbian writing – is akin to the feeling of being caught between cultures that ethnic Americans undergo when they are encouraged to dehyphenate themselves. Mainstream U.S. culture fosters an oppositional relationship with gay culture by luring gay men and women into mimicking its thinking by what Paul Monette calls "halving the world into us and them," even as it attempts to keep gay culture divided by making it difficult for gay men and women to acknowledge one another openly. Aware that mainstream U.S. culture has a large stake in preserving both the logic of either/or and the logic of universalist individualism, emergent

ethnic and gay writers promote something else: a *cosmopolitan* perspective that is conceived in contradistinction not primarily to nationalism, as in earlier theories of cosmopolitanism, but now in contradistinction to this idea of universalism. Cosmopolitanism conceives of difference, not as a problem to be solved as it is for Emerson or Rawls – for whom difference is a problem because they want to be able to make generalizations that apply to everyone – but rather as an opportunity to be embraced.

Many people have been writing about this lately. One of my favorites is the intellectual historian David Hollinger, who's written a book called *Post-Ethnic America* in which he writes:

Cosmopolitanism shares with all varieties of universalism a profound suspicion of enclosures, but cosmopolitanism is defined by an additional element not essential to universalism itself: recognition, acceptance, and eager exploration of diversity. Cosmopolitanism urges each individual and collective unit to absorb as much varied experience as it can, while retaining its capacity to advance its aims effectively. For cosmopolitans, the diversity of humankind is a fact; for universalists, it is a potential problem.

I think that this recognition of the importance of cosmopolitanism is one of the important by-products of thinking of minority literatures in terms of this idea of the emergent.

At the same time, the idea of emergent comes from someplace – it comes from neo-Marxist theory – and I think this genealogy reminds us that we ignore the category of *class* at our peril. I've been reading a very interesting book: Walter Benn Michaels's *The Trouble with Diversity*. Michaels argues that the reason “we” love diversity is that it can make “us” feel good and keep “us” from thinking about the real problem in the United States, which is class, the inequalities that are created by the unequal distribution of wealth. We feel that if we have a diverse classroom, with lots of different races and ethnicities and genders and sexualities represented, we're fine and we can ignore the fact that some people are very poor and don't manage to get into classrooms like this one. In any case, I think the genealogy of the idea of the emergent reminds

us that class is going to be a category that's cutting across the literatures that I'm talking about.

Raymond Williams notes that "the formation of a new class . . . is always a source of emergent cultural practice." So I want to make it clear that in not talking primarily about class, I'm doing something that is un-Williams-like, even though I'm thinking about the ways in which his model can be generalized. Indeed, true to his Marxist orientation, he gives class a special place in *his* consideration of emergence: he lists it as one of the two "sources of the emergent" and grouping together all other modes of "social being and consciousness which [have been] neglected and excluded" by the dominant (126). If the class-oriented writings produced in the United States between 1940 and the beginning of the twenty-first century do not constitute an emergent literature in the same way that I am arguing that the writings by Asian, Chicano/a, gay/lesbian, and Native Americans do, Williams's remarks nevertheless suggest that we avoid thinking about class at our peril.

We might think about a text like Richard Rodriguez's controversial autobiography *Hunger for Memory* (1982), which makes this kind of argument. He argues that it is class and not ethnicity that serves as the primary determinant of his own identity – and he completely sidesteps the question of his gay identity, which is the repressed thing in that text. I would argue that his autobiography in its moment *was* an emergent text despite itself, because it transforms U.S. liberalism in this one way: by asserting the right of a person of color, a person with the background that Rodriguez has, to participate fully in the U.S. liberal tradition represented by Emerson and Rawls, a right recognized in theory but not yet fully realized in practice either in 1982 – and may not in 2006.

So we're talking about margins and centers, and categories that cut across margins and centers, and one of the things to remember is that this is a model of fluidity. One concept that becomes very useful in thinking about emergent literatures is a concept that, in its current sense, originates in postcolonial theory: namely, hybridity.

Hybridity is a concept that proved so useful that it was immediately widely taken up; and now we're bored of it. People now want to get beyond hybridity. I think it *is* useful, so long as we remember its roots in binary thinking, its roots as a way of thinking about cross borders. I think

that hybridity theorists who want to quickly generalize it into multiplicity are making a mistake. Hybridity theory is both limited and empowered by its roots in binary thinking. This becomes clear when a text that has become famous in Chicana writing and in discussions of hybridity in the U.S. context, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). She writes:

I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape.

Anzaldúa imagines the borderlands as a space where mainstream systems of classification break down: "To live in the Borderlands means you are neither hispana india negra española / ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed." Anzaldúa talks about herself as growing up between *two* cultures, but she also wants to assert her identity as a lesbian. When students read this text, they always find that less convincing. Why? Probably because of the framework that Anzaldúa herself sets up. I think the idea of hybridity as we see it in Anzaldúa allows us to re-conceptualize what used to be seen as a situation of *either/or* into a situation of *both/and* – from the "dual personality" to Kingston's Wittman, a way of breaking the impasse of hyphenation.. But as Anzaldúa's self-description makes clear, hybridity as both/and can't account for all the facets of her identity: "I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican border, and others, all my life." Part of the power of hybridity theory today is its ability to describe the dynamics of crossing over borders, and yet that's a powerful constraint well.

Rather than talking about hybridity as multiplicity, I think we'd be better off talking about overlapping hybrid situations. When people talk about, say, queer identity and racial or ethnic identity, and then queer racial/ethnic identity, there's something wrong with taking simply adding them together: there's something qualitatively different about the

combination of queer with ethnic or racial identity, and I think it has to do with overlapping hybridities. If you're a queer Filipino and you're hanging out with your Filipino grandmother, you'll probably feel queer. But if you're hanging out with your gay friends in Greenwich Village, you may feel like the Filipino or Asian American guy. I don't think hybridity theory today allows us to really think through the difference between those situations.

I think one hope for new theorizations of hybridity lies in an area that does not get addressed a lot in conferences like MELUS (Multi-ethnic Literatures of the United States) or even queer theory conferences. That would be the place that we call "science studies." The French sociologist of science Bruno Latour has been thinking about the relationship between modernity and hybridity. He argues that modernity is characterized by its belief in the separability of culture and nature, or more precisely of the human and the non-human. Included in the category of the "non-human" are nature, animals, *and* machines. More than that, modernity works to keep the human and the non-human separate, to deny the existence and the possibility of hybrids between the two categories. To move forward, beyond the impasses of modernity, Latour believes, we must expand our conception of agency: "Modern humanists," he writes, "are reductionist because they seek to attribute action to a small number of powers, leaving the rest of the world with nothing but simple mute forces." Latour wants us to see that human beings are "delegated, mediated, distributed, mandated, uttered." Acknowledging our symbiotic relation with the non-human is no threat for Latour, because "the human[ity] is in the delegation itself, in the pass, in the sending, in the continuous exchange of forms."

The cultural critic Donna Haraway also promotes an expanded conception of human agency through her celebration of the cyborg – the hybrid of human and machine. For Haraway, the cyborg serves both as a symbol of late-twentieth century ontology and as a challenge to the political systems that engendered it: "a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints." The cultural critic Kevin Kelly pushes the idea of delegated agency even further, celebrating the concept of the hive mind, the merging of separate individuals into a single

collective intelligence. “What is contained in a human that will not emerge until we are all interconnected by wires and politics?” Kelly asks.

I want to give you a brief sense of how ingrained the models of individualist subjectivity are. What does hybridity mean to most people in the U.S. context? It means this:

[Clips from *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996): 1) From the middle of the film: Captain Picard talks about the cyborg race known as “the Borg”: “Six years ago they assimilated me into their collectives. I had their cybernetic devices implanted throughout my body. I was linked to the hive mind, every trace of individuality erased. I was one of them.” 2) From the opening of the film: a graphic representation of how Picard is violated physically by the Borg.]

This is hybridity, between human and machine, as popular culture imagines it.

These clips give us a sense of how monstrous hybridity is in popular science fiction, but it’s not unlike the kind of ideas of hybridity that people had in the late nineteenth century, except the hybridity they were talking about was “mongrelization”: the mixture of human and non-human meant the mixture of whites and Chinese in yellow peril novels like P. W. Dooner’s *The Last Days of the Republic* (1880). [Show slides of illustrations from the novel.]

One of the things to understand about hybridity these days is that some of the writing that is most pressing and vibrant about the nature of hybridity is precisely going on in the arena that we might call speculative fiction. Take, for example, Michael Cunningham, the author of *The Hours*, which I think of as a great gay novel precisely because it doesn’t make a big deal out of the gay experience that it depicts – gay experience has become everyday, quotidian, banal – it’s just part of the book. Why would Cunningham follow that book up with *Specimen Days*, which contains genre fiction: a ghost-in-the machine story; a thriller, *CSI*-kind of story; and then a speculative fiction that has to do with an android character?

The thing that I want you to remember finally about emergent literature is that it is not linked to a particular content. What it is, is a structure.

I've been spending most of my time today talking about multicultural writing, talking about minority literature. When the next literary history of the United States comes to be written, I would argue to whomever it is that is putting that together – hopefully some of you will be among those doing it – I would argue that you will need a section on emergent literatures. It may not have anything to do with emergent literatures as we understand them now, which are so interested in categories of identity: ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender. Maybe it'll have something to do with class. Or maybe it'll have something to do with forms that we consider to be rear-guard today.

What I want you to see is that it's structure. Emergent literatures allow us to speculate, to put earlier traditions into a new position where we can rethink what it is that they mean. Wittman Ah Sing makes us rethink Walt Whitman: he ceases to be the *eminence grise* of nineteenth-century American poetry and again becomes the radical, gay poet that he was once. Sherman Alexie has a wonderful poem called "Defending Walt Whitman," in which Whitman anachronistically plays a basketball game on the reservation. It's all about his interaction with these young Native American bodies; it reminds us of the Whitman that Gary Schmigdoll unearthed in his biography and anthology and biography.

Today, what's emergent within the emergent, within all these multicultural writings? Science fiction and speculative fiction. They're asking us to rethink what is emergent. They're suggesting that great fiction, whether it's ethnic or gay or otherwise, has a speculative component to it. I think that's one direction that many writers are starting to move into.

I'll conclude with another clip, which comes from the *Charlie Rose Show*. It's an interview with the Afro-futurist writer, Octavia Butler, who recently passed away. The thing that bothers him, the thing that he can't wrap his mind around, is why someone like her would want to write science fiction. It leads him to make some embarrassing gaffes.

Rose: Growing up as a poor painfully shy child, author Octavia Butler found a refuge in the limitless world of science fiction. She began writing her own stories at ten; at thirteen, she began sending her work out to be published. For decades, and over a dozen novels later, she

established herself as one of the most respected science fiction writers working today. Her draws praise and distinction for its exploration of feminist and racial themes. In 1995 she became a recipient of the MacArthur genius grant. Her most recent book, *Parable of the Talents*, is currently nominated for the Nebula Award [Rose pronounces it “Ne-BOO-la”] for best novel. I’m pleased to have her here on this program at long last. . . .

Rose: Why science fiction?

Butler: Because there are no closed walls. I mean the only rule is, if you use science, you should use it accurately. You can look at, examine, play with anything, absolutely anything.

. . .

Rose: Plus you treat subjects like race, sexual prejudice, all of that, you can put that in a context that ..

Butler: I write about people, about the different ways of being human, and you can’t really do that unless you write about a lot of different kinds of people.

. . .

Rose: What, then, is that central to what you want to say about race?

Butler: Do I want to say something about race, aside from, hey, we’re here . . .

Rose: Yes . . . we are . . . [unintelligible] . . . big . . . [unintelligible] .

. . .

Butler: Yeah

Rose: We . . . are . . . here.

Butler: I was just getting started – around ’79 I guess it was – my books were just starting to do reasonably well. I was on a science fiction convention panel, and in order to start trouble, I think, I hope – science fiction panels are known for, you know, start an argument, and then you can mix it up, and something interesting might happen. But the guy next to me was an editor, and he said that he thought it wasn’t really necessary to have black characters in science fiction, because you could always make any racial statement you needed to make by way of extraterrestrials. And if he was trying to make trouble, he certainly succeeded.

Rose [chuckling]: You took it as trouble, didn’t you? Or you made trouble.

Butler: Well, I wound up writing an article about it, and about the idea of writing science fiction as if it were happening in your neighborhood.

. . .

Rose: What is Parable of the Talents about?

Butler: It is the second half of my character's autobiography. She is a person who has a mission. She has a religion that she feels she has discovered, as opposed to created, and that she feels would make humanity a little bit more survivable, if they paid attention to it. What she wants to do is kind of push people into going to the stars, settling away from earth, because she feels that this is such a long-term, difficult, expensive project, you know, the cathedral of its time. For me, it was like what we did during the space race, even though the space race wasn't so long term. To me the space race was like having a nuclear war without having one.

Rose: How so?

Butler: Well, we were in direct competition with the Soviet Union ...

Rose: Oh, I'm sorry, the space race. I thought you meant the race . . . I misunderstood. I agree with you. It was all about . . . national pride, it was all about . . . those kinds of things. And who could get to the moon first. It was the great sort ...

The *space race*. You see, I think, how generic expectations get hardened into place. Thanks very much.

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