Editorial

This year American scholar Patricia J. Williams was invited to Britain to speak as Reith Lecturer, only the fourth woman and the third black speaker to contribute to the prestigious series of lectures which has a 49-year history. Her chosen subject was as topical as it proved controversial. Professor Williams's subtle and measured discussion of the persistence of racism in daily life – and in even the most liberal of consciousnesses – struck a chord in British society. The furore that broke in the press was based as much in a certain 'British' intransigent refusal to allow that the persistence of prejudice could possibly be as 'bad' here as across the Atlantic as it was in a basic reluctance to address distinctive realities in contemporary society. Richard H. King and I interviewed Williams immediately following the transmission of the lecture series on Radio 4 and the transcripts, published by Virago as *Seeing a Colour-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race*, are reviewed in this issue by Larry Brown. Brown places Williams alongside fellow African-American scholar bell hooks in order to assess the different perspectives they take on issues of race and the politics of identity, and in order to decide on nature of the often very different roles of contemporary black intellectuals.

In this issue of *Critical Survey* scholars from both sides of the Atlantic combine to discuss the impact of recent American writing, on readers, listeners, theatre-goers, and on contemporary critical and cultural studies. Suzanne Jones takes as her subject the contemporary African-American novelist Ernest Gaines and teases out the models Gaines deploys in his explorations of manhood and masculinity in the context of race relations in the American South. She discusses Gaines's most recent novels, *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), and concludes that Gaines expands on the paradigmatic definitions of white and black manhood locked into Jim Crow segregation in order to explore a range of masculine emotions with contemporary resonance. Rosalind Poppleton-Pritchard also examines the two most recent novels by contemporary American writer Tim O'Brien, whose work has been read in direct relation to his representations of the Vietnam War, a war he fought in and has been writing about since his first autobiographical novel *If I Die in a Com-*

bat Zone in 1973. In her discussion of *The Things They Carried* (1990) and *In The Lake of the Woods* (1994), however, Poppleton chooses to place environmental issues to the fore, beginning a discussion of O'Brien as a writer whose oeuvre is informed by an American literary canon of environmentalist philosophy that includes Emerson and Thoreau.

Tennessee Williams's most acclaimed plays were written almost fifty year ago but Williams, the subject of a new biography by Lyle Leverich, is enjoying a renaissance in Europe and the United States in the 1990s. Helen Taylor embarks on an 'archaeological dig' through Williams' study and, as well as unearthing a wealth of information about Williams and the contemporary festivals that celebrate his work and his life, she looks forward to what scholarship on Williams may bring forth beyond the millennium.

Linden Peach's article is an important development of literary critical discussions about 'dirty realism', the phrase Bill Buford coined to describe American novels of the 1980s which explore 'the belly-side of contemporary life' with a 'discomforting and sometimes elusive irony'. Peach expands on the verisimilitude Buford and others have emphasised in texts to include Philip Roth's latest novel *American Pastoral* (1997) which, though indebted to the genre, stretches beyond its conventions. In a stimulating discussion, Peach draws in the cross-Atlantic influences he perceives within the genre, focusing on Irish writers like Roddy Doyle and Mary Morrissey. He considers how 'dirty realist' novels function to critique postmodern consumer culture and reveals a psychoanalytical framework through which the 'family' is ironically exposed as a series of performative identities.

Two of the contributors discuss contemporary American poets whose exciting and avant-garde work is just beginning to receive the critical attention it merits. Alan Shima's is a creative and critical intervention into Lyn Hejinian's long poem *My Life* (199) and Jeanne Heuving's essay on Ai is a revelation. Shima's is a close and intimate reading of *My Life* which channels his own thoughts on 'the deliberation of writing' through Hejinian's 'poetics of description' and deploys Stein, Derrida, Sontag and Beckett in order to read this subtle, complex and elliptical text. In Hejinian the confessional and the experimental are combined and in the essay which follows, Jeanne Heuving examines the division that has been identified between 'mainstream' poetry – often confessional in its emphasis on a unique

expressive poetic self – and ‘experimental’ poetry where defamiliarising linguistic innovation often dominates. She reads the work of Ai, a poet of mixed African, Asian and Native American heritage, and concludes that her highly innovative dramatic monologues fit neither of these categories. She draws our attention to a writer whose work has been neglected by critics perhaps precisely because she escapes the literary-critical paradigms with which we sometimes encumber ourselves.

Contemporary American writing is an area of study rich for debate: it is informed by contemporary cultural practices and pressures; it is self-conscious and heterogeneous. This issue of *Critical Survey* taps into some of the ideas and apprehensions about America that a range of writers and critics are exposing and exploring.

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