



From the Editor

By Lyn Miller-Lachmann

Twenty-five years ago I found myself in graduate school in American Studies growing increasingly disenchanted with the direction of my life. While I enjoyed the friendships I'd made there, I had not managed to find an adviser with whom I felt compatible. Even more, the requirements of academic research and writing stifled my imagination. I dreaded the time I would have to spend on my oral exams and dissertation proposal. I had no ideas for a dissertation topic.

What I really wanted to do was write a novel. It was something I'd dreamed of doing ever since second grade, but as an undergraduate I felt too intimidated by my high-powered classmates (some of whom had been published in high school) to take creative writing classes. I took my first fiction writing class at a community center in New Haven, Connecticut, while I was still in graduate school. I realized I had a lot to learn to write publishable material, but I kept writing at least a half hour every day. I quit graduate school and became a high school teacher. I kept writing, and three years later I finished my first novel manuscript and a handful of stories.

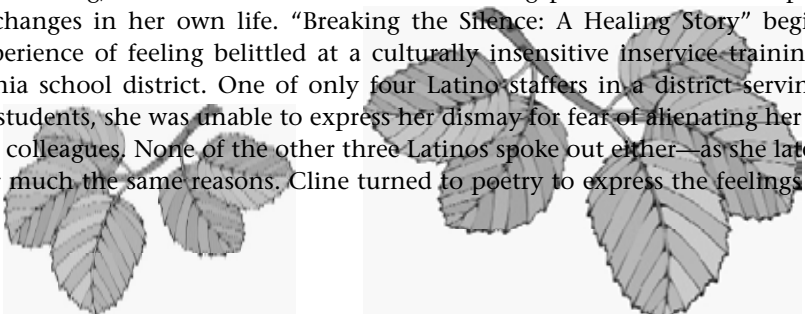
Neither the novel nor the stories were ever published, but I received a stack of encouraging personal letters. Almost twenty years later—ten years after I gave up in despair of ever getting a major press to bring out my work—I returned to a project that I started while I was teaching in New York City. That novel, *Dirt Cheap*, will be published next year, six years after I began working on it in earnest. As I write this, I am two chapters into the first draft of a new novel.

While my fiction is not autobiographical, it is my way of addressing issues in my own life and in the world around me. I am not alone in using creative writing for this purpose. Four of the five articles in this *MultiCultural Review* explore ways in which a variety of people—not just professional writers but also homeless persons, older adults, high school students, teachers, and school administrators—write about their lives. They express themselves through poetry, memoirs, essays, and short fiction. Several of these efforts have resulted in published anthologies.

"Living History: Memoir Writers Teach Across Time" describes a writing workshop in an ethnically diverse suburban Connecticut high school that combined senior citizens, teachers, and students. Many of the participants came from Gail Hall Howard's memoir writing class at Norwalk Community College. They wrote about surviving the Holocaust and confronting racial discrimination at the time of the civil rights movement. A Puerto Rican teacher at the high school reflected on how she experienced prejudice within her own family because of her darker skin. In a follow-up workshop, several immigrant students shared their writing as well.

Bob Blaisdell, who teaches writing to a diverse group of students at Kingsborough Community College, describes a workshop for homeless New Yorkers that he organized along with author Ian Frazier in 1995. The workshop at the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen continues to this day, with a new group of writer-organizers and an annual anthology that features the works of all participants. Blaisdell's article, "The Soup Kitchen Writing Workshop," offers observations on the people who attended the initial workshop, whose enthusiasm kept the project going; the structure of each meeting; and how others can create similar opportunities elsewhere.

While Howard and Blaisdell focus on encouraging others to share their experiences through writing, Zulmara Cline examines the writing process as it has helped bring about changes in her own life. "Breaking the Silence: A Healing Story" begins with her experience of feeling belittled at a culturally insensitive inservice training at her California school district. One of only four Latino staffers in a district serving many Latino students, she was unable to express her dismay for fear of alienating her supervisor and colleagues. None of the other three Latinos spoke out either—as she later found out, for much the same reasons. Cline turned to poetry to express the feelings she had



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to hold inside in order to keep her job; shortly after the disastrous training, she wrote:

My silence speaks volumes
If only one would listen
My silence
is not compliance
Nor acceptance
It is my cloak
of survival.


For Cline, however, poetry became more than catharsis. It allowed her to overcome her negative feelings, to explore alternatives to a job she detested, and to evaluate the impact of her decision on the students who most needed her presence as a role model and an advocate for them. Her process of “reaching resolution” through poetry can serve as a guide for those who find themselves in similarly difficult situations.

As I discovered fifteen years ago, using publication as a measure of writing success can have a stifling effect on personal and creative expression. Thus, the first three articles in this

issue focus on how ordinary people use writing to understand their lives and to communicate with others. In addition, the publishing establishment has often shown itself to be inhospitable toward people and ideas outside the demographic and commercial mainstream. For years Latina writers experienced discrimination on the basis of both ethnicity and gender. When anthologies first began to appear in the late 1970s, their publishers were small ethnic presses and magazines. In her article “On the Shaping of a History of U.S. Latina Literature Anthologies,” scholar and novelist Beatriz Rivera-Barnes describes the themes addressed by Latina writers of several generations and their struggles to become part of the American publishing mainstream and literary canon.

Self-expression does not always take place through the written word. Although most of the articles in this issue focus on writing, “Creating an Integrated Context for Multiculturalism in Action” by Ronald H. Evans and Verónica Zander Darer describes

how an interdisciplinary course in psychology and Latin dance at Bentley College in Massachusetts helped students overcome stereotypes of Latinos and Latin Americans and form friendships that crossed cultures. However, while the class explored kinesthetic expression, both the students and the teachers responded through journals that they kept throughout the semester. To a great extent, the student and instructor responses to the Latin dance class at Bentley College mimic those of the student and adult participants in the memoir-writing workshop described by Howard.

We are fortunate to have in this installment of *MultiCultural Review* some fine writers who focus on writing as a means of exploring diverse experiences—one’s own and those of others. These writers have inspired me as I begin my newest novel manuscript—a story that portrays the friendships and misunderstandings among people from two different cultures—and their work has set a standard that will guide me as I continue onward. 

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