

*The Norton Anthology of American Literature Since 1945*, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition: Who's Missing?  
Ed. Robert S. Levine, Amy Hungerford, and GerShun Avilez (2022)

When I was an undergraduate English major, back in the era when students purchased books for classes, it was an expectation—even a happy expectation—that the book list would include Norton anthologies. I was being trained to develop “taste” and the fat Nortons with their onionskin paper felt like my guides to sophistication and “professionalism” as an aspiring English professor. Despite radical cultural changes—even the signal event of the publication of the first edition of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* around the time I was finishing my Ph.D.—Norton anthologies have remained symbolically weighty touchstones of lasting value, the veritable Great Books of their eras. In today's China, where I now work as a professor of British and American literature, Norton anthologies are considered the definitive guides to the Anglophone writing that matters. The world of anthologies has proliferated exponentially, especially in this era of open publishing and textbook costs that far exceed student budgets. But Norton anthologies are still widely regarded as setting and representing a standard. That's why it matters to consider the contents of their newest edition of the volume intended to represent our contemporary period in American literature.

“How do we tell the story of American literature in our own time?” is the opening question in the introduction. No doubt it's a complicated question, especially in the current climate of irrational book banning, and anthology creation is a complex task in any era. It is also an ideological task, as it should be. This volume aims to uphold the traditional canon while unavoidably acknowledging, especially in its introduction, the diversity of readers, writers, students, educators, and perspectives of the past fifty years.

How well does it succeed in fulfilling that task of including diverse voices? The role of standard-bearing has outweighed the charge to tell the story of American literature and society today. At moments, this volume felt strangely like the Norton of my undergrad years decades ago with its preponderance of mainstream figures and traits and minimal representation of stylistic, cultural, and political progressiveness. The anthology paints a too-familiar picture that can feel oddly anachronistic in its oversight of writers and movements that are essential to telling “the story of American literature in our own time.”

There is much that could be said about the space given to conventional writers and predictable texts and the disparity in the size of selections by various writers. Robert Hayden, Amiri Baraka, and Audre Lorde are essential and welcome voices in this anthology but are shortchanged by the spare number of selections that only hint at their importance. The absence of other major voices and their cross-influences are of greater concern. In the book’s fleeting recognition of internationalism and diaspora, the useful inclusion of Edwidge Danticat and Jamaica Kincaid makes the exclusion of Derek Walcott more glaring. The introduction mentions postmodern experimentation as a reflection of current times, but there is an insufficient representation of writers associated with innovative or avant-garde styles and movements such as Harryette Mullen and Nathaniel Mackey. These are not marginal figures but established writers who have won some of the most coveted national literary prizes and awards. To demonstrate their continuing impact on a younger generation of poets employing innovative styles as political and social forces, it would have been valuable to include Tyehimba Jess, Nikky Finney, Terrance Hayes, A. Van Jordan, Evie Shockley, and Danez Smith, among many others.

A longstanding issue in anthologies has been the tendency towards tokenism for African American and other ethnic and diverse writers, which denies readers the opportunity to see

authentic traditions that have developed. For example, without a sustained and adequate representation of African American writers in a variety of styles, the included figures appear decontextualized and even depoliticized. In the category of creative nonfiction, we find Dr. King's ubiquitous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" but no excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. With the exclusion of Haki Madhubuti, Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Nikki Giovanni, and June Jordan (among others), only Amiri Baraka is present to demonstrate the major impact of the Black Arts Movement era. Without Sterling A. Brown, Margaret Walker Alexander, and the startling omission of Langston Hughes to represent the sophisticated interplay of vernacular and literary languages and forms, we are left only with glimpses through figures like Lucille Clifton and Gwendolyn Brooks.

Among the certainly essential figures in prose like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, we are missing the range of genres and styles that could be found if Colson Whitehead, Charles Johnson, John Oliver Killens, Ann Petrie, Gayl Jones, and Percival Everett (among others of equivalent stature) were included. In science fiction, the inclusion of Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin is beneficial, but Samuel R. Delany, Nalo Hopkinson, Tananarive Due, and Nnedi Okorafor would display the spectacular development in this genre and its correlation with Afrofuturism, intersectionality, and globalization.

Playwrights—including the power of women's voices—would be more adequately shown by including such writers as Suzan-Lori Parks, Anna Deveare Smith, Ntozake Shange, and Adrienne Kennedy. The selection of Postmodern Manifestos, woefully consisting solely of five white males plus a regrettably brief excerpt from Audre Lorde, would have been substantially augmented by incorporating manifestos by Stephen Henderson, Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, James

Baldwin, Ishmael Reed, Ralph Ellison, A.B. Spellman, Hoyt Fuller, bell hooks, Marilyn Chin, Haki R. Madhubuti, and Malcolm X, among many other excellent options.

With their stature as a record of lasting quality, the Norton anthologies are cultural landmarks with heavy responsibilities. Yes, the 10<sup>th</sup> edition looks different from its predecessor editions and these efforts are to be commended. This brief review aims to invite an even more expansive embrace in the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the bold voices of richness and power that must be heard to fully tell “the story of American literature in our own time.”

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