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# Forum

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## Ethnicity

To the Editor:

Sander Gilman begins his introduction to the January 1998 special issue of *PMLA* on ethnicity (113 [1998]: 19–27) by invoking a lecture I gave last year at Stanford University. According to Gilman, “In passing, Cheng commented on the papers presented at ‘Ethnicity and Writing/Reading,’ a forum at the 1995 MLA convention, which are published in this issue as ‘Four Views on Ethnicity,’ and dismissed them as ‘ethnicity lite’” (19). Indeed, Gilman seems poised to write against such a position—but the rest of his introduction only further complicates the issues surrounding ethnicity. For the fact is that, while arguably everyone has an ethnicity and an ethnic background worth studying, not all ethnicities and races are coded equally (at different historical junctures) in terms of their power valences, and this was very much my point.

Whereas I understand that it was convenient for Gilman to take my paper as a foil for his introduction, his use of my comments is misleading; nor did Gilman bother to check the published version of the paper. As I announced at the lecture, the paper was being published in *Cultural Critique* under the title “Of Canons, Colonies, and Critics: The Ethics and Politics of Postcolonial Joyce Studies” (*Cultural Critique* 35 [1997]: 81–104). To begin with, the paper (as its title indicates) discussed issues of postcoloniality in academia and the problem of “who gets to speak” for postcolonial studies and minority discourse—and was hardly focused primarily on ethnicity. The term I actually used, which Gilman misquotes, was “postcolonial lite”—a formulation very different from the one that enables Gilman to move from ethnicity “light” to “white” ethnicity. As for my comments (in passing) on the MLA convention forum “Ethnicity and Writing/Reading,” I acknowledged in the talk that the four speakers were fine scholars whose work I had benefited from and whose views on ethnicity had merits. But my main point was an expression of concern about how easily marginal fields of study—such as postcolonial studies and ethnic studies—can be appropriated by the academic center and taken away from the marginal or minority writers and scholars for whom those fields were designed in the first place; this is, of course, a very real danger experienced by all marginal discourses, including feminism and queer studies.

In fact, both the forum “Ethnicity and Writing/Reading” and the special issue on ethnicity illustrate my point. No matter how valuable or accomplished the

contributions to this forum, the reality is that some of the four well-known senior scholars who participated in it are turning now to issues of ethnicity after having made their scholarly reputations elsewhere, in less embattled fields of study; nevertheless, it is they who, even here, once again have easiest access to a dominant speaking position. Every year hundreds of less established scholars (including many minority scholars) struggle (often unsuccessfully) just to get on the MLA convention program, not to speak of a prestigious forum; every year hundreds of them struggle through *PMLA*'s notoriously rigorous blind-review gauntlet, in the hope of getting published in the most prestigious, dominant, and central journal in our profession—which has heretofore only occasionally published articles on topics of ethnicity, postcoloniality, and minority discourse. Indeed, Gilman himself notes, "This issue [on ethnicity] has drawn the third largest number of submissions of any special-topic issue to date: 108" (26n1). Yet the moment the MLA decides to devote a major convention forum to ethnicity and a special issue of *PMLA* to the topic, the moment that the marginal seems finally to be gaining access to the center, it is these well-known senior scholars (working in the academic center) who are invited to the forum and who then get a free pass (bypassing the messy blind-review process) into the pages of *PMLA*, once again recycling the position of the center in academic speech and power. It is they who get to speak for the margins. Thus, the central voices remain central, even on topics about the marginal—appropriation indeed.

VINCENT J. CHENG  
*University of Southern California*

To the Editor:

As a Canadian member of the MLA I am always somewhat troubled by Canadians' semiremembered, not-quite-American status (which the recent meetings in Toronto overwhelmingly reinforced: how many of the attendees really—I mean really—knew they were in a different country?).

In this letter, however, I write rather as a student of Australian culture. I have always been indebted to, perhaps I should say a fan of, Sander Gilman's scholarship on ethnicity. This made me doubly saddened to see his comments on Helen Darville and Mudrooroo. Gilman refers to Darville's "intensely anti-Semitic novel *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (1994), which won the Miles Franklin Award" (23). Reading this remark might make those unaware of Australian literature think that Australians merrily give major awards to anti-Semites. However, this

novel is "intensely anti-Semitic" only in the sense that *Huckleberry Finn* is "intensely racist." Darville portrays an intensely anti-Semitic Ukrainian culture. The problem of the revelation that she was not the Ukrainian Demidenko she pretended to be was less how she depicted Jews than how she depicted Ukrainians. Should writers be allowed to wash others' dirty linen while so publicly lamenting that it is their own?

The comments on Mudrooroo are far worse. Gilman states that "an Australian academic named Colin Johnson transformed himself into the aboriginal critic Mudrooroo" (23). Colin Johnson was a black Australian street youth who wrote a book about his experiences, *Wild Cat Falling* (1965). Court and social-service records show that his ethnicity was often a subject of speculation. There is no suggestion of what he believed his ethnicity to be. In the years following he wrote a number of excellent works, primarily prose and poetry but also criticism. He became a leader in Aboriginal cultural circles. It is not an overstatement to say he is the Australian equivalent of N. Scott Momaday or Gerald Vizenor. It is not an overstatement to say his work is of the same quality as theirs.

Like a number of Aboriginal persons in the 1980s and 1990s, Johnson changed his name to reflect his culture. This act also reflected his growing concern for Aboriginality, visible in his book *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (1990) and less temperately in some of his comments on Aboriginal writers. Recently his prominence understandably produced a variety of inquiries into his life, one of which led to a much older sister, who for her own needs had done some basic research into her genealogy. She found that the family is black in appearance not because of an Aboriginal ancestor but because of an African American one. Mudrooroo has had little contact with this sister, and there is no reason to assume he knew that he was not Aboriginal. On the other hand, his public statements, at least the ones I have been able to examine, have done little to clear up matters.

Imposture is always an important issue in matters of ethnicity. As a Canadian I am the last one to cast aspersions. I would hold our great Englishman Archie Belaney, better known as Grey Owl, up to any other nation's impersonators. However, imposture is also a complicated issue, as these examples show. Offhand remarks, especially by those who know little of the cultures involved and especially, if I may say so, by residents of the United States of America, only add to the problems.

TERRY GOLDIE  
*York University, North York*