

Fire and Ink: An Anthology of Social Action Writing. Eds. Frances Payne Adler, Debra Busman, and Diana García. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009). xxi, 460 pp., \$32.95 cloth.

By keeping their opening remarks very brief (the preface plus the micro-introduction add up to less than seven pages), the editors have made an unassuming choice: to let the work by the contributors do the talking. In other projects, this plunge into creative material without providing much of a historical or literary context might come across as daring, and with an anthology of social action writing, that risk may or may not pay off. The expectation of *Fire and Ink*, it appears, is that the reader (or instructor) will have some basic knowledge of activist writers and the range of social issues they are responding to with poetry, essays, rally speeches, op-eds or performance pieces. That presumption signals that this anthology is not for everybody: it has been shaped with a specific audience in mind. Why else would the opening piece be titled “You Gotta Be Ready for Some Serious Truth to Be Spoken,” authored by one of the editors.

In that piece, Debra Busman asserts a “no apologies” stance—“you gotta be ready to learn at least fifteen times more than what whatever it is you think you have to teach” (6)—that mirrors the spectrum of individual voices

and tones in *Fire and Ink* that come together as a single community to offer an alternative literary history of the twentieth century. Indeed, only a handful of the ninety contributors are taught in the traditional canons, the rest are “literary outsiders.” But this marginalized status is not held up as a critique of American literature, but rather as a badge of honor since the lesser-known writers keep comfortable company with some very impressive and respected names (must-haves in the multicultural academic curricula) such as Gloria Anzaldúa, June Jordan, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Li-Young Lee, Martín Espada, Linda Hogan, Jimmy Santiago Baca and Alice Walker, who proudly declares: “We are the ones we have been waiting for” (284).

With few notable exceptions (like the international figures Arundhati Roy and Mahmoud Darwish) and sometimes puzzling inclusions (a poem by Ethel Rosenberg, for example), *Fire and Ink* tends to limit its territory to the U.S. political landscape within the last fifty years, which is troubling and complex enough to inspire this rich body of letters. Adler, Busman and García work hard to capture a very contemporary climate (which includes the wars with the Middle East, the conflict at Vieques, the struggles of the GLBT population, and immigrant issues). This allows the anthology to thrive as a pedagogical tool with social-historical references within reach of the students in today’s classrooms.

Structurally, *Fire and Ink* is divided into ten convenient sections that tap into everything from homophobia to xenophobia, from class injustices to environmental issues, each a charged topic that will lend itself to stimulating exchanges between different points of view in an educational setting since this project has been clearly designed to provoke, prompt, excite and motivate. And for those instructors who may shy away from the “hot buttons” of political conversation, the editors conclude the anthology with a section titled “Talking, Teaching and Imagining: Social Action Writing,” which provides helpful

testimonies and interviews about the nature and process of approaching discussion on such subjects as race.

At the very least, this anthology succeeds in gathering the standards of activist writings, which have never been collected conveniently into a single volume. But the greater value of *Fire and Ink* is in its earnest belief in social action literature as an agent for education, enlightenment and, ultimately, change. Adler, Busman and García claim important roles as fierce advocates of activist writers who continue to resist, protest and take responsibility for their ideas without fear. *Fire and Ink* refuses to pander to the dominant conservative thought or to political correctness; it is a precious gift to the radical and free thinkers who, in the words of Arundhati Roy, “have a space now that a lot of others who think like me don’t” (422).

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