

Changing the Subject

Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

A special feature section topic on the changing state of North Carolina is a change itself from our genre and regional topics. As I wrote in the introduction to *NCLR Online* 2013, I was a little concerned about whether the topic was nebulous. But as usual, I worried needlessly. The “writingest state” never fails to fill an issue of *NCLR*. Pondering how to tie together the broad range of responses to this topic for the introduction, I discovered that the relationship is revealed by the content of this special feature section: North Carolina’s constant state of change is reflected and recorded in the state’s literature.

Bland Simpson opens this issue with an essay on exactly what the special feature topic is. Some kind of synchronicity was in play because Bland did not write this essay specifically for *NCLR*. I heard him give a talk in the spring of 2012 for the Voyages of Discovery speaker series, sponsored by East Carolina University’s Harriot College of Arts and Sciences, and even before realizing its appropriateness for the 2013 issue, I asked him if he would turn his presentation into an essay for *NCLR*. With this essay, Bland sets the stage for what follows in the issue. As he takes us across the Old North State, Bland explores the numerous treasures here, emphasizing the physical environment but including, too, the artistic riches. His essay and this overflowing issue (like the twenty-one issues before this one) serve as evidence that one of the greatest of North Carolina’s gifts is its literature.

And that literature, like everything else Bland talks about, is changing. Where once Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel* was probably the most internationally recognized book by a North Carolina writer, I will state here my conviction that now that book is very likely Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain*, a novel that I believe is also noteworthy for having inspired

the current popularity of *literary* historical fiction among both writers and readers. History has of course been inspiring North Carolina writers since the earliest literature of our state, but in my interview with Frazier in this section of the issue, I talked to him about my theory that the success of *Cold Mountain* may have paved the way for so many other fine writers to pursue historical novels that resonate far beyond the historical events that inspired them into the character-driven exploration of human conflict that distinguishes what is often termed *literary fiction*.

One such novel is Anna Jean Mayhew’s 2011 Raleigh Award winner, *The Dry Grass of August*, a coming-of-age story of an adolescent girl who witnesses violent reactions to desegregation a century after the Civil War. “Change is so difficult,” Mayhew acknowledges in an interview in this section, and her novel reveals the damaging effects of resistance to change.

Fast forward another fifty years from the setting of Mayhew’s novel to the present, and North Carolina writers are still exploring race relations. This classic theme of Southern literature needs updating, however, especially in North Carolina, where immigration has dramatically transformed our population. It is time to take into account relations with our Latina/o community. As mentioned in *NCLR Online* earlier this year, I was excited by Joan Conwell’s submission of an interview with María DeGuzmán, founder of the Latina/o Studies program at UNC-Chapel Hill. Professor DeGuzmán talks about the inevitable emergence of a body of literature from these new voices in our state. Completely coincidentally, the winner of *NCLR*’s 2012 James Applewhite Poetry Prize, which is published in this section, is a poem by Mark Smith-Soto, a longtime UNC-Greensboro professor who was raised in Costa Rica. Another such voice is that of



PHOTOGRAPH BY PEAT BURNETT



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW MOREHEAD

NORTH CAROLINA: A STATE OF CHANGE, A CHANGING STATE

Gustavo Pérez Firmat, a Cuban native who came to North Carolina to teach at Duke University and, as he talks about in his essay, also included here, found himself “homesick for North Carolina” when later living “up North.”

Many of North Carolina’s writers are not native to the state, including Daniel Wallace from Alabama, who shared a short story with us for this issue. North Carolina also has some homegrown writers who have left to develop their talents outside of the state, and perhaps in so doing, attained the kind of objectivity about their home state that these relative newcomers to the Old North State have. Among the native-born writers gaining a national reputation is Wiley Cash, who went to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette to work with internationally renowned author Ernest J. Gaines. Cash, the author of the critically acclaimed novel *A Land More Kind than Home*, is also interviewed in this issue.

Just like our state, academia is a place of constant change: new students appear in our classes every semester. Every semester also provides the opportunity to start over, try something new, even with a class one has taught numerous times. Most years begin with meeting new colleagues; some years come to an end with retirement parties. Change is the one constant, and it can be scary. With this issue, we say thank you and goodbye to three people who have retired from ECU: longtime Senior Associate Editor Lorraine Hale Robinson, Joyner Librarian Maurice (Maury) York, and Joyner Library’s Director of Project Development Blythe Tennent. Each of these special people has been a valuable source of support to the production of *NCLLR*, and I wonder how we will manage without them, but we wish them well as they embrace this next phase of change in their lives. ■

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BELOW, FAR LEFT **Mark Smith-Soto (left) receives the James Applewhite Poetry Prize from James Applewhite (read the winning poem on page 73.)**

BELOW, LEFT **Bland Simpson and Charles Frazier at the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association fall conference, 16 Nov. 2012**



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