

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and phone number via email to editors@poetrymagazine.org. Letters may be edited for length and clarity. We regret that we cannot reply to every letter.

Dear Editor,

I am disappointed in both reviews of Garrison Keillor's anthology *Good Poems* (April 2004)—nearly as much as in the anthology itself. Keillor dedicates his compilation to “all the English Teachers (especially the great ones),” and yet he neglects one of the cardinal guidelines for today's English curricula—to select material that reflects the multi-faceted fabric of our society. Lake Wobegon's Norwegian bachelor farmers may have in their youth been deprived of the smorgasbord American culture has become, but I would hope that nowadays even kids from the tiniest hamlets in rural Minnesota are a bit more informed about Walt Whitman's multitudes than Mr. Keillor's selection would have us believe. Young minds—hell, all minds—are impressionable, and an anthology overwhelmingly populated by white poets is likely to send the message that only white folks deserve and/or are capable of writing “good poems.”

For those readers who might have missed it (as both of POETRY's esteemed gentleman reviewers, Dana Gioia and August Kleinzahler, did), let me point out that in Keillor's entire book, all two hundred and ninety-four poems of it, I could find only three Black poets—all of them dead, no less, and the one woman actually a blues singer. Now, I may be missing someone—poems can be blessedly color-blind—but by any standard, this is an abysmal percentage. (Nor is there a Hispanic or Asian-American or Native American presence to speak of.) In his foreword, Keillor claims to have merely collected poems America—real America, good America!—wants to read; one can only conclude that his America never reads work by living African-American poets. There's no Lucille Clifton. No Marilyn Nelson. No Elizabeth Alexander or Sonia Sanchez, not even Gwendolyn Brooks!—not to mention Sandra Cisneros, Alberto Rios, Joy Harjo, Gary Soto, Cathy Song . . . all essentially narrative, “accessible,” and memorable poets, none of whose poems Keillor deemed worthy soul food for his good American people. I'm forced to this disheartening conclusion, since it is unlikely that igno-

rance led to oversight: after all, I've been a repeat guest on Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* radio show, and year after year my birthday is announced on *The Writer's Almanac*, occasionally accompanied by one of my poems. (I assume this damns me in Kleinzahler's eyes, but there it is.) In their reviews neither Gioia nor Kleinzahler touches upon this crucial flaw, probably because it simply doesn't impinge upon their lives. We have Kleinzahler writing that “the range of the selections” in the anthology exhibits “more variety” than Keillor's morning almanac, while Gioia celebrates the “Lutheran catholicity” of Keillor's literary taste; but I find the air pretty thin: that scarcely veiled “reserved for whites” sign sure can take one's breath away.

I've been at the “business” of poetry for some time; I know that I'm considered more of a “non-militant” writer. As I get older, however, my patience wears thinner; I've grown weary of having to point out what should be obvious to anyone with sense and sensibility. I resent the complacent, single-minded arrogance of myopic “men of letters,” whose curious brand of good will perpetuates racist selectivity. I resent their transparent, self-serving attacks on concepts such as multiculturalism and feminism that have propelled our society towards a truer democracy. I resent the presumption that their majority in numbers absolves them from paying attention to fair representation, leaving it up to those who have been “marginalized” to take note, tally the figures, and mount the protest. (What a waste of energy, emotion, enterprise! No wonder Ralph Ellison's invisible man gave up and went underground.) Well, my mama didn't raise a bean counter. I have better things to do—like trying to sit down and write a good poem, for example.

Rita Dove
Charlottesville, Virginia