sign (Adrienne Rich’s notion of a lesbian continuum is an exemplar here), I want to ask: have, or could, ‘Third World women’, become a similar magic sign for white feminists in the nineties? Within the first few pages of reading King, I found myself noting down ‘Read Sandoval’. While my previous ignorance may in part be responsible for the neon-lighted reading effect of seeing the previously unknown Sandoval repeatedly conjured, it also feels like my first encounter with the Holy Trinity (Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous) in the eighties which produced anxiety on my part to get on top of it all. In Theory in Its Feminist Travels, King teasingly predicts a come-back for Celestine Ware’s Woman Power (p. 13), but I’m betting that it’s Sandoval who gets catapulted onto centre stage.

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I asked to review former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s mea culpa on Vietnam because I wanted to learn how one of the major architects of the war could have persisted so long in such obvious error at so great a cost to the nation. I came away disappointed. As Melbourne lawyer Anthony O’Donnell points out in his review of the book in Arena (June-July 1995), ‘McNamara reveals nothing about the nature of the conflict that was not a matter of public record at the time, found in the work of journalists such as Robert Scheer and I.F. Stone, and disseminated by the anti-War movement’.

Robert McNamara began his career as one of Ford Motor Company’s Whiz Kids — more kid than whiz if this book is any indication. Ron Ridenhour, reviewing In Retrospect in the London Review of Books (22 June 1995), concluded that McNamara remains ‘self-servingly clueless about what really happened in Vietnam’. Indeed, there is something chilling about McNamara’s repeated confessions of error, ignorance, confusion and miscalculation. Breathtaking statements like, ‘I misunderstood the nature of the conflict’ are tossed off as if such abysmal dereliction of duty is perfectly comprehensible (if not entirely excusable) in the context of the times. Unable to see beyond the confines of government papers and official assessments, McNamara still seems ignorant of the fact that the knowledge he so sorely lacked was readily available in the public domain if only he had the eyes to see.
Despite its confessional tone, there is also a certain moral blindness about McNamara’s narrative. He persists with the notion that the United States fought for ‘good and honest reasons’ (p. 333) in Vietnam. O’Donnell refers to McNamara’s ‘production-driven model of warfare’ and to Vietnam as America’s truly ‘Fordist’ war. I was struck by the former Secretary of Defense’s apparent inability to face the deeper, moral dilemmas of the war. In 1965, when a young Quaker named Norman Morrison, a father of three, burned himself to death forty feet from McNamara’s Pentagon window, the Secretary says he bottled up his emotions and refused to discuss the incident with anyone. In times of crisis and great moral challenge, he confesses, ‘I often turn inward ... it is a grave weakness’ (pp. 216-17).

Apparently untroubled by the idea that the United States has some celestial right to manipulate the fortunes of less powerful states, McNamara still believes the basic problem in Vietnam was a managerial one — the US Government just should have been better organised for the war effort. Driven by an excessive fear of communism and by what Senator J. William Fulbright called the arrogance of power, McNamara blundered from one disaster to the next, drawing the line only at ‘the almost cavalier way’ the Joint Chiefs of Staff advocated the use of nuclear weapons (pp. 160, 234, 275).

McNamara takes a chronological path, following the Vietnam saga from ‘the most exciting day of my life’ (20 January 1961) when he became President Kennedy’s Secretary of Defense to his resignation on 29 February 1968 with the situation deteriorating further in South-East Asia and seven long years of warfare yet to run. Chapter 11 is devoted to ‘the lessons of Vietnam’.

In retrospect, McNamara believes the US should have withdrawn from the war in 1963 or 1964. (Even if the US had withdrawn after the Tet Offensive in January, 1968, more than 40,000 American — and countless Vietnamese and Allied — lives would have been saved). But the war dragged on and McNamara never said a public word in opposition. His ‘lessons’ from all this are astonishing. Vietnam taught Robert Strange McNamara that we live in an untidy world, that there may not be immediate solutions to all problems, that high-technology military equipment has its limitations, that ‘neither our people nor our leaders are omniscient’, that the Soviet threat was exaggerated, that public servants should be honest with the people they are appointed to serve (pp. 321-3). The United States of America paid one hell of a price for the education of Robert McNamara.

Most of McNamara’s disappointing final chapter is a rather vague prescription for American foreign policy in the post-Cold War world. The former Secretary of Defense still presumes to advise us on how we should shape our lives. Placing his
faith in UN-style collective security and collaborative decision making (something which ‘will be very difficult for us’ (p. 328), he still has no clear idea of where to go. Containment of the Soviet Union is gone, so now American foreign policy limps along focused on ‘a strategy of enlargement — enlargement of the world’s free community of market democracies’ (p. 329). Tell it to them in Bosnia, in Rwanda, in Somalia and in countless other trouble spots around the globe.

Perhaps the ultimate conceit in McNamara’s retrospective is his obvious contempt for people who do not believe as he thinks he does. Throughout the book he repeatedly returns to the argument that if only the South Vietnamese had been better democrats and less corrupt everything would have worked out fine. As Ridenhour concluded in his review, this is an ‘intellectually limp, morally dishonest tome’. It is a frightening book, setting out clearly just how poorly led the United States really was when it blundered into Vietnam.

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Basically there are two kinds of anthologies, though fortunately they are not mutually exclusive. The more traditional kind — like the old commonplace book — reflects little more than the personal taste of the collector, and the reader’s pleasure is bound up with a trust in such taste. ‘I have gathered a posy of other men’s flowers’, Montaigne wrote about such a collection, ‘and nothing but the thread that binds them is my own.’ The second kind is a product of ‘speciality’ publishing (Great Fishing Stories, Poems for Lovers etc.), and especially of the increasing demand for anthologies as school and university texts. The current range of anthologies prompted by pedagogical demand is enormous; many are indeed accompanied by a ‘Teacher’s Guide’.

The three anthologies under discussion here all deal with that genre that seems quintessentially American in its diversity, its flexibility, its range of narrative voice: the short story. They will appeal to the general reader but are also possible texts for courses in American Literature or in Short Fiction. All are edited by practising