

BOOK REVIEWS

E pluribus unum or E pluribus plura? Unity and Diversity in American Culture, edited by Hans-Jürgen Grabbe, David Mauk, and Ole Moen. European Views of the United States 3. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011. 306 p. ISBN 978-3-8253-5857-0.

In May 2008, members of the European Association of American Studies met in Oslo, Norway for their biennial conference. The theme of the conference was “*E pluribus unum or E pluribus plura?*” and the book now being reviewed, the third volume in the “European Views of the United States” series, is a compilation of eighteen articles written by a select few presenters at the conference and co-edited by Hans-Jürgen Grabbe, David Mauk, and Ole Moen. The contributions have been divided by the editors into three exploratory sections, cultural, literary, and historical, with the latter represented by a scant two articles. The preface to the volume, written by Grabbe, makes clear the intended theme of both the conference and compilation, this being the pluralism of American life and the “inner tensions” (ix) that arise from American diversity. The stated goal is to shed light on whether or not there is “some kind of American norm” (ix).

Co-editor David Mauk begins the volume with “a brief exploration of the theme” (1), setting the stage for the articles to follow with an overview of the early negotiations that characterized the prioritization of unity and diversity in American life. He notes that the Great Seal of the United States, Revolutionary War propaganda, and the Bill of Rights all touted diversity, while the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution emphasized unity. He concludes that ever since the Early National Period, Americans have been negotiating “about how best to balance unity and diversity in society” (4). Mauk’s introduction, a highlight of the compilation and proof positive that sometimes the best things come in small packages, is recommended reading for any American Studies student.

Gert Buelens starts off the “Cultural Explorations” section of the book by arguing that Americans are bound together in “a strong cultural compact” (6) formulated by traumatic ruptures such as emigration, the Declaration of Independence, and racism. It is severances such as these, he contends, which give American identity its “deep structure” (17). The next article, by Eliane Elmaleh, documents how after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 some African American artists began using the U.S. flag as a “visual tool of protest” (23) against institutional racism, to contrast the ideals of the American republic with the reality of their lives. These artists, according to Elmaleh, highlighted the “inconstancy” of the U.S. flag as a “symbol of freedom and unity” (34). For Elmaleh, the United States in the late 1960s was *plura* along racial lines.

Winfried Fluck authors the next article, arguing that American Studies as an academic discipline has long been grounded in “a romance with

America based on the myths and symbols of American exceptionalism” (35). *E pluribus plura*, for Fluck, is just another utopian myth that has dominated American Studies for the last two decades and has redefined and revived the romance with American exceptionalism but has not changed the United States in “crucial political and cultural aspects” (41). Fluck would have us view the United States neither as exceptional nor as profane (as some New Americanists claim) but as somewhere in between. One weakness of Fluck’s article is that it clearly displays a bias against the man Fluck refers to incorrectly as “George W. Bush, Jr.” (35). Another criticism concerning this article, as well as the article by Buelens, should be directed not at the authors themselves but at the editors of this volume. Both Fluck and Buelens, writing in 2008, express hope about the Obama presidency, but with publication coming three years later, some of these expressions are already dated. The editors should also have cautioned Elmaleh against using a tertiary source like About.com (22, note 3).

Bernd Herzogenrath rounds out the first half of the cultural section with a philosophical and highly intellectual article on the “specific materialities” grounding the “Body/Politic” metaphor (57). He contrasts the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes’s top-down image of the Body/Politic as the “unity of the representer” (64), sovereign power originating in a contract of the people and then solidified in law (e.g., the Mayflower Compact) with the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s bottom-up idea of the Body/Politic, which involves a representative body creating “a kind of order and sovereignty without adding an additional instance of regulation and control” (64). For Spinoza (1632–1677), there were two conceptions of power: *potentia* (force, strength, creative activity) and *potestas* (command, authority, sovereignty). It was Spinoza’s assertion that “the *potestas* of the sovereign is actually the *potentia* of the people.” For Hobbes (1588–1679), the multitude meant regression, whereas for Spinoza the multitude was the most important factor, as sovereign power is “the *potentia* of the multitude itself” (64). Hobbes argued for “mechanic materialism” while Spinoza saw “machinic materialism” (64). With this background theory in place, Herzogenrath then introduces the reader to the theory of “intelligent materialism” as formulated by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Michel Serres (born 1930). According to this theory, matter is productive and “accounts for the world’s order and creativity” (65). Deleuze saw intelligent materialism in American literature, the presence of which, he asserted, makes American literature superior to other types of literature. Taking his cue from Deleuze, Herzogenrath then identifies “resonances” (66) of intelligent materialism in the works of Walt Whitman. According to Herzogenrath, Whitman clearly saw the existence of a machinic democratic Body/Politic, “a multiplicity of members/forces that organizes itself” (72). Herzogenrath then concludes his article by stating that *E pluribus unum* has always been the motto for the American Body/Politic, but that two different versions of the Body/Politic compete over how *unum* should be envisioned: “one that starts from a One

already given . . . and one that starts from the Many" (74). For many readers, Herzogenrath's article will seem highbrow and densely packed and will prove tedious, and will probably result in obfuscation more than elucidation. Nevertheless, there are some valuable gems in this article for those who are willing to expend the time and energy it takes to mine them.

In the next paper in the "Cultural Explorations" section, Josef Jařab argues against the historian Nathan Huggins's assertion that a two-pronged attack by white America and black provincialism led to the failure of the Harlem Renaissance. Instead, Jařab contends, the Renaissance deserves credit not only because it "contributed considerably" (78) to the recognition of the plurality of American culture but also because it played a substantial role in the birth of modernism. Anne Ollivier-Mellios then follows Jařab with her argument that multiculturalism arose out of the debate during the Progressive Era over cultural pluralism and then was fueled by a variety of sources, including the huge influx of immigrants into the United States after 1965, the decline of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, the discussion of black power, the intellectual debate on postmodernism, and the fall of communism. She concludes by suggesting that multiculturalism should be viewed as "a crisis of intellectuals in the past 20 or 30 years" (89). The chief problem that scholars face, argues Ollivier-Mellios, is that they cannot define the true nature of the United States because it is a nation that, paradoxically, is based on universalism, or *unum*, but relies on "differentialism" (92), or *plura*.

Sabine Sielke's contribution to the cultural section of this collection documents how American filmmakers have busied themselves normalizing "the other," and, in doing so, have transformed the image of mainstream America "without letting go of the utopia of American consensus" (104). She further argues that the current version of the utopian *E pluribus unum* is tied to the aesthetics of old media, and that current American filmmakers, as standard bearers of the "paradigmatically American" (105), revitalize and reaffirm the nation by recalling "significant moments" in American history (119). The cultural section then ends on a low note with Susan Winnett's "Back to the Fold." This article on memoirs by American authors documenting the discovery of their Jewishness, besides being the shortest paper in the section, lacks a thesis statement and seems to be an excerpt, and an incomplete one at that. Only at the very end does the reader learn Winnett's point, somewhat obscurely formulated, that the Christianity of the authors of the memoirs "could not entirely obscure their parents' Jewish pasts," prompting the authors to "attempt to reclaim the community their parents abandoned" (131) through narratives of remembrance. This paper's connection to the stated theme of the volume is vague at best (out of one, many?) and will probably leave most readers assuming that the editors chose to include it simply because its subject matter serves as an adequate transition to the "Literary Explorations" section to follow, which itself begins with another paper making use of a memoir.

Marcel Arbeit, who, it should be noted in the interests of full disclosure, is the editor-in-chief of this journal, leads off the literary section of the book with a paper that explores the role of “the other” in the formation of southern identity by examining the identities of expatriates to chart how their southern identities have either been changed or lost. To do so, he utilizes the 1998 memoir of Southerner Elizabeth Spencer, a long-term expat, as evidence that Southerners living outside of the South do not give up their southern identities but rather have their identities clarified through removal. Further, he enters the debate over whether the South is homogenous or heterogeneous by pointing out that, at least for Spencer, southern identity is both (*unum* and *plura*).

While Arbeit concentrates on southern identity, the next author, Hans Bak, uses Chang-Rae Lee’s 1995 novel, *Native Speaker*, to reflect on “the complexly intertwined issues of language, identity and politics in multicultural New York” (148). The novel is rooted in the utopian possibilities of a community that transcends race and ethnicity, only at the end to show these hopes dashed. The protagonist, a second-generation Korean American, finds himself in an identity crisis because his “flawless” (149) English actually alienates him not only from his community but from himself. Towards the end of the novel, though, he realizes that his Asian physical features will always out him as the “other” (150) and that for this reason his original immigrant English was actually more authentic than his now Americanized speech. According to Bak, Lee’s novel portrays the bitter failure of a more inclusive Americanness, a failure blamed on the Anglo-American unwillingness in the 1990s to include Asian Americans in their vision of America. For Bak, Lee’s novel portrays the supremacy of *E pluribus plura*.

The editors then transport us back to the U.S. South, with Susan Castillo asserting that the region should be viewed as a Caribbean semi-periphery made distinct not by unity but by hybridity. This Caribbean hybrid identity of the South, argues Castillo, is reflected in its literature. She then focuses specifically on southern gothic literature, e.g., George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes* (1880), which she believes reflects not only repressed fears related to the region’s colonial legacy but also “fears of racial and regional indeterminacy” (163). In other words, for Castillo the South is analogous to Israel Zangwill’s metaphorical melting pot, filled with various ingredients, including but not limited to different nationalities, races and ethnicities, topped off with gender issues and a dash of fear, seasoned with history and then all mixed together to create a unique concoction that southern authors then sample and critique.

Whereas Castillo confines herself to regional identity, albeit in an extended Caribbean context, the next author, Jude Davies, examines the current instability of U.S. national identity, giving Theodore Dreiser the credit for calling the “assumed fixity and holism” (175) of American identity into question. According to Davies, it was the German-American ethnic identity ascribed to Dreiser during World War I that prompted him to develop and

tout throughout his literary career the belief that human solidarity surpasses any perceived boundaries and differences. Specifically, Dreiser rails against American exceptionalism and the “hypocrisy of the nationalistic American rhetoric” (178) that perpetuates it. Davies concludes by crediting Dreiser for his “multi-faceted attempt to forge some sort of human solidarity without erasing difference” (187). For Dreiser, the many could still be one without subscribing to an ideology-fueled hyper-nationalism.

“Unifying and Diversifying,” the next article in the literary section, was contributed by Jan Nordby Gretlund. In it, he points out that Alexander Hamilton stood for republican federalism and *E pluribus unum*, whereas Thomas Jefferson stood for states’ rights and *E pluribus plura*. It was *E pluribus unum* that emerged victorious from the Civil War, but according to Gretlund, southern writers, in authoring narratives of inclusion, have also begun to reclaim the history and ethnic reality of the South. Contemporary southern literature combines Jeffersonian diversification with Hamiltonian inclusion, leading Gretlund to conclude that the South is both *unum* and *plura*. The author’s creative attempt at the end of the article to incorporate country music into the argument falls short and detracts from an otherwise solid effort. As with the Elmaleh article, Gretlund should be faulted for using About.com as an academic source, and the editors again deserve blame for allowing the author to do so. Finally, this article fits extremely well with the Castillo article, leaving the reader to wonder why the editors chose to insert the Davies article between them. The reader will also be hard pressed to connect the next article in the literary section, by Elisabetta Marino, to the stated theme of the compilation. Marino argues that Amy Lowell’s poetry reflects her “multi-faceted interest in ‘Oriental’ culture” (206). Furthermore, she contends that Lowell realized that “Western arts could be vivified and enlivened by establishing a closer contact to Asia” (216) and believed that a “rewarding osmosis” between Asia and America could encourage a “fruitful grafting” (216) of American and Asian art.

The second-to-last article of the literary exploration section, by Dana Mihăilescu, should probably have been the first article in the section, as it couples nicely with the last article in the cultural section, that being Susan Winnett’s article on Jewishness. Mihăilescu argues that Jewishness on New York’s Lower East Side was “plural and complex” in the 1920s, with the country of origin playing an “integral part” in Jewish identity (221). A comparison of “Lower East Side fiction written by Jewish immigrants from several locales” (222) leads Mihăilescu to conclude that the authors clearly saw “diversity within unity” (223) in the Jewish community. Indeed, Mihăilescu sees the community as both heterogeneous and transitional, a place where conflicting values were being negotiated by different groups. Despite nativist discourse that presented the community as homogenous, there was no real “unified Jewishness” (238) in that particular place and time. *Plura* won out.

The final article of the literary explorations section is also arguably the most entertaining. In it, Sophie Vallas examines the fifty-seven crime novels in Ed McBain's 87th Precinct series and draws pertinent conclusions on both the characters and setting. For Vallas, the team of squadroom detectives in the series "resembles a large united family despite the diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds of its members" (242). Out of many, contends Vallas, McBain creates one conglomerate hero. These detectives protect and serve the imaginary and "mythical" city of Isola that McBain designed as an "urban laboratory" (244) in which experiments take place. He once said that he pictured Isola as a woman. He also supposedly modeled Isola on a New York City rotated ninety degrees clockwise. As such, contends Vallas, Isola should be viewed as the horizontal body of a woman, the proneness of which increases its attractiveness but also its complexity. Thus, the city of Isola is a laboratory or a female body, but either way a "living and changing entity" (247). Furthermore, McBain once described Isola as a "crazy thing of many parts which don't quite fit together" (247), making it *E pluribus plura*, while Vallas still sees *E pluribus unum* in Isola in that it is what she calls "the sum total of all American big, bad cities" (258).

The "Historical Explorations" section of the book is unfortunately brief, with just two contributions. Both are worth reading, but both could also have been incorporated into the "Cultural Explorations" section. Indeed, George Blaustein's article on the early Cold War era history of the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies, which might very well be the best article in the compilation, would have paired up nicely with Winfried Fluck's article on the romanticism of the American Studies discipline. For his part, Blaustein uses the Salzburg Seminar, the "primal scene" (270) of American Studies in Europe, as a platform for the study of the post-World War II reeducation of Germans and Austrians. The seminar proved popular because American literature was in vogue and American Studies provided "a relatively neutral field of study" (274) for a divided Europe. The seminar faculty, Blaustein documents, did not offer a coherent theory or unified approach, but they did export the American Creed and the ideology of inclusion to Salzburg, emphasizing America's cultural distinctiveness in their teachings. Nor did the faculty members share the same goals. For instance, F. O. Matthiessen viewed the seminar as a means to establish a "mystical Euro-American renaissance" (261) that would result in the democratization of post-fascist Europe, while Alfred Kazin was pessimistic about Matthiessen's utopian vision bearing the intended fruit, and confined himself simply to the goal of showing Europeans "that they could engage in intellectual inquiry without killing one another" (278). Both men, notes Blaustein, ended up disappointed. Even so, the Salzburg Seminar proved influential in rebuilding the European intellectual community while imparting certain democratic values to it. This article fits within the stated theme of the compilation because it documents the attempt of American intellectuals to use American ideology to foster

the emergence of a Euro-American “transcendent humanism” (281), or a Euro-American *unum*.

Laurence Gervais-Linon contributed the last article to the volume. In it, he argues that the “borders, fences and walls” around American gated communities and common interest housing developments actually serve as “a defense of the mechanism of unity” (287). He notes the perceived paradox between *E pluribus unum* and “gating off oneself from the rest” (287), as one-sixth of the U.S. population has done, but he argues that the residents of gated communities are attempting to recreate the ideal “city upon a hill,” where they can be safe and close-knit with people who share the same values and lifestyles. In these communities, contends the author, “Pluribus’ is no longer possible. Only ‘unum’ is valued” (294).

With no conclusion offered by the editors, the reader is then left to ponder the pluralism of American life as documented in the eighteen contributions. The stated purpose of the compilation is to determine whether or not there is “some kind of American norm” (ix), and sixteen of the eighteen authors each make their case in their own unique way, with eight arguing for *E pluribus unum*, four arguing for *E pluribus plura*, and four seeing both *unum* and *plura* (the positions of Winnett and Marino are unclear). Although the compilation therefore favors an *unum* in American identity, it creates enough uncertainty to leave most readers in a postmodern malaise stemming from the revelation that the truth about American identity cannot be known. Indeed, one is tempted to cast this compilation aside in frustration as “a crazy thing of many parts” (247) that yields few if any definitive results. However, those who have read Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) might take heart in the fact that the compilation as a whole seems to validate Ellison’s assertion that the ultimate fate of Americans is “to become one and yet many” (577) both as a society and as individuals. As such, the subtitle of this compilation, *Unity and Diversity in American Culture*, ultimately seems more accurate than the main title, which forces the reader to choose one or many.

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