

Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

Collins, Michael James and Pallant, Chris (2013) Introduction : Questioning E Pluribus Unum. *Comparative American Studies*, 11 (4). pp. 343-348. ISSN 1477-5700.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1179/1477570013Z.000000000059>

Link to record in KAR

<http://kar.kent.ac.uk/49516/>

Document Version

Publisher pdf

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

Introduction: Questioning *E Pluribus Unum*

MICHAEL J. COLLINS and CHRIS PALLANT

University of Kent and Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

In 2009 the New York University Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, in association with the US State Department, inaugurated a summer programme called ‘The Reconciliation of American Diversity with National Unity’ for British scholars of American studies. In 2010, it began an association with the US-UK Fulbright Commission before being discontinued in 2011 when funding was reallocated to establish new Fulbright Scholar Awards in the field. The seven contributors to this special issue are drawn from that initial Fulbright cohort and this collection is designed in part to commemorate a particular moment in the life of the discipline in the UK. The aim of the one-month programme was to explore the ways in which American culture had succeeded or failed to live up to the phrase on the Great Seal of the United States: *E Pluribus Unum*. True to the aims of American studies as an area of enquiry, this question was explored through a variety of disciplinary lenses including, but not limited to, those represented in this special issue: literature, history, art, architecture, intellectual history, and film. Although a perennial theme in both American studies as a discipline and the larger realm of American society and politics, the decision to run a course on the question of American unity and diversity at that moment in time came out of the perception that American studies was facing a crisis in the UK and required a new narrative through which to understand itself. In addition, it coincided with the resurgence of what was being perceived internationally as a new wave of American nationalism that had been damaging to the USA’s reputation in Britain.

On 15 April 2009 there had been a series of protests in more than 750 cities across the USA. Nominally directed against Barack Obama’s tax policy, these protests signalled the large-scale emergence of a new conservative populism in American society. Going by the name of The Tea Party (recalling the Boston Tea Party of 1773), this group had numerous, diverse, and frequently contradictory grievances against the Washington political system. Ranging from resistance to so-called ‘Obama-care’ health reform and a ‘Keynesian’ policy of fiscal stimulus, to discontent with certain state government policies towards gay marriage, abortion, or the secularization of schools, the Tea Party’s multiplatform protest movement often seemed to be unified more by circumstance than judgement. However, threads of unity can be found in this diverse body. Standing on Boston Common on 15 April, David Tuerck (an academic from the Boston-based Suffolk University) announced: ‘It’s time for us to rally around a new cause, which is to return America to the principles for which our

forefathers fought and died. It's time for a new American Revolution' (Boston Tea Party, 2009). As a response to an increasingly globalized world, this statement seemed troublingly US-centric and, given the history of the tarring and feathering of British nationals that marked the last American Revolution, the British cohort arrived at NYU with a certain amount of trepidation.

As the historian Jill Lepore has recently argued, the desire to 'return' politics to the conditions of the late eighteenth century actually reveals a peculiarly 'antihistorical' agenda (Lepore, 2010). To 'return America to the principles for which our forefathers fought and died' is to suggest that out of the American Revolution came a perfect reconciliation of the demands of the state with the demands of the individual citizen. It also suggests that *E Pluribus Unum* is an equation without a remainder. From this perspective, all subsequent attempts to achieve unity in diversity have been an aberrant deviation from the Platonic ideal of an exceptional American state. It is unsurprising then that Tea Party rhetoric can seem so apocalyptic when all American history is coded as a great fall from what the American Puritans referred to as 'The Covenant of Grace' — a uniquely balanced relationship between their earthly mission and the perfect Kingdom of Heaven. Furthermore, what Tuerck and his supporters occluded was a history of disputes over the question of unity and diversity that can be seen in countless conflicts over the USA's lifetime. Indeed, such conflicts constitute perhaps *the* dominant trend in American social and political life.

In recent years, it has become unpopular to talk about American exceptionalism in American studies. To do so would seem like a return to an old position of complicity between academia and the state. Donald Pease has illustrated this point particularly well in *The New American Exceptionalism* (2010), where he argues that, in the 1940s and 1950s, the 'vast majority of the scholars working within the field of American Studies cooperated with policymakers and the press in constructing a mythology of national uniqueness' (11). This national mythology of American uniqueness was designed to elevate those values of individual self-determination and national providence that could be utilized in a war against an alternative, antagonistic model of the state's role: Soviet Communism. For Pease, the belief that the American body politic is peculiar and distinct and lays, untouched, outside of the historical currents that have shaped other nations is shot through with the icy chill of Cold War liberalism. Certainly in Britain, American studies were begun as a project that was the recipient of support from the US State Department and was aimed at shoring up the Anglo-American Special Relationship in the aftermath of World War II.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s this model of Cold War American exceptionalism has come to be replaced by a renewed focus on a diversity of different perspectives and disciplinary engagements with American history and culture. Largely abandoning the idea of exceptional American symbols in favour of questioning how history operates through 'language' and 'texts', American studies came to define itself through its inclusive pluralism. For a while at least this pluralism became its own form of unifying narrative: multiculturalism. For many years, American studies as a discipline sought to fuse ideas of multicultural inclusiveness with a model of cultural theory that emerged from the ideas of French thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida on the nature of ideology and power. The language of French high theory should have provided a structured way for the diverse disciplines that comprise American studies to develop a unified language after the fall of the Berlin Wall and

the less-pressing need for the discipline to act as a cheerleader for US liberal culture. However, the rise of poststructuralist debates over language and power often coincided with a collective disengagement from the directly political implications of American studies scholarship and the relationship between American texts and the real conditions of the US nationstate. In effect, under the influence of theory, power became abstract, amorphous, and often detached from the particular experiences to which America had been subject. As Stephen Watts noted in his controversial essay in the December 1991 edition of *American Quarterly*: ‘The Idiocy of American Studies: Poststructuralism, Language and Politics in the Age of Self-Fulfillment’, this fascination with text and language produced a dangerous alienation from the real politics of the state. Academics within American studies were no longer claiming that America itself had a history and culture that was unique from other nations, so much as arguing that poststructuralist theory could offer them a detached perspective through which they could isolate the sources of a power that, even as it emerged under specific conditions, was universal. Watts noted ‘an outpouring of superb, erudite, Leftist scholarship combined with a steadily stagnating Leftist politics. By the 1980s, what had once been a disgruntled political retrenchment gradually evolved into a sophisticated political disengagement’ (1991: 631). Furthermore, without a structured political narrative to shape the discipline, the idea that American studies had anything that unified it politically or socially largely melted away as new departments began to be formed to cater for the particularist concerns of different cultural groups and disciplinary affiliations. In the UK, things began to go the other way. Under budgetary constraints and without a unifying narrative to deploy in their defence, American studies centres began to be reincorporated into more traditional disciplinary frameworks.

Largely as a response to this political vacuum in American studies, recent years have seen a deepening interest in exploring how the histories of other nations and political entities have affected America’s own conception of itself. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin noted in her Presidential Address to the American Studies Association in 2004 which was published the next year in *American Quarterly*, recently American studies has been shaped by a ‘transnational turn’. This ‘transnational turn’ has developed with the aim of expanding the debate over American national identity into a spatial arrangement that extends beyond the parameters of a traditionally, geographically-bounded definition of the US nationstate. In part a response to a new era of globalization, in which American identity is embedded within a complex nexus of international connections, the transnational turn is the expression of a desire to see how America appears from multiple different perspectives. As such, the eye has been re-focused on the USA, albeit in terms of an increased interest in opinions of the outsider looking in. This in turn has offered scholars of American studies — especially those like the authors of this collection who are not US nationals — a rich opportunity to re-evaluate their terms of engagement with the US nationstate.

This special issue does not take the motto on the official seal as an indisputable fact. Instead it seeks to show how the concerns of this creed manifest themselves in an extraordinarily diverse series of settings within American culture and politics. Questioning *E Pluribus Unum* challenges the assumption that America ever achieved the perfect union that the new political right assume. The work collected here demonstrates that the national fantasy of a past in which America had already

achieved an ideal reconciliation of diversity and unity plasters over the numerous ways in which this problem has been a constant site of exploration and interest. However, in this special issue we have tried to be attentive to the fact that, in the urge to expand the scope of American studies scholarship to include the perspectives of non-nationals, ‘transnational scholarship’ must not lose site of the particular and specific histories that have shaped American experience. In order to do this we have chosen to focus our attention upon the shared space of our collective intellectual, personal, and transnational affection: New York City and its environs. All of the articles in this collection have different approaches to unity and diversity, but what unifies them all is the same thing that unified the initial Fulbright summer programme: the cosmopolitan space of New York — a site in which unity and diversity are in constant tension and to which no simple, politicised account of an ahistorical US ‘national culture’ could ever do justice.

It was literary and political historians who first began American studies as a project and work of this nature is also present here. But, if the historical relationship between American studies and linguistics has taught us anything it is that the language through which a discipline encodes its meanings is as important as what it says. As such, nestled next to analyses of American diplomacy are studies of American art, film, and fashion that reorient, recategorize, and reshape the disciplinarily encoded meanings of the other articles in the collection. All of these chapters are synecdochal of the larger theme of unity and diversity and they come to different conclusions. Some elevate the collectivities of class, some the emotional power of animation or the brotherhood generated out of racial difference, but all identify the relationship between unity and diversity as a potential structuring narrative through which American studies can orient itself as a discipline without falling back on the old certainties of a belligerent American exceptionalism or a mandarin political disengagement.

In the 1990s, Richard Rorty proposed a solution to the problems engendered by the culture wars between right and left views of American history. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty suggested that, by regrounding American national debate in the terms of Deweyian pragmatism, we might learn to think once more about the future, rather than unthinkingly praise the past. Rorty said of Dewey that ‘what he dreaded was stasis: a time in which everybody would take for granted that the purpose of history had been accomplished, an age of spectators rather than agents’ (1998: 20). If this collection belongs within a tradition of American thought and culture, it is a tradition of pragmatism in which the process of asking questions is more important than developing a fixed and ahistorical answer. To achieve our country (or, in the case of the contributor’s to this collection, someone else’s country) we must repeatedly ask the question: How have individuals attempted to balance unity and diversity across the history of US thought and culture?

In Chris Pallant’s article — ‘New York: The Animated City’ — emphasis is placed on interrogating how animated representations of New York City render the familiar unfamiliar, opening up new ways to look at the urban landscape. Focusing on a range of animation styles, Pallant illustrates how hand-drawn techniques bring America’s depression narrative back to life in Disney’s *Fantasia 2000* (1999); how Patrick Jean’s computer-generated short *Pixels* (2009) establishes a reassuringly (and purposefully) artificial space in which to consider the subject of New York’s physical destruction — an understandably sensitive subject following the 9/11 attacks; and how *Grand*

Theft Auto IV (2008) opens up new ways to interact with, as well as look at, the urban landscape of New York.

Also fusing past and present, Anne-Marie Evans reflects on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 'American Woman: Fashioning a National Identity' (2010) exhibition, which brought together a range of cultural stereotypes from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as heiresses, Gibson girls, bohemians, and screen sirens. With this exhibition as a platform, Evans explores how fashion helped to define two prominent cultural roles: the heiress figure of the 1890s and the 1920s' flapper. Considering Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), Evans takes a distinctly multidisciplinary approach, revealing resonances across literature, fashion design, the politics of fashion, and the shifting status of fashion as art.

Taking the concept of curated space in a different direction, Siofra McSherry's article — 'Joseph Cornell's Subversive Materialism' — seeks to situate Cornell's shadow boxes within a broader continuum of consumer and spectatorial desire. Cornell's boxes are full of objects glimpsed in the windows and purchased from the shops and stalls of New York, the result of his engagement with the rituals of consumption and his participation in the unifying narrative of desire and purchase. What distinguishes Cornell's dialogue of desire, however, is not consumption, but the continual deferral of desire's fulfilment, enacted through the glass boundary. Cornell places objects back under glass, reconstituting the tension between desired objects and desiring subjects, between separation and connection. They become, in Cornell's vision, the *memento mori* of consumer culture. McSherry proposes that the consumer/commodity relationship is paradigmatic of the sense of social disruption and perceived failure of the American ideal of unity in the late twentieth century, and thus social alienation and disunity themselves are the subject of Cornell's subversion of the consumer's gaze through glass.

The practice of observation is taken up in Anna Woodhouse's article: 'The Woolrichian Window and the Democratization of the Detective in "Rear Window"'. Shifting the focus from Alfred Hitchcock's film adaptation of *Rear Window* (1954), which has attracted considerable scholarly attention, Woodhouse directs her gaze towards Cornell Woolrich's original story. Here, the window not only becomes a crucial plot device, but also a significant real-world portal that offers both the potential to expand and reflect subjectivity. For Woodhouse, the Woolrichian window reifies abstract social boundaries. It serves, simultaneously, as a symbol of urban alienation and fantasy of social integration. It also becomes a trope of consumption and popular culture.

Michael Collins' '*Manacled to Identity: Cosmopolitanism, Class, and "The Culture Concept"*' provides a reading of the work of the major American author Stephen Crane (1871–1900) in relation to significant late-nineteenth-century debates over the meaning and purpose of 'culture'. Beginning with a reading of Crane's last published short story 'Manacled' (1900), which dramatizes an actor's death in a theatre fire, Collins explores how Crane made use of a radical cosmopolitan aesthetic in order to critique the claims made within the dominant literary genres of realism and naturalism about the importance of pseudo-scientific objectivity and verisimilitude in characterization that were fixing behaviours as the products of certain spatial and

temporal loci. Crane, Collins suggests, found realism unable to confront the reality of class distinctions because it rendered inequality through the lens of emergent theories of culture. Revealingly, Collins also shows how the problems explored by Crane have resonances in our own era, in which, as the critic Walter Benn Michaels has recently noted, identification of difference (ethnic, racial, or class-based) has largely replaced politics of social justice and solidarity among the liberal-left in American studies.

Adam Burn's article — 'Adapting to Empire: William H. Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, and the Philippines, 1900–08' — continues the theme of America's role in the wider world through a discussion of the changing attitudes of the New York politician Roosevelt and the Ohio judge Taft towards the USA's newly-acquired status as a global imperial power in the wake of the Spanish-American War of 1898. Burns explores how America's isolationist treatment of Puerto Rico and the Philippines in the late nineteenth century proved to be a low point for the USA in its chequered history of reconciling diversity with national unity. The USA never successfully integrated the Philippines or Puerto Rico on a full and equal basis, and the repercussions of such decisions had markedly divergent results in the decades that followed. Burns' article maps a local story of a complex political and personal relationship, which shifted over time from a position of antimony to one of general unity, on to the world stage, plotting the effects of individuals on global history.

Sarah Trott's article — 'A "Lost Crowd": Reconfiguring the Harlem Renaissance as a Post-War "Lost Generation"' — draws the special collection to a close. Trott questions the traditional narrative that, for black Americans, World War I did not signify the same traumatic removal of traditional Victorian ideals, end of romantic notions of battle, or disillusionment and alienation evoked as common themes in the work of the, primarily, white 'lost generation'. Trott considers how themes such as alienation, masculinity, and place draw the two seemingly divergent "lost" generations into one another's orbits. Given the relatively scarce scholarship concerning the conflict that existed in post-World War I American society between being 'black' and being 'American', which is remarkable when we consider that the war was supposedly a key turning-point for African-American culture and attitudes, Trott's contribution is timely.

Bibliography

- Boston Tea Party. 2009. David Tuerck @ Boston Tea Party 2009, 21 April. [Accessed 13 March 2011]. Available at: <<http://teapartyboston2009.blogspot.com/2009/04/david-tuerck-boston-tea-party-2009.html>>.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. 2005. Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies — Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004. *American Quarterly*, March, 57(1):17–57.
- Lepore, Jill. 2010. *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Pease, Donald. 2010. *The New American Exceptionalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1998. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Watts, Stephen. 1991. The Idiocy of American Studies: Poststructuralism, Language and Politics in the Age of Self-Fulfillment. *American Quarterly*, December, 43(4): 625–60.