

Werner Sollors (ed), *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literatures* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 409 pp., ISBN: 0-8147-8093-8, paper; \$25.00.

Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature is a collection of twenty eight essays on what has been a largely neglected area in American Studies, namely, writings in languages other than English. The articles are all original contributions, and include, as editor Werner Sollors notes in the 'Introduction'

case studies and groundbreaking bibliographical work, historically focused contributions on language creation and suppression, and close readings of representative texts ...[it takes] seriously the task of examining the history of discrete language groups and their literary productions, as well as by crossing language boundaries ... by investigating newly invented languages; and by reflecting on the effects of multilingualism on English writing in the United States (9-10).

At the core of *Multilingual America* lies the concern with what Sollors refers to as the 'blind spot of language'(5): the way in which representations of the American experience have consistently ignored voices in languages other than English. Even with the past decades' focus on multiculturalism and pluralism, the agenda these debates set for expansion of the 'canon' has largely been deaf to the sounds of immigrants giving their versions of the American experience in their own languages. Te-hsing Shan notes that 'the LOWINUS [Languages Of What Is Now the US] Project at once unsettles and redefines long-held ideas about American literature' (119), and even if there are still many bridges to cross *Multilingual America* is a significant step forward.

The essays are divided into seven sections which provide different perspectives on multilingualism in the United States and what its recognition entails: 'Literary History, Old and New'; 'The Many Languages of American Literature'; 'Yekl and Hyde': 'Different-Language Versions of the 'same' Texts'; 'Multilingualism as a Way of Life'; 'Melting Glots'; 'Multilingualism and English-Language Writing'; and 'Languages and Language Rights.' Added to these is a separate part on research in Multilingual America

and a number of useful web addresses and search hints for further exploration and information. Given the collection's thematic and quantitative span, it is impossible here to mention all the contributions, even all the sections. Instead references are made to some issues that recur across the sections.

One such theme is the conflict between retaining the old home culture while at the same time assimilating into the new American. The negotiation of this dichotomy in turn generates two central questions: firstly, in what does the 'old' culture consist; and, secondly, what exactly is the 'new?' Orm Øverland shows that, for instance, to the Norwegian-American writer and journalist Waldemar Ager 'the new' was English rather than something innately American, and the notion of the melting pot a 'metaphor of destruction, more about the killing of the old man than the creation of the new' (53). In 'The Quintessence of the Jew' Matthew Frye Jacobson translates Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* back into Yiddish. He argues that in the original language *Yekl* 'engaged transnational debates regarding the essence of Jewish character' more than the assimilationist debate refracted in the English language version published two years later in 1895 (104). The definition of Polishness was, too, as Karen Majewski shows, a complicated matter: 'Was one a Pole by virtue of birthplace, of genealogy, of language, of religion, social class, political affiliation, of ideology, of inclination, of opportunism?' (248). The task of culture preservation thus had to be negotiated on two fronts: internally within the ethnic group and externally in relation to the dominant mainstream society. Several of the essays in this collection add significantly, not only to our understanding of the dynamics behind these processes, but also to the inter-ethnic points of convergence and divergence among the ethnic-American groups.

Apart from the insights the essays bring to different groups and their American cultural histories, they also bring attention to writings that are largely unknown to the general audience. Michel Fabre, for instance, traces the literature of the Creoles of color, the gens de *couleur* in Louisiana from the antebellum period to its extinction around the First World War. Distinguished from other African Americans by 'jealously preserving their Latin culture,' this group existed in a peculiar neither-nor category, removed from the black as well as the white community (29). Equally peripheral, perhaps, to the awareness of most Americanists is the history of the Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) press and its communal and political function. Its 'undoing,' Aviva Ben-Ur suggests, became the very acculturation it had worked to facilitate. Other literary productions that have been considered marginal to American Studies are the Jewish Orthodox sermons. Menahem Blondheim offers an interesting discussion of the adjustment these sermons had to make in order to reach new world congregations. Even if the members were basically the same as in the old country, the new setting drastically altered the needs and expectations that had to be met. Peter Conolly-Smith has written about Adolph Philipp's German musical comedies, and shows how they functioned to the immigrant community as a pedagogical bridging between high-brow German drama and the popular theater of the new world.

Another case in point is contemporary Chinese-American literature written in Chinese, which retains its connections with the old culture but centers on immigrant thematics in the US. This literature, Xiao-huang Yin argues, is distinguished from Chinese-American literature in English by its liberty of speech: of not having to conform to stereotypical

representations of the Chinese-American experience. This particular use of another language than English is also, as Mario Muffi argues, an important aspect of the Italian-American foundational work *Peppino* (1885) by Luigi Donato Ventura – written in *French*, rather than English or Italian. Muffi suggests that one reason Ventura may have done this is that a 'neutral' language enabled him to talk about things 'privately' Italian to a public audience while at the same time enabling him to retain the grace of *la bella figura* (173). This aspect of language use ties up with another important theme several essays touch on, namely how writers in the past as well as the present century have felt pressured to relate their fears and hopes in English and how this has influenced their accounts of their experiences. This is Aviva Taubenfeld's concern in her examination of the different configurations of the Jewish community and the author/narrator in the Yiddish and English versions of Cahan's *Yekl*.

Apart from the obvious educational contribution *Multilingual America* makes to the current multiculturalist debate, it is also a highly valuable pedagogical addition that will be useful to all students and teachers in American literature and American Studies departments. The teaching of American literature and culture is becoming increasingly dependent on inclusive reading-lists, and our understanding of American cultural and literary history must take into account both historical awareness as well as awareness of the multiple implications of 'hyphenated' America. Although he was speaking about Mexican-Americans in particular, scholar and writer Juan Bruce-Novoa's comment that the hyphen signifies 'intercultural possibilities' of a continually expanding space is, as *Multilingual America* demonstrates, of general relevance.² Only by acknowledging this can we appreciate the multicultural 'narration of the nation' American literature has reflected from its early days.