

## Reviews

Dale Carter, ed., *Marks of Distinction: American Exceptionalism Revisited*, The Dolphin, 32. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2001. 339 pages; \$25.95 £12.95 22.50 DKK 158 paper (ISBN: 87-7288-383-9).

The concept of American Exceptionalism occupies a unique position in relation to American Studies. On the one hand, very few Americanists recognize the term though they understand the idea when it is explained; on the other hand, Exceptionalism informs the very structure of what we teach and study as Americanists, especially in the fields of history and literature. American Studies takes as its founding question the question posed by Hector St John de Crèvecoeur shortly after the War of Independence: 'What is an American?' The attempt to answer this has involved the construction of a 'grand narrative' of American nationhood, built upon a canon of privileged texts beginning with John Winthrop's 'Model of Christian Charity' in which he articulated the model of New World culture as a 'city upon a hill.' What emerges powerfully from these essays is a sense not only of the extent to which this ahistorical paradigm has been challenged and interrogated particularly by twentieth-century critics but also of the resilience and explanatory potential of Exceptionalism itself.

This collection consists of twelve essays, including Michael Kammen's 1993 *American Quarterly* essay 'The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration' and Joyce Appleby's 1992 presidential address to the Organization of American Historians, 'Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism.' The ten new essays address a range of disciplinary approaches to Exceptionalism, under the section headings 'Cultures,' 'Technologies,' 'Institutions' and 'Laws.' These papers originally appeared as a special issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia*, and arose from the seminar, 'Aspects of American Exceptionalism' held at the American Studies Center, University of Aarhus, in 1996. This point of origin lends the essays coherence through the common focus upon and response to Joyce Appleby's paper. The book begins with Dale Carter's introduction and Appleby's essay and concludes with Kammen's essay. In his editor's introduction, Carter usefully sets out the terms in which the essays comprising the volume engage with the debates that characterize contemporary Exceptionalist discourses. He relates these essays to Kammen's critical review of work in the field of American Exceptionalism and brings this up to date by including more recent work by such scholars as Byron Schafer (*Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism* [1991]), David Adams and Cornelius van Minnen (*Reflections on American Exceptionalism* [1994]), Seymour Martin Lipset (*American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* [1996]), and myself (*American Exceptionalism* [1998]).

Thomas B. Byers' essay 'A City Upon a Hill: American Literature and the Ideology of Exceptionalism' invokes in its title the foundational metaphor of Exceptionalism and

goes on to consider the ways in which Exceptionalism has informed the structure and development of the American literary canon. This line of inquiry is extended by James Mendelsohn in the essay that follows, 'Writing, Criticism and the Imagination of Nation: American Exceptionalism and the Evolution of American Studies.' Mendelsohn asks how the imagination of America as an exceptional entity is constructed not only in literary texts but also in the scholarly discourses that describe and analyze them. Both Byers and Mendelsohn isolate in exceptionalist rhetoric a tendency to identify America as a place with America as a mission. How contemporary scholars attempt to discover an alternative to exceptionalism is an important theme of both essays. Indeed, in the introduction to his essay 'Technology and Cultural Difference,' David E. Nye observes that 'It is currently unfashionable to assert the existence of a common American cultural experience' (93) but he goes on to develop a view of American culture that uses the idea of a distinctive American democratic technology to set America apart. Inger Hunnerup Dalsgaard, in 'No Special Relation: British Perceptions of Ante-Bellum America's Growing Pains,' looks to the relations between America and Europe, specifically Britain, to identify the 'definitions and values' that have been ascribed to the new nation. Whilst continuing the critique of the relation of Exceptionalism to the concept of the modern nation-state Eric Guthey, in 'Newt's Clean Slate, or American Exceptionalism in the Information Age,' begins by remarking upon the use of Exceptionalist rhetoric by Newt Gingrich in his 1995 book *To Renew America*, where he argues in classic exceptionalist terms that America is the world's 'last, best hope.' I would add here the observation that Exceptionalism provided George W. Bush with the terms for his public response in the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

The challenge for scholars such as these represented here is to reconcile the undoubted appeal of Exceptionalism with the vagaries of lived history and changing intellectual methodologies for the analysis and description of that history. Peter Bardaglio's essay, "'A Divided Empire": African Americans, the South, and the Narrative of American Exceptionalism,' focuses upon the reliance of Exceptionalism upon an emotional and psychological commitment to the idea of American 'difference' and asks how that commitment has shaped the situation of African Americans racially and the South regionally within the narrative of American history. Interestingly, John Halsey and W. Bruce Leslie in their contribution, 'A College Upon a Hill: Exceptionalism and American Higher Education,' confront the institution of education, much neglected in discussions of Exceptionalism yet an obvious point of European inheritance and New World innovation, as a test case for the longevity and robustness of the concept of American Exceptionalism. In the concluding section of the book, Helle Porsdam, in "'They Came to Lawyers, You Know, What Can You Do?": American Exceptionalism and Judicial Activism,' and Jody W. Pennington, in "'Against Any Winds that Blow": American Exceptionalism, Multiculturalism, and Judicial Review,' examine the role of American lawyers and the entire judicial system in shaping and also challenging the ideology of Exceptionalism.

This is a well balanced collection of essays which emphasizes the importance of



American Exceptionalism to the various disciplines that comprise American Studies. Indeed, the multi-disciplinary nature of exceptionalist debate is dramatically illustrated by the selection of essays and approaches. One takes from this book a new, or perhaps renewed, sense of the vigour with which Exceptionalism is and has been interrogated by contemporary scholars, in terms of the historical challenge to Exceptionalism's ahistorical character, as well as the challenge of contemporary multicultural discourses to Exceptionalism's Eurocentric bias, and the challenge to inherited notions of the nation state upon which Exceptionalism could be said to rely. This book is essential reading for Americanists of all disciplines and students of American Studies for the challenge that it poses to our conventional ways of imagining America and articulating those imaginings.

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Cecelia Tichi, *Embodiment of a Nation: Human Form in American Places*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001; xii + 303 pages, 38 black and white illustrations, bibliography, index; \$39.95 £27.50 45.90 cloth (ISBN: 0-674-00494-9).

Abraham Lincoln's unfinished Mount Rushmore face stares off the jacket of Cecelia Tichi's new book *Embodiment of a Nation*. The audacious sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, declared 'I couldn't and wouldn't have started to drill on that mountain if I hadn't known that the portrait of Washington had been there for forty million years and I had to find it. And that of Jefferson and Lincoln, who saved our country, and finally Teddy Roosevelt' (15). Tichi reads these heads as 'the valorization of cerebral power' erected by a man who had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan and celebrated the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic peoples. She agrees with Albert Boime, who called Mount Rushmore 'Four Great White Fathers, all intellect and logic, disembodied and soulless.' Tichi devotes her first chapter to Borglum's sculpture as an example of 'Crania Americana,' and traces a historical line from the naming of the 'Presidential range' of mountains in New Hampshire in 1820 through the nineteenth-century fascination with phrenology to racialist theories of white supremacy. She notes that Hawthorne was critical of naming mountains for presidents after Washington, and writes well on his 'The Great Stone Face,' a political 'fable about disclosure of national character' (37). She points out that Melville subversively read Queequeg's head phrenologically to resemble Washington's (31), and that Emerson used phrenological language to characterize Napoleon. As these examples suggest, her book focuses on literary texts in detail, bringing in historical materials from secondary works. There are also many references to popular culture, including an advertisement showing broad smiles on the heads at Mount Rushmore, each listening to rock music on Sony headphones.

The trope of environment as body is so vast that Tichi realizes she cannot make an exhaustive survey. Nevertheless, her introduction might have sketched a wider range of geographic embodiments. She mentions mountain chains as backbones, peninsulas as arms, and rivers as arteries, but a more thorough outline of a (gendered) taxonomy