

Journal of American Studies, 44 (2010), 3. doi:10.1017/S0021875810001337

John Michael, *Identity and the Failure of America: From Thomas Jefferson to the War on Terror* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, \$22.50). Pp. 301. ISBN 9780 8166 5144 3.

John Michael offers a sophisticated argument that identity politics have reflected failures of American democracy from the early republic to our misguided neo-imperialism in the Middle East and Afghanistan. For Michael, ethnic and other affiliations by identity are frequently shaped by injustices the nation has failed to address. Slavery, sexism, class hierarchies, and racial discrimination are just some of the failures that have produced powerful affiliations among African Americans, Asian Americans, Chicano/a and Latino/as, Native Americans, women, and the working class. Exemplifying his argument with interpretations of Thomas Jefferson, Herman Melville, Lydia Maria Child, John Brown and Nat Turner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Emerson, and Frederick Douglass, Michael concludes with the relevance of this long political and cultural history to contemporary America.

Michael's thesis follows a recognizable liberal outline, claiming that identity politics have contributed to what Arthur Schlesinger termed the "disuniting of America" and causing many artists and intellectuals to abandon consensus politics as mere ideology. Michael tries to reimagine the America in the dialectical relationship between national realities and ideal democracy. Predictably, Thomas Jefferson's views of African Americans and Native Americans demonstrate the hypocrisy at the very heart of the early republic. Yet the democratic reforms Jefferson's hypocritical Enlightenment values demand are not, for Michael, so easy to achieve in politics or culture. In his reading of *Moby-Dick*, Michael contends that the divided and diverse crew maintains and reinforces Ahab's tyrannical rule. In a far-reaching chapter on Lydia Maria Child, Michael argues that literature may provide "sympathetic identification" that allows majority and minority groups to rediscover a shared commitment to social justice, rather than to discrete identifications by ethnicity, gender, or class.

However powerful our identificatory sympathies, they are difficult to translate into political and social reforms. Tracing the iterations of Nat Turner and John Brown from their times to Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* and Russell Banks's *Cloudsplitter*, Michael argues that both revolutionaries were contained and controlled by means of religious and racial identifications. Even Frederick Douglass is reduced from national reformer to Abolitionist exemplar of African American identity, and later, in his own efforts as US minister to Haiti, to an aspirant to white bourgeois masculinity. Violent insurrection or change from within the state both suffer, according to Michael, from the fatal appeal of identity politics.

Only Emerson escapes these problems, albeit not without considerable difficulties. The author of *Emerson and Skepticism*, Michael offers a spirited defense of Emerson as a citizen who reluctantly advocated abolition for the sake of saving the union. Separating himself from Melville's dysfunctional crew, articulating himself as a critically thinking citizen, incorporating Child's and Stowe's aesthetics of "sympathetic identification," Emerson in his anti-slavery writings exemplifies a democratic dissent that helps rebuild national consensus at a critical moment in American political history.

Unfortunately, Michael makes it appear that slavery was abolished as more a consequence of Emerson's speeches than of the international Abolitionist movement. Not all identitarian affiliations are the results of alienation from the nation; many of our most powerful ties to specific communities antedate nations, exceed specific state formations, or negotiate transnational obligations. Just how the state may force these identities to conform to a specific national form is a fundamental problem that Michael does not address, despite his frequent invocation of cosmopolitanism as an ideal. Early in this book, Michael rejects "universal citizenship" as an impossibility, leaving us only with the possibility of *American* cosmopolitanism, an oxymoronic idea that nevertheless has had many deadly consequences in our long imperial history.

University of Southern California

JOHN CARLOS ROWE

Journal of American Studies, 44 (2010), 3. doi:10.1017/S0021875810001349

Susan Castillo and David Seed (eds.), *American Travel and Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009, £65.00). Pp. x + 288. ISBN 978 1 84631 180 2.

In *American Travel and Empire* (2009), editors Susan Castillo and David Seed collect essays that explore how travel writing has informed cultural preconceptions of hemispheric America. Donald Ross, in "What Are We Doing Here? Scenarios for Early English Colonies in North America," assesses the translation of sixteenth-century conservative Englishness in Colonial charters, where a mundane commercial imaginary envisaged the American continent as its utopia made manifest. Susan Castillo, in "'The Lies of a Distant Traveller'? The Travel Writing of Louis de Hennepin," explores the art – and artifice – of Hennepin's *Description of Louisiana*, which has been excoriated as a 'geographical' lie. Castillo's examination offers an alternative perspective, where the sculpting of recording and fictive devices can be seen to embody the conflicts of travel writing in the context of empire. In "French Representations of Niagara: From Hennepin to Butor," Charles Forsdick also explores "travel liar" Hennepin as one of several writers fascinated by Niagara, assessing the impact of colonial travel on the tradition of French literature, specifically the metaphoric force of the falls themselves. Wil Verhoeven's "'Come to these Arcadian Regions where there is room for Millions': Citizen Imlay and the Empire of the West" examines the parallels that appear in the travel writing of British Jacobin radicals of the late eighteenth century, seeking a world of liberty and equality on the grand frontier, and the land speculators, seeking profit and personal fame, with the figure of the American Gilbert Imlay, writer of *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (1793) and the "frontier" romance *The Emigrant* (1793), merchant and traveller across London, Paris and the American territories, at the pivot of the discursive territories of reformers and profiteers. In "The Conquest of Antiquity: The Travelling Empire of John Lloyd Stephens," Gesa Mackenthun explores the development of Central America as a discursive site of American identity politics following the demise of the Spanish Empire, arguing that the aims of the archaeologist-adventurer (a forerunner for Indiana Jones) to "collect" Mayan cities for museum display in the US, as expressed in his 1840s travel narratives,