Susan Savage Lee

E pluribus unum or E pluribus plura? Unity and Diversity in American Culture: *European Views of the United States*, Vol. 3. Hans Jürgen Grabbe, David Mauk, and Ole Moen (eds). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011. h / bk 306 pp. ISBN 978-3-8253-5857-0. Price £25.95.

The editors and contributors to the third volume of *European Views of the United States* seek to understand American negotiation with unity and diversity in society, in particular how Americans attempt to find balance between the two notions. The concepts of *E pluribus unum* — the idea of the melting pot — and *E pluribus plura* — the idea of diversity and pluralism — are used throughout this volume as the contributors examine the tensions between these ideas and the contradictory practices of social and political exclusion in the American past.

Unity and diversity have been repeated themes throughout American history because of their close proximity to notions of American identity. In "Oneness through Rupture: on the Severances that Bind Americans," Gert Buelens traces *E pluribus unum* as it functioned in its original context on the Great Seal. Buelens suggests that the idea of unity expressed through the Great Seal and later, the Declaration of Independence, has changed over time in order to accommodate modifications made to an American identity. In 1776, for example, unity meant rupture as the colonies separated from England. By the time that Abraham Lincoln incorporated passages from the Declaration in his speech against Stephen Douglas, Lincoln described a different sort of unity. For Lincoln, unity meant including both immigrants and slaves into the formation of America's national identity. Buelens' focus on the Great Seal and the Declaration illustrate that modern-day meanings of unity are not contained within the contents of these original documents, but rather emerge as social constructions built long after the creation of the Great Seal and the Declaration. Buelens suggests that a contemporary American sense of unity and identity must involve two elements which work together: the diversity of the American past; and the trauma of slavery. Buelens further argues that present-day Americans need to find a balance between unity, diversity, and the trauma of a racist past.

While Buelens firmly grounds *E pluribus unum* as a constantly-evolving concept, Eliane Elmaleh expands upon the inaccessibility of unity for marginalized groups such as African Americans in "African

American Artists and the American Flag: Unity, Diversity, and Protest." Elmaleh seeks to link art and activism, while considering the historical and political influences which make artistic subversion possible. Elmaleh uses the American flag as the centerpiece for her analysis of African-American exclusion from American unity. While the American flag has been used to represent America itself, at the same time, for African-American artists like David Hammons, the flag is a symbol of "America's unkept promises to and violence against African Americans" (23). Artists like Hammons thus subvert the symbolism of American unity in the flag by depicting it as a symbol of political injustice. For example, in "Injustice Case" (1970), Hammons shows the silhouette of a man gagged and bound to a chair. This man is a representation of Bobby Seale, a Black Panther Party founder who was silenced during his conspiracy trial through the same methods imparted in the silhouette. The silhouette is framed by the American flag. Hammons used his own body to create "Injustice Case" in order to suggest that the long list of injustices directed at Seale and many other African Americans is a common theme in African-American history. Furthermore, according to Elmaleh, the use of Hammons' body illustrates his lack of access to the art world. In the Sixties and Seventies, many people believed that minority access to the art world "would result in an abandonment of the imagery of exclusion that predominated in popular American culture" (27). However, Hammons' work indicates that blackness can be confronted and understood through the use of his body in the construction of black art. By incorporating the American flag into his work, Hammons creates art that reflects the political. Much like Buelens' idea behind the ever-changing meaning of *E pluribus unum,* Elmaleh denotes the instability of the flag as a symbol of unity and diversity.

Winfried Fluck expands upon the ideological, social, and political implications of unity and diversity by describing diversity's close proximity to American exceptionalism in "The Romance with America: Approaching America through Its Ideals?" Fluck mainly focuses on the changes in departments of American Studies, in particular the emphasis on transnationalism or transdisciplinarity. Fluck suggests that this stress on transnationalism in American Studies is simply one method for returning to "the field's initial romance with America" (37). According to Fluck, this attempt to revisit the romance with America is also a method for combatting the growing feeling of disenchantment with the United States. Fluck's

solution to this problem is to integrate European American Studies' use of critical theory for a more independent approach to the field (37). While Fluck's discussion sheds light on the latest trends in American Studies scholars' analysis of American identity, at the same time, Fluck refers to transnationalism as a methodology when it is quickly becoming a field of its own, evolving out of already-formed departments such as American Studies and Chicano Studies. Fluck demonstrates that understanding American identities does not have to be limited by the geographical borders of the United States. Rather, European American Studies scholars can contribute to the meaning of unity and diversity in American culture.

The contributors to this volume provide a broad, but well-formed analysis of the changing depictions of unity and diversity in the United States. Each author's chapter of *E pluribus unum* or *E pluribus plura* suggests that these concepts which seek to describe American identity are unstable ones and, as a result, unity and diversity need to be explored further in order for us to understand or reconsider what it is that we think we know about America.

Susan Savage Lee
St. Louis University