

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Thinking Through Nationalism

As always, it is with great pleasure and pride that I am able to introduce the works and reviews in this, *NeoAmericanist's* fifth edition. This has been a big year for the journal and its editorial structure. *NeoAmericanist Reviews* is building momentum and the number of books we are commissioning has grown substantially in only a year. The recent progress with our reviews office was made possible only because of the initiative and hard work that Gregory Klages has put into setting up the initial infrastructure and creating a communications platform with publishers and students around the world. The Reviews office continues to grow and Executive Editor, Melissa Horne, has recently been moved in to aid in the functioning of the position.

As with any student publication, *NeoAm* experiences a steady rotation in its editorial staff and we have recently added an "editorial staff" section to the website in order to better communicate the efforts of our active editorial positions, as well as availabilities for those positions, throughout the year. The devotion and hard work of *NeoAm's* core executive are what make a publication of this size and ambition possible on a day-to-day basis, but the reach of the publication is only such because of our correspondents around the world. While positions are annual assignments, we are always amazed by the hard work and investment that students across the globe put into the journal.

One of the serious boundaries and dilemmas for a journal that wishes to reach an international audience is the matter of language. Working from Canada, most of *NeoAm's* executive have grown up or been well-exposed to a bilingual environment and immersed in the "language" of multiculturalism. But, this is not to say that Canadians, like our American counterparts to the south and in nations around the world, are not actively engaged in discussions about "accommodation" or "compromise over the cultural makeup of the nation-state". Recently we decided that the journal would attempt to launch a series of posters and advertisements in multiple languages, despite the organization's (current) inability to actually accept papers in the posted languages. In other words, the posters would be used for the exclusive purpose of increasing general awareness among a wider global audience, as *NeoAm* would not be able to alter its practice of requesting written works in English only. This decision to launch the posters has produced a fair amount of debate, even amongst our small executive. Some have argued that the journal would be misrepresented by advertisements in languages other than English, while others argue that so much of the work done in American Studies assumes a monolingual readership. Needless to say, this debate may never be solved—certainly not within the scope of our small publication—but it points to the crucial and problematic role that language plays in the constitution of identity, subjectivization and the cultural apparatuses that sustain any collective identity.

In the United States of America, whose constitutional and legalistic foundations are proudly trumpeted, there is often great apprehension in drawing ethno-linguistic boundaries. Yet, despite this, there seems to be a great emphasis on assimilation in America that could be considered unfeasibly and unrealistically complicated when applied to other nations. Notions of racial citizenship, when brought to the public arena, are met with significant anxiety in America due to its own history with race and racism; however, the demand that the US be homogeneously English-speaking seems to be much more available for criticism. This is the real appeal of Elizabeth J. Vincelette's piece on English as *the American*

language. Most readers will likely be familiar with this debate and its various iterations; historically the debate can be traced as far back as Teddy Roosevelt and the Progressive Era when people discussed the responsibility—or absence thereof—that so-called “hyphenated American” immigrants bore in terms of conforming to a homogeneous cultural identity. As the precursor to Wilsonianism and the foundation for much of the global thinking on dividing/“creating” nations, the emergence of these discourses ought to be situated in a period that also saw the rise of biological racism and Social Darwinism. This cultural and historical emergence was not unique to America and the debate over national splintering along ethno-linguistic lines continues to affect the socio-political composition of France, Spain, Canada, Serbia, Russia, Nigeria and dozens of other countries around the world.

But more importantly, Vicellette, in her work “Identity and Ideology”, shows the immense proliferation of cultural mechanisms that are at play in creating, sustaining and polarizing the debate about the foundations of nationalism. Web 2.0 (the move toward interactive and contributive web technologies) has revolutionized the way we construct our sense of historical and cultural identity and the way that we conceive a global community wherein communicative exchange is, in principle, unlimited. But in America, the connection between cultural identity and language remains in an awkwardly unsettled position where the ideal of a white, middle-class Anglophone citizen still serves as an uncomfortable normative of citizenry upon which all other identities are measured. The way that this intersection of social strata is normativized largely depends on an almost devout trust in the neutrality and objectivity of America’s constitutional and legal mechanisms that make the nation’s constitutional liberal-republican system appear as the culmination of democratic development. However, as Righi Brandon’s essay explores, the American faith in legalism’s supposed objectivity is compromised by tensions within the latter’s constitutive elements. His examination of *voir dire*, the process by which attorneys screen (selecting or rejecting) jurors for trials, serves as a pertinent example of how legal history in the United States drives at larger questions about the American national project. Specifically: can America’s increasingly diverse population and the liberal emphasis on socio-political tolerance—which stand as a lasting legacy of America’s enlightenment and markedly modern constitutional project—be squared with legalistic traditions that strive for objectivity, while also apparently preserving discriminatory practices?

Vicellette and Brandon both hint at the ongoing construction of the normative “American”. The coupling of normatively requisite American English with foundationalist interpretations of juridico-constitutional traditions forms an imperative part of a system whereby citizens are determined to be uniquely, unmistakably American. Lindsey Churchill’s work approaches this question of identity from another angle, exploring some of the possibilities for and limits of dissent within such a determined and determinable identity. While a great deal of work has been done on the question of American dissent by the likes of Sacvan Bercovitch and Lewis Lapham, Churchill focuses expressly on the Students for a Democratic Society’s and related organization’s papers and other affiliated organizations that resorted to what are still deemed radical methods. By using a historical case study, Churchill poses a question that stumps academics and the general public alike: When can a group or person be defined as anti-American and what characteristics of Americanism—or American identity—must be abandoned or challenged to earn the label “deviant” in a socio-political context?

Taken collectively, these essays show that deep questions about the fabric of American society and what constitutes a “stable” American identity, which may serve to bind such a large nation, demand thought and attention. As I write this, riots rage in Serbia over the separation of Kosovo as a distinct

nation-state, and the American Embassy in Belgrade sits gutted by fire in retaliation against America's support for Kosovar secession. While bound tightly to idiosyncratic geopolitical discourses, U.S. support for Kosovar independence points to a dense interconnection between multiple currents and strata of historico-cultural forces. Firstly, there seems to be an ongoing need to better think through the interaction between the local and the global, the local and the national, the national and the transnational, and the processes of identification and subjectivization by which all of these forces appear to feed the discursive legitimacy of what are actually very specific and highly restrictive nationalisms.

In the post-Cold War, post-9/11 Eras, revived study of how the creation of nations/alisms interacts simultaneously with local, global and transnational currents of power seems necessary. Any doubt about the nation's re-emerging mediating role in social, political, historical, and cultural power in relation to connections between the nation state (in its conceptual and practical manifestations) and processes of subjectivization is weakened by Republican candidate John McCain's recent comments. In a story reported in the German newspaper, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, it was revealed that McCain has very recently suggested that America should plan to see Russia thrown out of the G-8, that the White House give new support to Kosovo's break with Serbia and that a so-called "league of democracies" be set up under US leadership as an alternative to the UN. While this may at first appear to be a matter of geopolitics or inter-/national relations that has its roots in the tensions of the Cold War, I would suggest that these essays reveal the importance of looking to the debates and discourses over national identity and Americanism that were waged in the days of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—if not earlier. While those days seem behind us, the similarities between contemporary problems and Progressive Era conflicts over nationalism and internationalism should not be ignored. Renewed calls for new and stronger alliances, the apparent collapse and impotence of organizations like NATO, the growing rift between American and European political strategies, and the resurgence of very local questions concerning cultural foundations seem as pronounced as ever today. The job, I would argue now, is for intellectuals and the general public to begin to ask what role and power, if any, the nation state exerts in and of itself, or if these movements must be connected to the interaction of local and global discourses which exist in relation to, but independently of, the nation's shibboleth.

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