

*IDENTIDAD Y DISIDENCIA EN LA CULTURA
ESTADOUNIDENSE.*

EDS. CANDELA DELGADO Y CRISTÓBAL CLEMENTE
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As the title of this collection of essays suggests, *Identidad y disidencia en la cultura estadounidense* revolves around some of the central schisms that have shaped the not-so-United States of America. The scope of this book is highly interdisciplinary, combining literature, politics, performative arts, music and pictorial representation. It is a timely addition to the surge in interest in the role of race and gender, geography, and the search for an indigenous heritage in the fragmentary creation of an American identity as shown in recent publications by Smith-Rosenberg (2010), Schwarz (2013), Brundage (2011) and Kennedy-Nolle (2015) amongst others, and complements analyses of the impact of these multifarious agents in the search for genuinely American forms of art undertaken by critics such as Moses (2000) and Brown (2012). The result is an interesting, if occasionally erratic, sketch of the multiple dissonances within the identity of the USA.

Candela Delgado Marín analyses the origins and repercussions of one of the greatest divides in the USA: that of the North against the South. She focuses on how the identity of the South has been crystalised around a nostalgia for its mythical and romanticised origins, including the exaltation of slavery (17) and the feeling that the efforts of Reconstruction after the Civil War were in fact an attempt by the North to establish a social, economic and artistic occupation of the South. Delgado perceptively warns of the need to preserve an identity of the South that acknowledges the past but does not revert to a previous characterisation of isolation and parochialism.

Jesús Lerate offers a panoramic view of the relationship between art, politics and the conservationist movement in the arts and literature of the United States, from the Hudson River School and the transcendentalist Thoreau to Melville's *Moby Dick* and its parodic reincarnation in Donovan Hohn's *Moby Duck*. Lerate contends that *Moby Dick*, which according to him has generally been interpreted as anti-ecologist (52), in fact belongs firmly in the tradition of American works vindicating a more responsible relationship with nature. It would have been interesting to see Lerate position this claim within the wider critical debate on Melville and ecocriticism that Elizabeth Schultz outlined so effectively in her essay "Melville's Environmental Vision in *Moby Dick*" (97-113). Lerate points to an

interest in nature as a constant in the American tradition since the mid nineteenth century, successfully highlighting the currency of Thoreau and Melville in contemporary discourses, and tracing a line that stretches to the present in Hohn's denunciation of the environmental consequences of capitalism and globalised commerce in the twenty-first century.

Juan Manuel Gómez analyses the influence of Stanislavski on the inception of what is probably the main contribution of the United States to the field of drama and performance: method acting and the Actor's Studio. Gómez contends that the big rupture in American theatre takes place in the 1960s with the emergence of the Black Arts Movement and experimental theatre. It is a pity that his overview of the "current panorama" closes in the 1970s and the theatre of the last fifty years is dismissed as pandering to the market and averse to taking risks (85). Gómez mentions but does not develop the relationship between innovations in drama and performance and the periods of crisis when they flourished – he points to the fact that Stanislavski arrives in the USA after the Russian Revolution, the Group Theatre appears during the Great Depression and the Living Theatre thrives after WWII and thus implicitly hints at a correlation between social upheaval and dramatic developments. The essay could open the field to enquire about the nature and significance of twenty-first century responses to current crises and the pockets of creativity and subversion in what Gómez contends is an increasingly stale panorama: for instance, Off-Off Broadway's overt rejection of the diktats of the market and the rivalry between *The Pit* and *The Magnet*, the two schools of Improvisational Comedy which are revitalising New York's dramatic scene by reacting against the interiorisation and psychological exploration of method acting.

Yiyi López Gándara discusses the first American Avant-Garde and its progressive rejection of European influences in order to reflect the idiosyncrasy and constant renewal of the so called American identity. Although Avant-Garde was primarily concerned with art as a vehicle of social transformation after the war (p.89), its appropriation by African American artists displacing the hegemony of European emigrés firmly positions it within the context of industrialisation and the Great Migration. López enumerates the main trends and contributors of the Avant-Garde after WWI and connects post-WWII Avant-Garde with wide-ranging political agendas such as the feminist movement, the gay rights movement and the anti-Vietnam protests.

María Ángeles Toda provides an enlightening comparison of the different experiences of adaptation to the conflicting demands of adulthood in the American bildungsroman. Although the genre shares an established pattern whereby the protagonists have to negotiate their position within the adult world and define their identity in relation to their family, their sexuality and the expectations of their society, their coming-of-age experiences differ significantly depending on the characters' ethnicity, gender and class. By letting characters as well-studied as

Esther Greenwood, Holden Caulfield or Pecola Breedlove rub shoulders, Toda presents these youth novels in a new light and persuasively defends their value as an indication of the profound dissonances in the apparently universal transition from childhood to the constraints of adult society, while remaining a vindication of the liberation and self-actualisation promised by the American Dream.

Alfonso Ceballos discusses the transformations in the portrayal of gay identity in contemporary theatre, from plays presenting homosexual characters but not promoting a gay agenda to consciously gay drama responding to the LGTB community's new self-recognition as a defined group. Ceballos highlights the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s as a turning point in representations of homosexuals on stage. Once the AIDS scare subsided, contemporary gay drama ceased to be liminal and started to embrace the non-threatening, middle-class nature of mainstream theatre.

Mar Gallego Durán discusses the role of female African-American writers and critics in what she calls the "reinvention" of the United States (167). These women could not accommodate their experience of double discrimination within either feminist studies or black studies, currents that might have been sympathetic to them but instead treated them with hostility. Therefore, these women had to trace their literary foremothers in order to reclaim a tradition of African-American feminism. In the process, they also redefined black masculinity --contesting its traditional representation as the often brutalised antagonist to white masculinity-- and ensured that the voice of African-American LGTB authors and critics was heard.

The last essay, by Inmaculada Gordillo, analyses rupture in contemporary cinema on four different levels: syntactic, diegetic, semantic and pragmatic. Gordillo provides multiple examples of each category, briefly sketching the function of plots and characters, although her argument could have been made more strongly by discussing this diversity in terms of its significance within the larger framework of late twentieth and early twenty-first century transformations in art and society, as Birkenstein et al. (2010) did in their exploration of cinema in the wake of the collective trauma of 9/11. For instance, Gordillo leaves the discussion tantalisingly open when she devotes a sizeable section of her essay to describing fragmentation in storylines. She contends that it was first introduced in fiction and proceeds to summarise plots at the expense of a more developed analysis of the implications of this transfer from the page to the screen.

The eight essays in the collection cover the topic of identity and disidence from multiple perspectives, with an ambitious chronological span --from the British colonies to the present day-- and a commendable interdisciplinary approach. This inclusiveness can cause challenges, as authors cater for the relatively novice reader by providing definitions for well-known terms such as "Avant-Garde" (p.88) or "mainstream theatre" (p.148) while leaving references to more niche topics

unexpanded –for instance, notes to “imagism” (91) and the “invention” of homosexuality in 1869 (148) would have aided the non-specialist reader.

The volume might have benefited from a brief introduction by the editors stating its aims, scope and structure and where this collection intersects with other recent contributions to the field. Providing dates for authors and works would have also helped to chronologically situate developments. The task of introducing the essays has been passed to Carmelo Machín, former RTVE correspondent in Washington DC. His Prologue foregrounds the conflict at the core of the subsequent contributions by presenting the identity of the USA as a perpetual act of balance between two poles: conservatism and rupture. Machín illustrates this dichotomy in his lucid analysis of the social and political changes, of which he was a privileged witness, in the period from the Bush to the Obama administrations and the latter’s battle for nomination against Hillary Clinton. Machín’s emphatic assertion that “the United States is a world that deserves to be known” (p.9) serves as a tentative vindication of the many strengths of this volume which, due to its varied themes and ambitions, will prove useful to a wide range of readers.

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