

# Americas, Americans

## Introduction by Martin H Folly

It is appropriate that *EnterText* should be launched with an issue on an American Studies theme. The history and culture of the New World form a fertile area for both cutting-edge scholarship and cultural engagements. The scholarly articles in this issue have been selected to mirror the range of subject matters and discourses taking place in the field of American Studies.

One of the themes which links these diverse pieces is interconnectedness, both within the cultures of the New World, and with those of the Old. Taking up this latter theme, David Dabydeen makes literary history by introducing a hitherto unknown text from Guyana which appears to be the earliest colonial rewriting of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, with its special position in Old World discourses of the New World. Published in 1929, the era of high modernism, Samaroo's *Tempus Est* is an extraordinary, surreal narrative making use of Guyanese Creole, Hindi and Latin. *Tempus Est* takes Prospero through a number of reincarnations, including a gigantic purse, and an axe-armed Shiva, destroyer of the forest. Samaroo's Caliban is a bionic creature, born from Miranda, who is the raped forest, a reminder that ecological concerns about what was beginning to happen in the Amazonian rainforest in the early twentieth century remain urgently topical today. In his wide-ranging lecture commissioned by the BBC, Dabydeen situates his discussion of Samaroo, an East Indian Guyanese about whom nothing else is known, in a lively survey of colonial and postcolonial works which mirror or respond to Shakespeare's last play.

Just as environmental issues are a recurring theme in American culture, so are those of paranoia, and it could be said that in the modern era the two are converging fast, and potentially productively. John Byrne examines the paranoia theme in connection with the contemporary phenomenon of the world wide web. He discusses the extent to which conspiracy theories, through their emphasis on the idea of interconnectedness, function as reactions to the fragmentation of the postmodern world and the apparent collapse of grand narratives. By examining the fears of increased global interconnectedness articulated in many of the "New World Order" conspiracy narratives, and analysing relevant features of the "Paranoid Style," he argues that conspiracy theories can operate as curiously reassuring sense-making strategies. As a belief system for a new millennium, conspiracy theory restores a "faith" in a world where things are firmly nailed down and anchored, where events are connected, where the creeping threat of chaos and confusion is kept at bay. Paranoia and suspicion characterised fascist movements in the 1920s and 1930s on both sides of the Atlantic, and Thomas Linehan explores a seldom examined connection between Old and New World cultures in his article on the perception of Hollywood films by British fascists. Fascist writers represented the Hollywood movie in a number of ways: as an intellectually barren "mass cultural" form, as a symptom of encroaching decadence, as a vehicle which propagated immorality, and as an instrument for the promotion of so-called "international" Jewish propaganda. As in many other instances, European reaction to American mass culture was ambivalent, for at the same time, fascists viewed Hollywood's product with a great deal of envy. It was applauded by them as a paradigm of cinematic and technical excellence that was far superior to its British counterpart.

The literature of America's diaspora populations frequently explores issues of connectedness and autonomy. David Brauner's article offers a reading of three post-war American-Jewish novels in which Gentile characters undergo conversions (literal or symbolic) to Judaism. Taking Sartre's theories of Jewish identity (as articulated in *Anti-Semite and Jew*), as the point of departure, it argues that in these novels the Gentiles' desire to identify themselves with, and as, Jews, expresses and reflects authorial ambivalence towards ideas of Jewishness. Whereas Sartre sees the relationship between anti-Semite and Jew as symbiotic, in these novels the progress of the American Gentile from anti-Semite to Jewish convert both exploits, and attempts to reconcile, the tensions between national and ethnic identities in post-war American-Jewish fiction. Sameness and difference are given a searching poetic analysis by William Watkin, who considers

the innovations of the New York poet Kenneth Koch through the metaphor of poetry as a machine. The theoretical framework of the piece mixes linguistics, traditional verse patterning and post-structural theory not only to establish Koch's place in the avant-garde, but also to propose the possibility of an avant-garde prosody.

Continuing the theme of challenging established boundaries and definitions, Joseph Mills' article focuses on George S. Schuyler's 1931 novel *Black No More*. The novel chronicles what happens when a scientist discovers a way to "whiten" African-Americans. An effort, according to Schuyler, "to laugh the colour question out of school by showing up its ridiculousness and absurdity," the book scathingly satirises America's obsession with race. Insisting that a person could be both black and American, Schuyler, Mills shows, rejected the discourse that equated "white" with "American" and "black" with "different." He also opposed calls for a racial aesthetic. Mills, however, regards *Black No More* as in part illustrating the crippling effects of what Langston Hughes termed an "urge to whiteness." Niall Palmer looks at marginalisation in a rather different form: in the writing of American history. President Warren G. Harding is regularly rated as the worst American president of the 20th century but his administration is among the least-explored by historians. Palmer explores the way that the failings of the 29th President were exaggerated by historians with a distinct ideological and partisan bias, and also by sensation-seeking journalism which found in Harding an easy and undefended target. Despite the recent appearance of a revisionist perspective, Harding remains a symbol of scandal and incompetence in the White House, in contradiction to the available historical record.

Bénédicte Ledent takes up the theme of diaspora and belonging in a discussion focused on the most recent works of Caribbean-born writer Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) and an as yet unpublished essay, "The 'High Anxiety' of Belonging." *The Atlantic Sound* is an exploration of three places which triangulated the slave trade, Liverpool in the UK, Elmina in Ghana, and Charleston in the USA. It is a non-fictional work, but Ledent argues that the text shares many features, thematic and structural, with Phillips's novels. She takes issue with those critics who have tended to find a tragic tone in Phillips's preoccupation with the black Atlantic history. She links him instead to Derek Walcott, and finds in his work a paradoxical concept of the diasporic condition as healer of the wounds of history, and as pathway to a new idea of home. Martin Folly's topic is a very different transplanted ethnic group, the Amish in the United States and Canada. They have successfully managed and restricted the impact of mainstream American values and lifestyles, and in doing so, have acquired a niche in American culture, a reputation for living a wholesome, ethical life, based on traditional values and the rejection of much of modern technology and culture. Folly looks at the way the newspapers dealt with the issue of the arrest of two Amish men for drug dealing in 1998, and how, rather than prompting a reassessment of the standard image of the Amish, the coverage tended to function as part of a cocoon protecting their reputation.

Alongside these scholarly essays we present *Đ* in a mix which is unusual in the American Studies field *Đ* some creative pieces, all of which make memorable use of a sense of place. They range, like the Americas themselves, from a new poem by the UK poet laureate, Andrew Motion, creating a symbolic world of bitter northern cold, to writing set in the tropics. Excerpts from the forthcoming second novel by the acclaimed Guyanese writer, Oonya Kempadoo, put Caribbean Creole to distinctive use, witty and poetic. A Caribbean context is also the choice of Reetika Vazirani, who sets the finely judged, intimate drama of her Nikos poems in Trinidad, and engages wryly with the icons of American culture. Robert Miltner's poems, "swatches on the American quilt," paint nuanced landscapes of the rugged Mid-West, while Laurence Breiner's poems create potent imagined locations worldwide, including Machu Picchu, symbolic of the ancient, lost Americas, to access subtleties of feeling and relationship.

Together these works make a distinctively plural American group, which reflects the guiding ethos of diversity and inclusiveness that characterises contemporary American Studies, and indeed *EnterText* itself.