

Shaffer, M.S. (Ed.). (2008). *Public Culture: Diversity, Democracy, and Community in the United States*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. 392 pp. \$59.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8122-4081-8.

Review by Wynne Wright

Do Americans share a public culture? What unites us; what provides a sense of belonging and collective identity? Pluralism and diversity have become popular watchwords that many contend hold the key to progress, and if that is the case, where is our center, our civic glue? These are some of the questions taken up in the edited volume *Public Culture: Diversity, Democracy, and Community in the United States*. Editor Marguerite Shaffer has brought together a number of scholars—mostly historians and American Studies scholars—to explore how public culture is constructed “within a diverse and increasingly global culture” (p. x).

Shaffer attempts to showcase numerous case studies of how Americans negotiate belonging in modern society. The book is organized into five thematic sections: public culture, public action, public image, public space, and public identity. Most sections include three chapters that speak to these themes.

This book is intriguing. I was particularly drawn to the topic of public culture, a field of interest to many scholars across a number of disciplines. This hot-button topic in many social science and humanities disciplines is also a popular theme that infiltrates our media. It is impossible to turn on talk radio these days and not hear a commentator decry the lack of public culture in the United States or tell listeners what is wrong with our public culture. The election of a former community organizer to the U.S. presidency has also stimulated interest in the structures and institutions that underpin public life. Much of the book's appeal lies in its taking a contemporary issue—nay, problem—and subjecting it to rigorous historical analysis in most cases.

Most of the chapters are thoughtfully presented and rigorously researched. All of the chapters help us better understand the tapestry of our culture, whether through the lens of urban plazas, pornography, medicine shows, funeral homes, or gated communities. A few chapters stand out as exemplary, however. I especially enjoyed Catherine Gudis's analysis of the political battle over the public landscape as waged by roadside reformers who attempted to protect our highways from becoming eyesores due to billboard blight. When I drive the highways of other countries and become astutely aware of the lack of invasive advertising in my line of sight, I am reminded of yet one more sign of capitalism that I take for

granted in my country. Thanks to Gudis's assessment of the "billboard war" and its gendered dimensions, I better understand the politics of this form of early American advertising and the battle waged between the "scenic sisters" and the "billboard brethren."

Equally compelling was Lynn Spigel's analysis of the American television landscape post-9/11. Her assessment of patriotic programming and related consumerist messages emanating from the media was eye-opening. I recall feeling dismayed and belittled by post-9/11 programming, and Spigel's perceptive portrait demonstrates how popular culture can be marshaled as a weapon in the war against terror.

These are just two illustrations of sound scholarship coupled with skillful writing that lure the reader into this competent volume. The many other chapters will also be of interest to humanities scholars and their advanced students. However, even as I found this book intriguing, I also found it frustrating at times. A persistent inability to define key concepts and interact with existing literature lingered throughout the volume. I would expect a book edited by an interdisciplinarian to be, well, interdisciplinary—to interact with the breadth of scholarship on public culture, community, and democracy. Terms like *public* or *community* were rarely, if ever, defined within the various chapters, which I found discomfiting. For instance, sociologists might see this book as an attempt to investigate social capital. Shaffer and her contributors often use the language of social capital—belonging, togetherness, reciprocity, trust—yet seldom does this concept make its way into the scholarship. This suggests to me that the volume to some degree continues to reproduce the insular academic silos Shaffer critiques in the preface by not interacting with the scholarship that has been well-trodden in various academic domains.

Mary Kupiec Cayton opens the volume with a strong chapter devoted to surveying theories of the public. This chapter welcomes the reader into a broader conversation about public culture and attendant cultural theory frameworks that have a vaunted place in humanities and social science scholarship. Unfortunately, these frameworks are never revisited in the individual chapters. It is also hard to ignore the absence of a concluding chapter that could have woven each case into an integrated whole, asked us to reflect on the collective lessons from these studies, or laid out a charge for future research on public culture in American life.

At the end of the day an edited volume such as this stands or falls on the rigor of its individual contributions. Shaffer's book

offers good stories and succeeds in opening a window to help us better understand what our public culture is becoming and how we might invigorate it with a civic ethos.

About the Reviewer

Wynne Wright is an associate professor at Michigan State University.