

Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and Jopi Nyman, eds. *eros.usa: essays on the culture and literature of desire*. Gdansk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdanskiego. 221 pages; ISBN 83-7326-282-2; paper.

Would it be going too far, I wonder, to begin a book review with a confession? The book in question, *eros.usa: essays on the culture and literature of desire*, might be said to warrant such an approach, especially if one recalls Foucault's observation that "[f]rom the Christian penance to the present day, sex was a privileged theme of confession."<sup>1</sup> So I will admit, I will confess, to being, at times, titillated by a book which invites me, in the words of its editors, "to look at the American erotic and marvel at this undying animal which calls and coaxes, teases and taunts, seduces and sells itself to us in a multiplicity of forms."<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, however, one is left with the impression that *eros.usa* succumbs to the very expectations it excites – its promise is more than it delivers.

Of course, there can be no single approach to the erotic, and, as editors Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and Jopi Nyman make clear in their introduction, even defining the term constitutes a "problematic task" given "its multifaceted nature" (19). Nevertheless, and following the work of Bataille, Malcolm and Nyman see, in eroticism, not the utopian promise of liberation, as, say, Marcuse would have it, but its relationship to the social and moral codes it otherwise transgresses. For Bataille, desire and eroticism are inextricably linked to, and, indeed, produced by the forces of prohibition, so that, in the words of Colin McCabe, "[n]o taboo, no desire."<sup>3</sup> Although Malcolm and Nyman's evocation of Bataille might be regarded as problematic in the American (or perhaps any) context,<sup>4</sup> it nonetheless appeals on a level. Indeed, how else to account for a culture, which, as Heinz Ickstadt puts it in the foreword, "seems to be split between a Puritan repression of sexuality and the crude and naked reassertion of the sexual, the one constantly provoking the other into evidence" (9)?

Divided into two parts examining "literary perspectives" and "cultural readings" respectively, *eros.usa* makes good on showcasing that "multiplicity of forms" by which the American erotic "seduces and sells." More than this, it examines, in Ickstadt's words, "what happens to the erotic in a culture at once divided and diversified along racial and ethnic lines, yet also held together by the all-pervasive tease of the commercial – a culture that provokes the sexual scandals it publicly condemns" (17). Approaches and media are certainly diverse; Toni Morrison's 1998 novel *Paradise*,

1. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*, 61.

2. Malcolm and Nyman, "Introduction: Approaching the Erotic," in *eros.usa* 28. Unless otherwise indicated, all further page citations will be to this volume.

3. McCabe's citation, from the introduction to the 2000 Penguin reprint of Georges Bataille's *Eroticism*, appears in Malcolm and Nyman 19.

4. I say this because, in a country where the erotic life of individuals is not only highly politicized, in the realm of civil rights for example, but also used to single out individuals as objects of scorn, baiting and/or bashing, an oversimplified equation of eroticism with transgression strikes me as theoretically, politically, retrograde – in the sense that it makes something worse. I will return to this point.

for example, finds explication in terms of *écriture féminine*; American sit-com *Designing Women* provides a springboard for examining overlapping racial and sexual identities, particularly *mestiza* lesbianism.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in what other volume could one find an analysis of William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* rubbing shoulders with one of online boy-band fan-fiction,<sup>6</sup> and cinematic representations of African-American sexuality next to Captain Kirk's?<sup>7</sup> Clearly, this is heady stuff.

Nevertheless, and given the wide array of approaches and media presented here, it should come as no surprise that this particular *pluribus* is lacking in *unum*. While I would otherwise consider the very diversity of *eros.usa* to be one of its strengths, that diversity, unfortunately, also works against it. The essays collected here exhibit little, if any, awareness of each other and, at times, speak beyond or past one another. As an example of this, one might consider "homoeroticism" as it appears both in Walter Hölbling's "Eroticism Displaced" and in Andrew Schopp's "Pathologically Queer." Hölbling sees, in Norman Mailer's 1967 fiction *Why We Are in Vietnam*, an "indictment" of a deathly, homoerotic male-bonding, devoid of what he calls the "female principle" (39). As "a competition between two representatives of the same [masculine] principle," this relationship is then externalized "as a life-denying substitute for the creative sexual union they cannot achieve" (39). Moreover, what Hölbling calls "Rusty's Jeremiad," that character's sexist, racist, and anti-communist rant, reveals a fear of losing "social and political power and control, on an individual as well as a national level" (41). Ultimately, in Hölbling's view, this serves not only as a reason for United States involvement in Vietnam, but for a pervasive political rhetoric which continues to demonize international "others," while extolling the domestic virtues of "service," "sacrifice," and "fierce brotherhood" (43). What is missing from Hölbling's analysis, however, is precisely what Andrew Schopp might provide: that is, a focus on homoerotic "male-bonding," repression of which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick maintains, is often used to explain violence.<sup>8</sup> For his part, Schopp considers homoeroticism as it is produced in two filmic texts from 1999, *Fight Club* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, both depicting homoeroticism in terms of violence and indeed "pathology." Unlike Hölbling, for whom the "eroticism displaced" between two men is an otherwise heterosexualizing "female principle," Schopp considers the ideology of what he calls "the heterosexual imperative" (137), which works to foreclose homoeroticism in the first place. Whatever else one might say about Hölbling's and Schopp's varying approaches, their two essays, clearly, should have been put together, rather than five essays apart, allowed to speak to each other, making the tension between them – but also the complementarity – that much more acute.

5. Respectively: Justine Tally's "The Nature of Erotica" (60-74), and Suzanne Bost's "Dissolving and Solidifying Identities" (187-205).

6. In fact, these two essays, Gayman Wong's "The Prying Eye" (86-99) and Kristina Busse's "Digital Get Down" (103-25), along with Bost (see n. 5) and Surface (see n. 9), constitute the best of *eros.usa*.

7. Respectively: Tomáš Pospíšil's "How Far Can You Go?" (155-70) and Amanda Putnam's "Good Sex and Star Trek" (171-86).

8. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 18-19.



On the other hand, the editors may well have made a judicious decision in placing Schopp's piece far away from their own introduction. Grouped nearer another couple of essays examining personal identity – Suzanne Bost's exposition of race, sex, and sexuality, and Heather Surface's consideration of the idealized female body, and the relationship of large women thereto<sup>9</sup> – Schopp's piece, along with these two, accords ill with Malcolm and Nyman's emphasis on Bataille. Let me say at the outset that I agree with Suzanne Bost, who writes:

Many gay-affirmative arguments attempt to secure rights for gays and lesbians by arguing that sexuality, like race, is something one is born with. They assume (perhaps correctly) that the general public will have less sympathy for a chosen or fluid "lifestyle." Since bi-identity refuses a single identification, it visibly undermines erotic essentialism. In configuring sexuality as a choice, rather than an anatomical inevitability, bisexuals are thus often seen as traitors to gay and lesbian political interests. (199)

The "heterosexual imperative," hegemonic in American culture, is not the only "imperative" to be found in it. For, as Bost makes clear, one could easily speak of a gay and/or lesbian imperative vis-à-vis bisexuals. And yet, even agreeing with the constructed nature of sexual identity and eroticism, such a theory fits poorly with that of Bataille, whose "eroticism" is equally constructivist. Indeed, if one accepts "no taboo, no desire" as outlined by Malcolm and Nyman (19-21), one risks essentializing gays, lesbians, and bisexuals at the level of transgression itself. In other words, lesbians are not lesbians because of some inborn genetic trait, nor are they lesbians because of their own erotic identifications or choices. Rather, they are lesbians because they are erotically drawn to, "choose," *transgression*. And this, I take it, is *precisely* what the heterosexual imperative would dearly have "the general public" believe. Not only does this view re-affirm heterosexuality as *the norm* (to be transgressed), it renders the queer emphasis on "subversion" (through transgression) far less subversive than it might otherwise seem. Here, subversion is a simply a matter of making a virtue out of necessity (which it might be anyway, considering the frequency by which this increasingly empty platitude is bandied about in both this and other texts), and submitting to its labor, already implicitly defined as Sisyphean. For, as Malcolm and Nyman make clear, "taboos and transgression demand each other," sharing, as it were, a mutually dependent relationship (21).

To give Malcolm and Nyman their due, they *do* caution against an exclusive reliance on Bataille. "While Bataille's theory of eroticism manages to capture its titillating pull," they write, "it unfortunately remains lacking and gender-blind, barely suitable to explain the increasing presence of the phenomenon in contemporary culture" (21). Because I share their fascination – and their criticism – I remained completely unsatisfied by the discussion that followed. Their corrective to Bataille, beginning with an appeal to feminist film theory from the 1970s, an emphasis on the gaze, "the display," the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of erotic objects (21), struck me, not only as dated in terms of feminism, but similarly "lacking," "unsuitable," in a culture where the erotic and

9. See Heather Surface's "Sexualized Fat Bodies" (206-221).

erotic lives themselves are so persistently held under erasure. Nor did the subsequent essays take up the gauntlet thrown down here; given pride of place by the editors, this potentially productive theory, spelling a way in to a discussion that needed to take place, was simply left dangling.

This was not the only problem besetting *eros.usa*. Readers will face a number of, at times, glaring typographical errors. A couple of the essays in this volume lack polish, appearing more as drafts than finished products. This, unfortunately, leads to an overall impression of *eros.usa* as an uneven book. It taunts and it teases, it coaxes, cajoles, but its readers will be left wanting more.

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Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005. 212 pp. ISBN: 0743284577; \$25.00, hardcover.

Jimmy Carter did not go quietly. During the quarter century since his defeat in the 1980 presidential election, he has continued to make a mark on the political process through visits to world leaders, attempts at conflict mediation, and pleas for international cooperation. His efforts have garnered praise and acclaim particularly among Europeans. In an era defined by the use of pre-emptive might, his commitment to negotiation, incremental change and stress on human rights have served as a reminder of a kinder, gentler age. Furthermore, Carter and the Atlanta-based Center through which his work is carried out have embraced social-democratic representations of rights. They are not mere constraints upon the powers of government (a conception of liberty spelt out in the Bill of Rights) but instead encompass positive, social "rights" such as a guarantee of access to food and healthcare.

Others are markedly less generous in their comments. A failed presidency has, they assert, given way to a failed ex-presidency. They point to the former president's 'meddling' which, as they record, has irritated and at times infuriated his successors. Furthermore, some have noted, there is a tension between Carter's commitment to rights and his faith in diplomacy. Despite the rhetoric of rights, Carter's politics often seem to owe more to a leftist *realpolitik*. Conservative periodicals such as *National Review* point to his 'apologetics' for figures such as Yasir Arafat, Fidel Castro, Hafez al-Assad, Mengistu Haile Mariam, and Kim Il Sung.