

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 41

Issue 2 *Writing 1914-1918: National Responses to the Great War*

Article 28

6-15-2017

Katherine Arens. *Vienna's Dreams of Europe: Culture and Identity Beyond the Nation-State*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Nathaniel Parker Weston

Seattle Central College, nate.weston@seattlecolleges.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Weston, Nathaniel Parker (2017) "Katherine Arens. *Vienna's Dreams of Europe: Culture and Identity Beyond the Nation-State*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 41: Iss. 2, Article 28. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1919>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Katherine Arens. *Vienna's Dreams of Europe: Culture and Identity Beyond the Nation-State*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Abstract

Review of Katherine Arens. *Vienna's Dreams of Europe: Culture and Identity Beyond the Nation-State*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Keywords

Book Review, Katherine Arens, *Vienna's Dreams of Europe: Culture and Identity Beyond the Nation-State*

Katherine Arens. *Vienna's Dreams of Europe: Culture and Identity Beyond the Nation-State*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. 328 pp.

The author begins her study of Austrian literature since the Enlightenment with a sustained critique of the field of Cultural Studies for its apparent over-reliance on the Frankfurt School's interpretation of the combined forces of state power and capitalism in determining culture. It is her hope to offer an alternative means for comprehending identity that resides outside of the modern nation-state form by analyzing a series of examples in which authors in the Austrian setting look and speak to Europe to conceive of themselves and their readers in cosmopolitan instead of national terms. Katherine Arens also seeks to pluralize the field of German Studies, insisting that the history of German speakers and their cultures was and is more diverse than a unitary view allows. These two efforts at shifting our perspective on Austria, in tandem with the author's deep expertise on the subject matter, make for an interesting volume that demands readers' attention, though it is firmly aimed at scholars and advanced graduate students in the field itself rather than a general audience.

The book is divided into two parts, each containing four chapters. The first looks at different episodes from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the second deals with the twentieth century. The author sets both squarely in wider Austrian historical contexts. She analyzes the writing of Joseph von Sonnenfels in chapter one to distinguish receptions of the Enlightenment in Austria and Prussia. In the second chapter, she examines the work of the early nineteenth-century playwright Franz Grillparzer to differentiate his ideas from other German-speaking dramatists of the time. In another departure from German-language theater elsewhere, the author considers popular drama from Vienna in the era preceding the 1848 Revolutions in chapter three. She ends part one by reading public visual art and its manifestation in Austrian literature, particularly in the writings of Adalbert Stifter, in the period before 1848. In this fourth chapter, however, the author no longer clearly contrasts Austrian authors with other German writers.

The second part of the book skips ahead to 1918, the year the Habsburg Empire ceased to exist. Arens argues in chapter five that Hugo von Hofmannsthal's writing after the First World War situated itself in a Pan-European context. She discusses the work of Arthur Schnitzler in the sixth chapter without situating it in a European setting and without discussion of its potential exceptionality to German Studies. In chapter seven, the author moves to post-World War II Austria to analyze avant-garde writers' reflections on their nation's past culture. She looks at Austrian engagements with Balkan countries in the eighth chapter as a return to the multi-ethnic Habsburg order in the post-Cold War European Union period. Overall, the book succeeds at urging readers to think more critically about the places of Austria and its writers in relation to other German speakers, even if the author initially rails

against, but ultimately leaves unanswered, questions involving the impacts of nationalism, imperialism, and capitalism.

This study adds to the still-growing number of works representative of a resurgence in scholarly attention to Habsburg and Austrian literature, culture, and history that recognize their ongoing prominence and importance to Central Europe and Europe as a whole. Yet, arguing for Austria's unique place within German Studies actually sounds all too similar to the national framework that Arens wishes to avoid. Furthermore, the focus on a cosmopolitan Europe by no means ensures a space outside of notions of nation-states. The glaring gaps between 1848 and 1918 and the 1920s to 1945 also undermine the author's claims, since they omit major moments of the Austrian past, including the democratization of the Habsburg Empire and the German National Socialist annexation of the First Austrian Republic, leaving readers to wonder how ideas about Europe operated in literature of these eras.

On a final note, complicating German Studies to make room for multiple cultures across spatial and temporal lines is a perspective that should also be applied to Europe. It is not clear that the continent, along with its cultures, states, and economies, was a static entity, whether real or dreamt, at the time of the Enlightenment, Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, Industrialization, or before, during, and after 1848, 1918, 1945, and 1989. It remains to be seen if the Frankfurt School, or a different theoretical apparatus altogether, will be the most appropriate vehicle for newly interpreting Europe and its parts. One hopes scholars do not decide on such matters simply, quickly, or conveniently.

Nathaniel Parker Weston
Seattle Central College