

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anders Breidlid, Fredrik Brogger, Oyvind T. Gulliksen, Torbjorn Sirevag, eds. *American Culture: An Anthology of Civilization Texts*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. xviii + 404 pp. \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-12440-9; \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-12439-3.

Reviewed by Howard M. Wach (City University of New York)  
Published on H-Review (June, 1997)



The volume under review is a collection of primary source documents compiled by a group of distinguished Norwegian scholars of American Studies. Their intended audience, described in a general introduction, is the student of American culture engaged in learning English as a foreign language. A fundamental premise of their text, therefore, is the interplay between culture and language; in their words, the basic insight “that language is culture and culture is language.” As a teacher of American Studies whose students are learning English as a second language (not quite the same thing as a “foreign” language), the editors’ declared intentions intrigued me. So I examined the text with a couple of specific questions in mind. How accessible is the language likely to be to non-native speakers of English? How well do the selections and their ordering within the anthology present the sort of cultural propositions useful in an American Studies classroom; that is, how well would reading and studying them illuminate important American cultural patterns and accomplish the anthologists’ underlying goal?

In the first instance, this four-hundred page volume includes much more material than any single semester’s work could possibly take in. Its thematic organization, divided into thirteen parts of about ten documents each, suggests the ambitious range of its content. It begins where most readers do nowadays: with questions of group identity explored in sections on Native Americans, immigration, African Americans, and women. Selected aspects of politics and social life are then covered in sections entitled “The Structure of Government,” “Parties and Politics,” “Enterprise,” and “Class Structure.” Three of the remaining four sections address more purely “cultural” questions: “Education,” “Mass Media and Popular Culture,” and “Ideology: Dominant Beliefs and Values.”

One additional category of readings, tucked just before the concluding “Ideology” section and called “The United States and the World,” consists largely of political manifestos, from Washington’s Farewell Address to George Bush’s televised announcement of launching hostilities against Iraq in 1991.

The documents throughout the volume are quite short, typically three or four pages (the longest—at fourteen pages—is an excerpt from Ole Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*). Each section is organized to present a historical trajectory of sources arranged chronologically, and each begins with a two- or three-page introduction of relevant issues and debates. The introductions are somewhat uneven in quality. The preface to “Ideology,” for example, provides a quite useful conceptual framework by suggesting the splintering, into reformist and conservative tendencies, of the cluster of beliefs in individualism, equality, and opportunity that Gunnar Myrdal called the “American Creed.” Other introductory essays are disappointingly pedestrian and amount to little more than a thumbnail sketch of each document.

I cannot speak to the English competence of Norwegian university students enrolled in American Studies courses, although I would imagine it is fairly sophisticated. Inclusion of the nineteenth-century cadences of Emerson, de Tocqueville, and the James brothers (Henry and William, that is), as well as contemporary critics like Adrienne Rich and Allan Bloom, tells me that these writers, who would stump my weaker ESL students, are not beyond the pale at the University of Oslo. But these names should not mislead. The anthology descends from highbrow regions to include middle-class icons like Dale Carnegie, song lyrics by folk artists like Bessie Smith,

Buffy St. Marie, and Woody Guthrie, and the earthy reminiscences of Tammany Hall's George Washington Plunkitt. Several well-chosen examples of Studs Terkel's wonderful interviews, in which the spoken American English of unknown people shines a bright floodlight on our collective condition, are also included. The pitch of language thus varies dramatically and includes official government pronouncements, the rhetoric of Jefferson and Lincoln, the mogul's didacticism of Andrew Carnegie and Henry Ford, and most stops between. The teacher working with students of limited English proficiency would need to proceed cautiously. Certainly the documents' brevity is an advantage in this regard. Still, with a few exceptions the selections ought all to be reasonably accessible, and they unquestionably offer a plentiful sampling of the American language and its cultural uses.

The editors employ a sensible strategy to demonstrate their proposition that "language is culture and culture is language." Most selections are openly rhetorical. Whether one is reading Joseph McCarthy's attack on communists allegedly infesting the State Department, Jonathan Kozol's harsh critique of poor urban schools, or Rush Limbaugh on, well, Rush Limbaugh, the persuasive intent of language is easily seen. From a teaching standpoint, most selections allow rhetorical intention to be easily identified and critically examined. Thus, two of the relatively few fictional selections juxtapose Upton Sinclair's proletarian hell in *The Jungle* with Sinclair Lewis's bourgeois anti-hero George Babbitt. The choice and arrangement of documents lends itself to reading for underlying assumptions, for extracting the cultural codes embedded in diction and voice. Again, for the student with limited English, this can be a difficult task. But certainly the anthology provides ample materials that teachers can readily employ to further the twin goals of language acquisition and acculturation.

The size and comprehensiveness of the volume in fact offers teachers many different possibilities—historical and thematic. One can imagine employing this book for

a variety of approaches to American Studies coursework. Still, there are absences. One, openly admitted by the editors, is literary. Their definition of "civilization texts" presumes the need for at least one companion volume of fiction, poetry, and short stories. Another noticeable tendency, perhaps also implied in their definition of "civilization texts," is the preponderance of public, even "official" voices. The editors rely heavily on political statements such as State of the Union and inaugural addresses, official party platforms, and Presidential policy statements. They also employ many semi-official manifestos of various kinds—by evangelists, feminists, civil rights activists, and others. With the noticeable exception of Studs Terkel's interviews (and these too are "public" of course, excerpted from his best-selling books), there are virtually no everyday voices to be heard. The anonymous diary, the unknown letter-writer, and the forgotten memoir can be compelling sources for exactly the kind of linguistic and cultural exploration American Culture sets out to provide. Certainly the public language that predominates in this volume fulfills the editors' intentions. But such sources are neither the only nor necessarily the best kind to use.

Despite these limits, American Culture offers the teacher of American Studies a broad choice of sources to bring to the classroom. It will suit especially those teachers whose approach meshes with an orientation to public sources and the contours of public debate. The editors have no visible ideological axes to grind, as inclusion of both Adrienne Rich and Allan Bloom suggests. In fact, the juxtaposition of forceful and opposing rhetorical statements is the book's greatest strength. It insures that an attentive student will have a good chance, at least, to learn the lesson that "language is culture and culture is language."

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

/reviews

**Citation:** Howard M. Wach. Review of Breidlid, Anders; Brogger, Fredrik; Gulliksen, Oyvind T.; Sirevag, Torbjorn, eds., *American Culture: An Anthology of Civilization Texts*. H-Review, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1080>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).