



The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness

Carrie Tirado Bramen

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The turn of the last century, amid the excesses of the Gilded Age, variety became a key notion for Americans—a sign of national progress and development, reassurance that the modern nation would not fall into monotonous dullness or disorderly chaos. Carrie Tirado Bramen pursues this idea through the works of a wide range of regional and cosmopolitan writers, journalists, theologians, and politicians who rewrote the narrative of American exceptionalism through a celebration of variety. Exploring cultural and institutional spheres ranging from intra-urban walking tours in popular magazines to the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, she shows how the rhetoric of variety became naturalized and nationalized as quintessentially American and inherently democratic. By focusing on the uses of the term in the work of William James, Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, Hamlin Garland, and Wong Chin Foo, among many others, Bramen reveals how the perceived innocence and goodness of variety were used to construct contradictory and mutually exclusive visions of modern Americanism.

Bramen's innovation is to look at the debates of a century ago that established diversity as the distinctive feature of U.S. culture. In the late-nineteenth-century conception, which emphasized the openness of variety while at the same time acknowledging its limits, she finds a useful corrective to the contemporary tendency to celebrate the United States as a postmodern melange or a carnivalesque utopia of hybridity and difference.

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