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Historians have developed numerous perspectives to compare the historical experiences of Americans and seldom have they agreed upon even the most basic categories separating them. Could ethnicity, for example, be defined broadly as a sense of peoplehood valid as long as an “imagined community” existed to support that vision? Or must we look at it more narrowly with clear criteria that make the concept useful as an academic tool? If so, what do these criteria look like, what qualifies as an indicator of ethnic belonging? Skin colour? Language? Culture? Questions such as these have fascinated scholars of the field for more than a century; their debates have shaped the history of American ethnic studies. Thus, to write a comprehensive, approachable historiography of this discipline can only be described as a daunting, almost impossible task. Yet, in his handy volume, Jason McDonald has risen to the challenge, providing a cohesive introduction to readers not familiar with the field while simultaneously offering an ideal reference work for those who are.

McDonald has structured his book into four parts. After a brief first chapter that discusses terminology and some basic positions on race, ethnicity, immigration, and citizenship, McDonald tackles the foundational questions that have plagued and divided the field from its inception a century ago until today. Where are the boundaries that divide the various ethnic populations? Who gets to define these boundaries and how far do they reflect “real” divisions between one group and another? Were ethnic identities simply invented and ascribed by the dominant few or instrumentalised by those that strove to unite the struggling masses? Did these identities empower or suppress? Were they used to represent a dominant society that melted away all difference, or were the nation’s diverse groups able to withstand that pressure and retain particular identities? McDonald addresses these and other equally relevant questions without positioning himself on one side or another of

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any particular debate. Rather, he identifies advantages and limitations of each approach and outlines future perspectives, thus leaving both young and experienced scholars at an ideal place from which to begin their own explorations.

The book is especially strong in the second part, where McDonald covers the complicated relationship between coercion and consent. This is, of course, an ever-growing and developing discussion among scholars of American history. Assimilationists paint a picture of the overwhelming “American Way of Life” that has melted away cultural differences and suffocated social and cultural rights of those outside of mainstream visions of America. Pluralists, on the other hand, argue that “ethnic boundaries are extremely resilient and that as a result the enduring characteristic of the American ethnic landscape is diversity” (55). McDonald’s impressive understanding of the academic debates that have shaped the discourse have enabled him to devise a structure that highlights the differences separating the various camps while also pointing to the similarities that unite them.

While McDonald successfully dissects and elucidates even the most complicated debates, he is not always capable of doing so comprehensively. The latter problem largely arises out of his decision to focus on “research published prior to the year 2000” (xi). Recent developments in transnational scholarship, as well as the strengthening focus on the interrelation of immigration and empire, are especially missing from his narrative. For example, the work of Paul Kramer, Laura Briggs and other American Studies scholars invested in the consequences of American involvement abroad has shown that the colonial adventures in the Philippines, Puerto Rico and countless others places nowhere near the continental United States did much to undermine and transform the ways in which Americans thought about themselves and their neighbours. When colonial subjects began entering the United States and challenged “white” rights and privileges, boundaries of belonging and citizenship were invariably altered along lines of race and gender, opening up possibilities for some while closing the door on others.¹

Despite its omissions the book is well-recommended. In its cohesiveness and accessibility it is in fact the ideal reference work for both students and scholars of ethnic American history. The most complicated themes are sagaciously dissected and processed for immediate, rewarding consumption by a professional audience that will appreciate the intellectual effort contained in all of the book’s 260 pages. And while
McDonald stresses the fact that his is an “outsider’s view” (ix), his book is an addition to any scholarly library of the ethnic United States – American or not.