



Walking Blues: Making Americans from Emerson to Elvis

Timothy Parrish

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Who or what is an American? Many scholars have recently argued that in a country of such vast cultural and ethnic diversity as the United States it is not useful or even possible to talk of a single national identity. Are people right to suggest that the very idea of "Americanness" is merely a myth designed to obscure the divisions among us?

This is the central question addressed by Tim Parrish in this imaginative interdisciplinary study. Working in the tradition of the blues, an art form based on the adaptation of cultural past to present, Parrish seeks to show what happens when we think of American identity not as some transcendental entity or essence, but as an ongoing process. At the core of his analysis is an appreciation of the rich legacy of pragmatism, a distinctly American frame of mind that sees truth as an act rather than an object, as a matter of doing rather than being. While the philosophical roots of pragmatism can be found in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William and Henry James, and Horace Kallen, the same intellectual approach informs the work of writers such as Ralph Ellison, Mary Antin, and Philip Roth as well as creative artists such as Son House, Elvis Presley, and James Brown. What all of these figures share, according to Parrish, is a recognition of the intrinsic connection between thought and action that has allowed Americans to define who they are through what they do.

Walking Blues accounts for our cultural diversity without either insisting that we are all the same or denying that we have anything in common. Far from glossing over difference, Parrish shows how our American social, racial, and ethnic conflicts often mark the starting point for the various acts of creation through which we make?and remake?ourselves as Americans.



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