

INA BERGMANN and STEFAN HIPPLER, eds., *Cultures of Solitude: Loneliness – Limitation – Liberation* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2017), 330 pp.

*Cultures of Solitude* is not only a collection of 17 essays that focus on the implications of solitude in American culture with a particular emphasis on loneliness, limitation, and liberation—a highly successful alliteration—but also one that gathers a wide range of international scholars from Germany, Austria, France, Denmark, Ireland, China, Canada, and the United States, who significantly enhance this field of studies with their respective expertise. The collection is based on an international and interdisciplinary conference on “Cultures of Solitude” held in Würzburg, Germany, in 2015, and organized by the two editors. In addition to the conference participants, the editors were able to recruit additional experts for this publication. Furthermore, the scholars do not just represent internationality but also interdisciplinarity since they work in a variety of disciplines such as American Studies, Literary and Cultural Studies, American History, Intermediality Studies, Comparative Literature, British Literature, Art History, Sociology, Religions Studies, Environmental Studies, and Psychology. Some of the scholars work at the intersection of several of these disciplines and at various career stages.

Focusing on the social phenomenon of “solitude” and adding cultures as reference points already indicates the phenomenon’s contingency on its cultural surroundings and, consequently, its characteristics of historical, cultural, and social variability, changeability, and development. Thus, solitude is never one-dimensional, which is what the impressive range of contributors show. Yet, in all their variety, the contributions also testify to common ground and discuss questions directly or indirectly such as the relationship between the public and private spheres, between the individual and society, and between the individual and technology. Concepts of identity, gender, and ethnicity also take solitude as an impact factor into consideration.

Any collection of essays with such a wide range needs what Ina Bergmann offers in her introduction, namely, a narrative that gives coherence to diversity. Her theoretically and historically well-founded overview offers the framework for all contributions, unfolds the range of meanings of the concept, and ex-

plains the further subdivision of the volume. Bergmann distinguishes between two basic types of solitudes, one freely chosen by the individual, one imposed on the individual. Both types indicate a critical stance toward society.

As Bergmann explains in her introduction, the collection “explores specifically American cultures of solitude and their representations in cultural products” (13), for cultures of solitude “in the US are of particular interest because solitude is directly related to concepts of individual independence and liberty which are venerable American ideals” (13). Freedom, for Bergmann, is one of the most essential features of “reclusiveness and eremitism” (13), which are two forms of self-chosen solitude. Hermits living in “the hut in the wilderness” (14) are strongly associated with American culture—if we just think of Henry David Thoreau’s legendary life at Walden Pond. Yet, deprivation is always also present. Bergmann goes on to discuss related concepts such as dichotomy and liminality, archetypes and universality, religion and spirituality, mental deviation and pathology, art and creativity. As she finally concludes, literature and culture are full of solitude and solitary figures. However, despite this phenomenon’s widespread presence, not too many scholars have tackled it in its broad range and certainly not from an interdisciplinary perspective. This is the gap that *Cultures of Solitude* fills.

Apart from the introduction, the collection is divided into six sections. In the section on “Early Solitude: Language, Body, and Gender,” the essays by Svend Erik Larsen, Kevin L. Cope, and Coby Dowdell trace solitude from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century in transatlantic and diachronic perspective. The first issue raised by Larsen is the paradox that lies in the simultaneity of solitude as an individual experience and its representation in language as a collective medium. Cope explores the stereotypes and values associated with the recluse while Dowdell discusses female reclusion after the American Revolution with reference to Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797). The section on “Solitude in the Nineteenth Century: Gender, Politics, and Poetics” offers three contributions by Ina Bergmann on Julia Ward Howe’s *The Her-maphrodite* (written in the 1840s, pub. 2004), Margaretta M. Lovell on Thoreau, and by Hélène Quanquin on Garrisonian abolitionists’ politics of isolation and reform. Women’s reclusiveness may imply freedom from social

restraints but also limitations whereas for men it is often associated with a view on nature—as in landscape painting—that results in insight and wisdom, as Bergmann and Lovell argue respectively. As Quanquin shows, reclusiveness offers a space on the margins of society and politics, as can be seen in abolitionism in the nineteenth century.

The section on “Solitude from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century: Society, Spirituality, and Religion” consists of Ira J. Cohen’s exploration of solitary withdrawal as a sociological phenomenon, focusing on Thoreau, Thomas Merton, May Sarton, and Kevin Lewis’s analysis of lonesomeness in American literature, music, and fine art. The chronological sequence is continued in the section on “Solitude in the Twentieth Century: Space, Gender, and Ethnicity” where the “cabin scenario” (Randall Roorda), the representation of Emily Dickinson in plays (Nassim Winnic Balestrini), and female reclusiveness in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984) (Jochen Achilles) are key concerns. Two more essays in the section entitled “Solitude from the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Century: Space, Identity, and Pathology” look at David Foster Wallace (Clare Hayes-Brady) and turn-of-the-century American films (Rüdiger Heinze), the latter particularly focusing on *Finding Forrester* (2000).

The final section on “Solitude Today: Technology, Community, and Identity” takes us all the way into the twenty-first century with its pressing concerns about technology and social media. While Stefan Hippler reads Dave Eggers’s *The Circle* (2013) and its criticism of tech-

nology’s impact on individuals as an example of solitude in the digital age, Scott Slovic presents students’ fieldwork at the University of Idaho and its “Semester in the Wild” program. His premise is that people look for solitude in order to think about society. For Slovic, the experiment’s most important result is that students learn to “use their writing and public speaking in order to imagine themselves as engaged citizens” (283). Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker conclude the section and the book by discussing psychological perspectives on the costs and benefits of solitude. They argue that seeking solitude in order to avoid social interaction has to be viewed critically whereas the desire to reach a state of solitude for its own sake is to be preferred.

All contributions are preceded by a very short abstract and a detailed bibliography that give readers orientation in this variety of approaches to solitude, as do subdivisions within each article. Many of the essays perform an in-depth analysis of American literature and cultural phenomena and give additional insights into other disciplines’ approaches. The volume offers an impressive overview of solitude as a cultural phenomenon from the Middle Ages all the way into the twenty-first century. The collection’s comprehensiveness turns it into a reference work for anyone eager to learn more about one of the most common but also most under-researched questions of—at least—Western and, in particular, American culture. Anyone interested can also find the book online.

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