

past remain ever-present in his reflections on his distant relatives, his educational opportunities, and the most formative periods of his academic training.

One of the more insightful points that might begin to reveal B.'s intentions for writing this memoir can be found in the earliest sections where he reflects on his frequently lonely adolescent pursuits (1–79). There he states he found the tools that helped him to understand better what would become his life's work: Late Antiquity. The many connections between the illusion of great empires and the discovery of 'little big men' would ultimately alter his worldview. With 'dignity and good nature' the figures he uncovered, like many of his relatives, were living through and reflecting on a moment of transition. They, too, watched the world as they knew it crumble around them and give life to something altogether strange and uncertain.

It is without a doubt the stories, and many, many influential names that stand out in his adult life, that will be of interest to those who have been significantly influenced by B.'s work. In many ways, the path through his academic success appears almost accidental or determined by chance encounters with generous contacts. It was a series of moves that is almost unheard of today. His experiences and, dare I say, privileged appointments in some of the United States' most elite circles feel almost as foreign as his descriptions of his father's years in the Sudan. It is a world and series of experiences that simply no longer exist. In many ways, I was left wondering if Professor Brown ever applied for any of his positions, let alone was required to develop a DEI statement or produce numerous research or teaching statements, which are standard practice in today's bleak job market. It was certainly a different time and different path that not many (if anyone) will ever replicate.

B. remains charmingly humble throughout these ruminations on his various prestigious posts, and almost always credits the brilliance of his interlocutors for any new idea that inspired his next great work. The most jarring moments, at least for this reader, are found in his descriptions of women and their influence upon his life. One wonders if many of the all-male early environments B. inhabited trained him to see and write about women in a very particular way. To be clear, his vantage point is never exploitative or cruel, but worth paying attention to as you move along.

To conclude this very brief reflection on an expansive work, I will use B.'s explicit reference to his change in approach to Augustine to gesture to what I believe he hopes his readers will take with them at the end of these reflections. The intellectual biography B. originally produced on Augustine was a narrow presentation of the scholar. Scholarly works, however, can only say so much. It was only when B. discovered the *Divjak Letters* that he says he truly began to discover 'the full measure of the man' (291). I suspect these reflections aim to re-orient how readers perceive the differences between the scholar and the man Peter Brown. We do not need a collection of letters to take his measure. Here he has asked us to join him through a carefully curated and entertaining *Journey of the Mind*.

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## V. RECEPTION

DEAN HAMMER, *ROME AND AMERICA: COMMUNITIES OF STRANGERS, SPECTACLES OF BELONGING*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xi + 252, illus. ISBN 9781009249607. £85.00

Rome has been in the air in recent years in the U.S.A., whether in films (e.g. *Gladiator*), television (e.g. *Rome*), scholarly work (e.g. M. Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America* (2009)), and even on social media with (mostly young) men being asked how often they think of the Roman Empire. America's interest in Rome, perhaps more visible of late, is hardly new; to cite one example, two Virgil-derived Latin phrases adorn the seal of the United States: *novus ordo seclorum* and *e pluribus unum*. Why does Rome loom so large in America's imagination? What are we to make of the oft-remarked similarities between the two imperial republics?

Dean Hammer, a leader in political theory approaches to Roman thought, takes up these questions in his fine book, exploring how Rome and America struggle with their collective

identities (as H. puts it, ‘dislocated identities’, 8), and the constitutive role of the Stranger within ‘nation[s] comprised of strangers’ (6) — Trojan refugees, in the case of Rome, refugees and immigrants, with America. H. employs a broadly phenomenological approach, engaging figures such as Arendt and Foucault, along with empirical analyses of politics, especially in the fifth chapter. Each chapter features a close study of aspects of Roman literature and culture, along with a paired study of American literature and culture.

Ch. 1, ‘Memory, Identity, and Violence: Founding in the *Aeneid* and *The Outlaw Josey Wales*’, addresses the interplay between memory, identity and founding violence and the role played by the encounter with wildness in Roman and American identity. Ch. 2, ‘Imagining Purity: The Corrosive Stranger and the Construction of a Genealogy’, turns to the ‘corrosive Stranger’ (61) as an anchor to identities in communities ‘constituted by other pasts’ (64). The literary foci of ch. 2 are Cato the Elder, Varro, Cicero, Booker T. Washington, Noah Webster and W. E. B DuBois. In ch. 3, the foci are the Samnites and Native Americans; in exploring the ‘wild Stranger’ (97), H. argues that the Stranger serves as a ‘reminder’ (117) of the wildness behind and outside civilisation and reaffirms the civilising missions of Rome and the U.S. ‘Playing Culture: Combat Spectacles and the Acting Body’, the fourth chapter, turns to the ‘taboo body’ (134) of Rome’s gladiators and nineteenth-century America’s bare-knuckled boxers, which accentuate the ‘rugged origins’ (134) of both regimes’ foundations. The fifth and final chapter — ‘The Experience of Politics and the Crises of Two Republics’ — treats the ‘fundamental paradox that lies at the heart of the slow demise of the Roman Republic’, and perhaps the American republic: ‘there is nothing that suggests that there was ever an intention by anyone to overthrow the Republic’ (185). H. argues that politics is an ‘arena of identity contestation’ (187), and that the conflicts that destroyed the Roman Republic, and their eerie echoes in contemporary America, cannot be reduced to material or institutional explanations so much as the inability of politics ‘to project the community into the future’ (189).

H.’s book is clearly written, crisply argued and engages a wide range of scholarship drawn from classics, political science, political theory, literary studies, film and other disciplines. Its scope is remarkable — I have already noted some of the objects to which he turns his eye, but omitted others, such as Robert Montgomery Bird’s nineteenth-century American play about Spartacus, *The Gladiator*, Charles Eastman’s autobiography, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, and a vast array of Greek and Latin texts. I would be remiss, too, if I did not note how creative H.’s approach is, and readers from a variety of disciplines will learn much from his account.

My reservations with H.’s argument, however, centre on a set of claims in the fifth chapter and, by extension, the overall narrative of the book. Hammer identifies and explores troubling similarities between the Late Republic and recent American politics, including ‘polarization’ (194), political ‘obstruction’ (195) and ‘political violence’ (196), culminating in the Roman context of norm violations begetting further — and greater — norm violations. H. sees similar phenomena in contemporary America, in which, at both the elite and mass level, we see a ‘new Caesarism’, most evident in the person of Donald Trump and the ‘MAGA’ movement, both of which bring together ‘populist and autocratic’ tendencies (215). H. makes sense of these phenomena with reference to the book’s overarching exploration of identity, and thus ‘how participants [in American politics] understand themselves and the place of politics in relationship to a larger narrative of belonging’ (203). My reservations with this argument have to do with the fact that democratic backsliding is far from unique to the United States; indeed, a recently published study (*Bedrocks of Democracy Under Threat Across the Globe* (2023)) by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance finds that almost 50 per cent of states surveyed experienced some element of democratic backsliding. If this is the case, then it seems that the story of America’s democratic backsliding may have less to do with how Americans imagine their belonging, but rather with global, structural forces. H.’s argument illuminates much about how Americans — and Romans — have thought about and struggled over their collective identities and the boundaries of their communities, but I am less convinced that it illuminates phenomena associated with America’s democratic backsliding.

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