Twain’s final verdict on Bermuda is captured succinctly in a letter written to a correspondent in 1910: “You go to heaven if you want to—I’d druther stay here” (152).

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When Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904) is remembered at all today, it is primarily for the series of stories and essays he wrote about Japan during the last decade of his life. Moving there permanently in 1890, Hearn became one of the first Westerners to immerse himself completely in Japanese culture, and he made a name for himself by publishing sketches of his adopted country in the *Atlantic Monthly* and other high-profile American magazines. At the time of his death, he was widely regarded as one of the world’s foremost experts on Japan, but he has fallen into obscurity in recent years. Outside of Japan, where he remains popular for the nostalgic glimpses he offers of a countryside still untouched by industrialization and urbanization, Hearn is perhaps best known for writing the original ghost stories upon which Masaki Kobayashi’s 1964 film *Kwaidan* was based. Before traveling to Japan, however, Hearn worked as a journalist in Cincinnati and New Orleans, and it is this earlier period in Hearn’s career that Simon J. Bronner emphasizes in this collection of Hearn’s writings. To that end, Bronner brings together thirty-two individual sketches and editorials that demonstrate what Bronner calls “Hearn’s ethnographic approach to writing and his views of America” (x).

Fifteen, or just under half, of the articles in *Lafcadio Hearn’s America* date to 1873–77, when Hearn was working as a reporter for the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and the *Cincinnati Commercial*. Six were published in the *New Orleans Item* between 1879 and 1881, shortly after Hearn had moved to Louisiana. By the mid-1880s, Hearn had begun to contribute to such national publications as *Harper’s Weekly*, and seven essays, all composed between 1883 and 1886, reflect his work during that period. The last four articles appeared in the English-language *Kobe Chronicle* in 1894, four years after Hearn had relocated to Japan. Bronner, however, eschews chronology in favor of a more thematic structure. (He helpfully records the articles’ original sources in an appendix for those readers who wish to read them chronologically.) Bronner groups the contents into three roughly equal sections: “Communities and the ‘Under Side’ of America” contains eleven portraits of gypsies, longshoremen, rag-pickers, immigrant fishermen, and other colorful subcultures of Cincinnati and New Orleans. In the eleven essays that comprise the second section, “‘Enormous and Lurid Facts’: Language, Folklife, and Culture,” Hearn turns his attention to unique or exotic cultural practices, such as minstrel shows, Creole alternative medicine, and voodoo. Finally, “Opinions of America” offers a sampling of ten editorials by Hearn on topics ranging from women’s rights and labor problems to trends in American literature and art. All of these pieces, according to Bronner, provide “rare glimpses of ethnic,
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Because of its content, *Lafcadio Hearn’s America* may prove most useful to scholars researching the history and culture of nineteenth-century Cincinnati or New Orleans. As a basic introduction to Hearn and his lesser-known American writings, it is serviceable, thanks largely to the excellent biography of Hearn that Bronner includes in his lengthy introduction to help contextualize the essays that follow. Unfortunately, for scholars already familiar with Hearn’s work, Bronner’s collection proves less helpful. At least three of the best sketches in this book—“Levee Life” (1876), “Black Varieties” (1876), and “Pariah People” (1875)—were previously available in a collection of Hearn’s essays entitled *Children of the Levee* (1957; ed. O. W. Frost), and it is unclear just how many of the other entries in this volume have been reprinted elsewhere. Hearn was an enormously prolific writer, and there is no definitive edition of his collected works. Both the sixteen-volume American attempt, *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn* (1922), and the eighteen-volume Japanese attempt by Hokuseido Press (1926–32) are incomplete. One cannot help but wish that Bronner had elected to include only those writings by Hearn that remain uncollected.

Bronner also tends to use the adjective ethnographic rather loosely when referring to Hearn’s writing, which gives the false impression that Hearn thought of his work in those terms. In fact, Hearn maintained a lifelong interest in ethnography—as well as ethnology, anthropology, linguistics, and folklore—but he seems to have regarded it as a professional field requiring specialized knowledge that he did not possess. In “New Orleans Superstitions” (1886), he disclaims any degree of expertise or systematic study on his part, suggesting that he is “simply calling attention to the prevalence [of non-Creole superstitions] in New Orleans, and leaving the comparative study of them to folklorists” (153). Many of Hearn’s sketches amount to little more than long catalogues of song titles (“The Music of the Masses” [1877]), recipes for herbal remedies (“The Creole Doctor” [1886]), or locations and personnel of fire stations (“Cincinnati Salamanders” [1874]); they do not contain extensive interviews or other forms of rigorous ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore, one wonders whether the literary characteristics Bronner singles out as ethnographic—“description of an unusual custom, speech, craft, song, story, group, or setting”; documentation of “distinctive manners and customs”; and survey of “genres of folk expression such as music, craft, or speech as a way to show the vitality of an ethnic urban culture”—might not describe the writings of most nineteenth-century newspaper reporters or any of the authors generally classified as “regionalist” or “naturalist.” Indeed, had Hearn remained in New Orleans and turned more fully to fiction, it is likely that we would associate his work with that of his friend and contemporary, George Washington Cable; Hearn himself even uses the phrase “local color” (127) to describe the subject of his essay “The Creole Patois” (1885).

So what is specifically or uniquely ethnographic about Hearn’s writings? Or is their ethnographic value due primarily to the vivid nonfictional descriptions of place they afford current American Studies scholars? Bronner never historicizes this distinction properly. Instead, he seems to highlight the “ethnographic” elements in Hearn’s writings in order to downplay the common criticism that Hearn’s American writings are less interesting and less accomplished than his Japanese writings. This has been the prevailing opinion since Malcolm Cowley wrote his introduction to *The Selected Writings of Lafcadio Hearn* (1949). Bronner’s counterargument is that “for American studies . . .
mesh of ethnography and art in Hearn’s prose is worthy of cultural analysis rather than artistic hand-wringing” because they provide “rare glimpses of nineteenth-century American urban ethnic and occupational life that are needed to inform a fuller, if darker, picture of American social development” (31). I am sympathetic to Bronner here, but in light of recent trends in American Studies, his worry over the distinction between “ethnographic” and “artistic” seems irrelevant to the value of Hearn’s early writing. Hearn’s complex cosmopolitan background—he was born in Greece, reared in Ireland, and educated in France before moving to America and, later, to Japan—marks him as one of the most interesting writers of his generation and guarantees that his reputation will rise as more scholars become interested in questions of national identity and globalization.

What of the sketches and editorials themselves? Without necessarily endorsing Cowley’s evaluation of Hearn’s career, this reviewer was most struck by the substantial improvement in Hearn’s writing over time. An early piece such as “Cincinnati Salamanders” simply runs out of steam before the end, as if Hearn had tired of listing the names and hobbies of various Cincinnati firefighters. Others seem contrived or heavily fictionalized, including “Some Strange Experience” (1875), which reads suspiciously like a series of formulaic ghost stories rather than an authentic interview. In later sketches, such as the masterful “Saint Malo” (1883), Hearn manages to sustain the reader’s interest throughout, thanks to a finely honed ability to provide near-tactile descriptions of setting. His conclusions and generalizations in later essays also become more concrete and less sweeping, and he grows more apt to cite verifiable sources for his information, as in “New Orleans Superstitions” (1886). For the greatest contrast between his early defects and later maturity as a writer, compare his 1877 essay “The Music of the Masses,” which provides a seemingly endless catalogue of then-popular songs while also revealing a surprising lack of genuine musical knowledge, to his more insightful and satisfying observations about a few authentic Creole songs in his 1885 “The Creole Patois.”

At his best, Hearn demonstrates a thoughtfulness and sensitivity that make his views feel remarkably progressive and in tune with our own. In “Haceldama” (1875), Hearn condemns the needless cruelty to animals on display at most slaughterhouses and praises the cleaner and more humane methods of Jewish butchers. Gems may be found even in some of the weaker pieces, including “Cincinnati Salamanders.” There, Hearn provides a particularly fine description of the virtues of what we now call multiculturalism: “The multitude are, therefore, wiser than any man, from the very fact that diverse vocations diversify the gifts and powers of men, and give that variety to character which, securing the world unity in variety, redeems it from the dreariness and desolation of a dead monotony” (109). Hidden away in an otherwise inconsequential newspaper article, this sort of statement exemplifies Hearn’s occasional brilliance as an essayist and goes a long way toward justifying Bronner’s claims for Lafcadio Hearn’s America. Students of Hearn’s work may not be able to resist second-guessing the construction and content of this collection, but it should serve as an adequate introduction to this remarkable cosmopolitan writer.

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