



# Reciting America: Culture and Cliche in Contemporary U.S. Fiction

*Christopher Douglas*

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From 'one nation under God' to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness', what we say about being American is closely linked to how we understand ourselves as Americans. Through a close examination of four representative post-World War II novels, Christopher Douglas illuminates the complex relationship between being American and reciting American discourses. "Reciting America" provides fresh readings of Russell Banks' "Continental Drift", Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man", Maxine Hong Kingston's "Woman Warrior", and T. Coraghessan Boyle's "East Is East", as well as other texts such as the cartoons of Matt Groening and the inaugural poems of Robert Frost and Maya Angelou. Considering these works in light of theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Sacvan Bercovitch, and others, Douglas suggests that the American Dream and several other national vocabularies have become inflexible forms of language that disallow apprehension of the real. He explores how these novels and other texts confront national discourse and strive, though with inconclusive results, to open America up to new subject positions by offering alternatives to the dominant ideology. Douglas finds contemporary intellectual and political life, against the backdrop of a mythology enshrined in proclamations, pledges, and public documents, to be impoverished by the pervasive use of cliches, which he identifies as figures of speech that stimulate emotion or action while short circuiting reflection. In its extreme cliched form, the American Dream consists of nothing more than advertising slogans and popular culture images; yet these pronouncements retain a powerful hold on the will and imagination of U.S. citizens. Probing the limits of public discourse, the power of the American Dream cliché, and the complexity of identity in the United States, "Reciting America" is a sophisticated look at the range of motion available to individuals trying to act on the official texts that produce them as social beings.

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