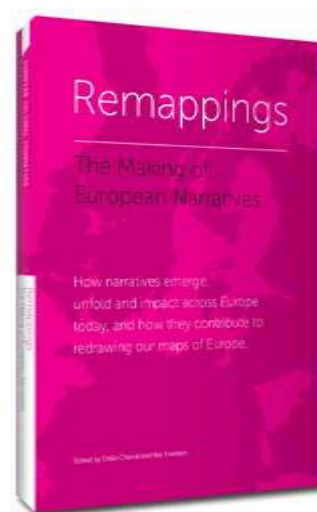


European Cultural Foundation,  
*Remappings - The Making of European Narratives*  
ECF, Amsterdam, 2012. [narratives@culturalfoundation.eu](mailto:narratives@culturalfoundation.eu)

**Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at [www.diversophy.com](http://www.diversophy.com)**

Living in Europe as a non-European and active as an interculturalist, I have long been bewildered by the intensity of concern for cultural preservation, promotion and display. Sometimes I was even willing to write off my attitude as that of a somewhat boorish Yankee lacking in the appreciation of the finer things of life. Only with the reading of *Remappings* did I arrive of a better sense of how important the management of culture and cultural artifacts is to European identities and to the promotion of a European identity.

At this moment Britain, as enchanted with itself as ever, is wondering about its continuation with Europe, it is tempting to recall the famous British news headline of the 1930s, "Fog in Channel; Continent Cut Off." Without a doubt, part of this is Britain's inability to get over itself as the world's once grandest empire, but part of the issue lies with Europe's inability to arrive at a compelling narrative, a European discourse of identity that creates cohesion and vision across its nations, including across the Channel, despite what seems to be an archaic sense of and identity that no longer resonates in the limited memory of current generations.



Gone is the time when the story of the pioneering European economic collaboration was the dove of hope as Europeans tried to escape the bitter memory of millions of deaths in the bloody carnage of World War II. So also passé is the attraction of the narrative of a Europe that is both rich and socially responsible as well as the story of its successful unification. These once-upon-a-time compelling narratives are simply no longer a part of the present generation's experience of Europe. Nor have the narratives emanating from Brussels on a regular basis touting the importance of this or that initiative to the well being of the Union convincing. So if the old and Eurocratic identity narratives are not compelling, what will hold Europe together going forward? The euro? Migration? Classical mythology? Efforts to stem off financial crisis? Hardly! There is no silver bullet.

The ongoing art exhibits and the involvement of local talent, including immigrant talent do say something about the desire for a narrative of unity in diversity among nations and ethnic groups. The yearly naming of a city as a "Capital of European Culture," with its concomitant exhibitions and events also attempts to deliver this message at the intellectual and street levels. Hence, we recognize on one hand, the importance of cultural manifestation as a vehicle for a possible identity narrative, the phenomenon, which puzzled me in my naïveté. They are at least, as one of the authors calls them, "practice fields" for the development of European narratives.

Yet, I tend to believe along with many of the authors in this volume, that much of this is still a plaster, a Band-Aid, stuck in place to protect slow natural healing, in the hope of avoiding deadly infection, while working on a quicker cure seems to become ever more pressing. Europe's story today is inevitably a story in the making and it is the making that

this anthology concerns itself with, despite the disparate opinions of its various contributors. *Remappings* is thus composed of rather miniscule chapters providing a variety of insights and debates.

Is it possible to construct or reconstruct the European narrative out of the experience of its citizens, particularly the experience of newcomers, whether through the accession of Eastern European states, the movement of migrants within Europe, or the arrival of immigrants from beyond its borders?

Eastern Europe, marginalized by years of communist occupation and influence, was driven by the possibility of becoming part of the European narrative as it struggled to comply with European norms for admission and participation. The loss of communitarian sentiments and the focus on individualist enterprise highlight questioning about the effective practice of democracy in regions now dominated by the accumulation of wealth and economic and political imperatives that seem to have been paying little attention to popular sentiment.

Europe's various national identities, reinforced by a strong sense of the need for assimilation, mask the internal diversity that has existed since forever, to say nothing about the insertion of recent newcomers. The narratives of national identity have long been strong, compelling, and politically useful. Even without reference to this diverse history of the composition of Europe and its states, it is impossible today to pick up a telephone directory or Google one for any sizable European city and not be struck by the incredible variety of ethnicities suggested as one looks at a column of names.

In spite of this obvious diversity, Europeans have been afflicted by multiple expressions of the desire to be true French, true Finns, and the like, to assume a simple identity and to fear the newcomer as an interloper into something fixed that is actually *fix und fertig*.

The ECF project on *Migrants Moving History* discusses the observation of European migrants about their identity and the societies that receive them. This resulted in a powerfully vivid video synopsis that can be seen at: <http://www.migrants-moving-history.org/documentary.htm>. The bottom line here is that the stories of migration may be the more reliable source for understanding the European narrative if one can overcome protectionist denial, identity legitimization by exclusion of difference. As one of the authors puts it, these immigrant narratives, "may in the long run become more valid than the 'common heritage' of intellectual interchange among the peoples of Europe that may not have much traction with broad swaths of the population."

So, one can also ask, "Is there a Europe anymore?" Is the search for a European identity a solipsistic black hole? All too often, and not exclusively in Europe, identity has been claimed over and against "the other", rather than emerging from an interior authentic sense of being. It has been a manipulative political tool, rather than a life-giving soul drawn from the stories that matter. My favorite take away quote from the book is a citation from Jens Christian Grøndahl, "A true European is someone who has absolutely no desire to be a European." Europeans exist in an ambivalence resulting from the simultaneous remembrance of and denial of the past, preventing perhaps the kind of "unity in diversity" so often envisaged as an appropriate narrative.

At the same time nation states are dogged by, if not seriously threatened by regional movements of independence, some long-standing, like Catalunya, now exacerbated by economic stress. The book does not deal with this, unfortunately.

*Remappings* is glued together by intermittent chapters about a comic strip character, Osvald, a somewhat cynical journalist, given a variety of incarnations by several cartoonists. Osvald is perhaps more of an antihero than a hero, as he reflects Europe's condition and is frustrated by efforts to play his tune, to weave the quilt of Europe's identity, to discover the story that will make him who he is, while accepting the strong strain of apocalyptic pessimism in the European discourse. The mixture of graphics and text found in the comic book approach, focusing on everyday life, rather than superheroes, suggests that a graphic narrative, which balances text with diversely interpreted images, might be conducive to connecting the multiple simultaneous identities that Europeans experience. This is another reason why art and expositions of art, as explicitly dealt with and encouraged in several chapters may be more important to European integration than the outsider would expect.

The question of European identity is not just about how Europeans see themselves today or expect to see themselves in the future, but also about how the rest of the world sees them, now that centers of economic and political power are shifting to the developing world. Colonial times are over, and neo-colonialist mentality is becoming an anachronism. The fragmentation of Europe in financial crisis, as several European politicians have warned, could return the possibility of armed conflict.

The final chapter of the book deals with the fact that even entities as large as Europe are part of the global ecological balance. All nations are challenged to become world citizens, responsible to each other in their interdependence on the planet. The book leaves us with the question about how and to what degree art and culture may yet play a salutary role in European self-definition and the identity of individual Europeans in democracy as it struggles with economics. This is admittedly the business of the European Cultural Foundation and its creation of this volume stems from this commitment. So, we shall see...