

Are We Post-American Studies?

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The one-word answer to the question posed by the title would have to be “no.” As one fellow Americanist has written, “Cancellation-by-prefix more often than not preserves as connection what it pretends to erase as sign.”¹ I doubt that we shall ever truly become post-American studies, however earnest our resolves, until or unless the United States ceases to be a unit of jurisdictional and curricular organization, and neither is likely to happen soon. But this much at least is certain: what for the last half-century or more has called itself American studies surely *will* change and indeed is changing fast.

The challenge for us who work in this area is to define what will follow the current age of revisionist awakening. That’s more or less where we have been since circa 1970, when the first and perhaps the only “school” ever to dominate American studies—the so-called myth-symbol approach—began to come under serious attack both methodologically (for liberties taken in selection and interpretation of historical evidence) and theoretically (for its consensus approach to American history, its tendency to posit a “main-

stream" of American thought). Academic research then began to assimilate what had been overlooked by the classic consensus narratives of American culture's internal teleology generated during the previous several decades. They were too male, too high-canonical, Eurocentric, exceptionalist, perhaps even imperialist in their framing of American culture. Or so that earlier dispensation today increasingly called "Cold War criticism" has come to seem.² Never mind that the contemporary critique, in order to make its own countercase, is bound to oversimplify the internal complexity and intellectual range of that formative epoch of American studies. It is incontestable that around 1970, just as the coordinates of American culture seemed mapped, the project started to come undone, never to be reassembled as it was before the rise of feminist and African-American revisionism. "Conflict" or "dissensus" replaced consensus as the preferred metaphors.

Even after a quarter-century, Americanists are still processing the results, because the various revisions in American culture studies have not come all at once but in waves, and because they have come symbiotically with such developments as the increasing percentage of important contemporary writing in the United States produced by non-WASPS, and the movement within academic theory to question whether literary texts should remain the main objects of literary study. A quarter-century of ferment and fission has left practitioners of American studies feeling that the field needs remapping but that their basic cartographical instruments will no longer serve the purpose. In particular, the most fundamental category, "American," seems more problematic than ever before. Not only must our research and teaching reflect the awareness that "America" is pluriform, not monolithic; it must be equally attentive to the parochialism of American studies' traditional equation of "America" with "United States." If we continue to disregard that our two master terms—the cultural entity and the political unit—are not the synonyms that American studies (as practiced in the United States, anyhow) has traditionally taken them to be, we risk lapsing into what increasingly looks like an uncritical nationalism, or at least being thought to have so lapsed.³ For most Americanists in the United States, this contemporary problematization of "America" requires a conceptual shift as fundamentally significant as feminist theory's critique of the generic male pronoun a generation ago.

How must we then reconceive American studies, given the directions that history, literature, and academic discourse are taking? In particular, how should we reconceive American studies in the light of the hemispheric and indeed global character of "America," taking into account its full range of origins, interdependencies, and effects?

1. Our theories about American culture must adjust themselves to a theory of nationhood something like this: that nations are utopian social fictions⁴ that are at once epistemologically suspect, economically obsolete, politically potent (since world order continues to recognize the sovereign nation as primary unit), territorially determinate (except in wartime), and culturally porous. In short, nation and culture aren't coextensive, but neither are they disjunct.
2. Given that national interdependence is increasing in the main if not uniformly, American studies will preoccupy itself increasingly with boundary-crossing phenomena of all sorts, such as: (a) diaspora studies that trace patterns of "dissemi-nation" (as Homi Bhabha wittily calls it);⁵ (b) so-called border studies that reimagine the culture (or cultures) of the United States as hemispherically interlinked;⁶ and (c) the placement of the United States within (trans)hemispheric circulation of cultural formations, whether generated from within the United States or circulating through the United States from some external point of origin.⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Doris Sommer have done distinguished work in areas (a) and (b).⁸ My own interest lies especially in area (c): for example, in how "(post)colonial" formations like pastoral nationalism have influenced cultural self-definition in the United States.⁹
3. I have already suggested that the focus on national borders and border erasure follows logically from the multiculturalist thrust that was in good part responsible for the displacement of the older-style consensualism of the classic myth-symbol school. African diaspora studies, Asian-American studies, and especially Latino studies have been the bridge. This refocus will quicken the shift we are already seeing away from now-familiar debates about national identity vs. cultural particularism, toward the issue of whether a model of cultural identity at any level can hold its ground against a model of cultural hybridization or syncretism. If the increasingly complicated ethnic composition of the student body at major universities today is a fair litmus test, the answer is certainly no.
4. Insofar as self-identified American Studies projects continue to center on the United States (and most undertaken within this country probably will), practitioners must guard against reinstating versions of older-style totalization. New historicist analysis of American ideological formations, like much recent work on the culture of United States imperialism, too easily rigidifies into the mirror of the consensualism it rejects. Indeed, Americanists (i.e., United States-ists) of all persuasions—I certainly plead guilty to this myself—seem chronically tempted to define the meaning of America, which always gets us in hot water. In this we repeat ancient traditions of Americanist discourse, such as essentialism, didac-

ticism, and utopianism—ringing moralistic *prounciamentos* whose cogency depends more on rhetorical will than on evidentiary base to call what we described into being. (The foregoing sentence, of course, demonstrates my own irretrievable colonization by that genre.)

5. Though contemporary transnationalism and cultural theory require us to forgo older myths of national distinctiveness and question the solidity of nation as category, that does not bar us from adopting motifs distinctive to United States history as central reference points. On the contrary, it might be a healthy thing if the American studies faculties of every university where such programs exist held periodic retreats at which they collectively drew up and pondered lists of historical/cultural traits that are arguably distinctive to the United States: the percentage of residents who claim they believe in God and hell, the institution of the liberal arts college, the United States's status as the first modern ex-colony to win independence, the hyperspecificity of its race law (in certain states, particularly), the national homicide rate compared to the rates of other industrialized nations, the percentage of autobiographical writing in both the traditional *and* the expanded literary canons, or the size of this country's land mass that lies within the temperate zone. On the basis of such empirically specifiable traits as these, perhaps we might be able to arrive at a more faithful set of generalizations about the culture of the United States than have been formulated. In short, I still see a place for projects like the quite good 1990 multidisciplinary Oxford conference published under the title of *Is America Different?: A New Look at American Exceptionalism*. Provided, that is, that the section of libraries devoted to Americanist symposia with interrogative titles also includes such works as *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?*—an equally meritorious compendium of contrary thrust, emphasizing intrahemispheric circulation rather than national distinctiveness.¹⁰
6. Americanists whose field is *literature* may stand especially to benefit from my hypothetical motif inventory, for two reasons. One is literary study's skittishness about empirical procedure. At the fall 1994 meeting of the PMLA Editorial Board, I was struck (though not surprised) to find that the call for papers for a special issue on the use of evidence in literary studies had been unusually slow in generating contributions that were even close to passing muster. From conversations since, and such desultory reading on the subject as I have managed, I am convinced that the editors of *Questions of Evidence*, a compendium of *Critical Inquiry* symposia, are quite right—at least with respect to literary studies—in asserting that “it is extraordinary how little direct attention [the topic of evidence] has received.”¹¹ To the extent this bespeaks tribal disinterest

in empiricism as a dimension and calibrator of theory, studies of the literary history of the United States need to take on more ballast. This need is especially compelling in light of a second consideration: that the argument for literary distinctiveness on the basis of language is largely denied us, since U. S. literature is so overwhelmingly Anglophone—albeit vernacularized here and there.

The case for American literature's autonomy has therefore always rested much more on claims about subject matter than about aesthetic form: on broad sociohistorical claims about the impact on the creative imagination of the ideology of individualism, the frontier experience, etc. The more decentered so-called American literary studies becomes, the more suspect the category of nation as a putative cultural unit, and the more likely United States literature specialists may be to oscillate between clinging to discredited assumptions about national distinctiveness vs. throwing ourselves wholly, *amor fati*-like, on the pyre of postnationalism (in a kind of subdisciplinary suttee). Whereas if we're truly rigorous in trying to get to whatever empirical bedrock underlies those assumptions while at the same time remaining attentive to the distinction between culture and nation (and with this the promise of border, diaspora, and global culture studies), then we will be faithful to our posts as post-American Americanists, whatever the outcome of the culture wars.

NOTES

1. Carolyn Porter, “What We Know That We Don't Know: Remapping American Literary Studies,” *American Literary History*, 6 (1994): 476–77.
2. Americanist Cold War criticism was first significantly characterized as such in several of the contributions to Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease, eds., *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), particularly Pease's essay, “*Moby-Dick* and the Cold War,” as well as Jonathan Arac, “F. O. Matthiessen: Authorizing the American Renaissance.” Matthiessen and Perry Miller, the most seminal figures in pre-modern American literary studies, have understandably been singled out for special scrutiny. On Miller, cf. Amy Kaplan's reading of him as an intellectual Cold Warrior in “‘Left Alone with America’: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 3–11. For a good diagnosis of what is at stake in Cold War criticism diagnostics, see David Suchoff, “New Historicism and Containment: Toward a Post-Cold War Cultural Theory,” *Arizona Quarterly*, 48 (1992): 137–61.
3. Hence, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch's introduction to *The Cambridge*

- History of American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) is careful to emphasize the contributors' engagement with "nationality as a problem" and their awareness that "'America' in these volumes designates [geographically] the United States, or the territories that were to become part of the United States." "America" from this standpoint conceptually refers to "a declaration of community, a people constituted and sustained by verbal fiat," and hence "a semiotics of exclusion, closing out not only the Old World but all other countries of the Americas" (1: 3).
4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), is the seminal text from which recent, more nuanced discussions of nation as fiction have sprung.
 5. Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291–322. Several other essays in this post-Anderson collection are also exemplary. See also the journals *Diaspora*, *Callaloo*, and *Transition*.
 6. In the field of history, for example, see for example Ramón Gutierrez's study of Pueblo-Hispanic (and eventually also Anglo) contact in New Mexico, *When Jesus Came, The Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); and David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). In literary studies, see for example José David Saldívar, *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), which experimentally remaps North American literary culture with Havana as its center.
 7. The variety of conceptual frameworks is rich. For example, Kaplan and Pease (note 2 above) operates from a U.S. hegemony approach; Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), operates from a more decentered global culture approach; Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), updates a more traditional "European Invention of America" approach; Richard Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), takes an intrahemispheric/comparatist approach.
 8. I especially have in mind Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Sommer, *The Foundational Fictions of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
 9. Cf. "New World Dreams and Environmental Actualities," *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 53–82, which discusses forms of pastoralism in (Anglophone) settler culture and indigenous culture (e.g., Négritude). See also Renata Wasserman, *Exotic Nations: Literature and Cultural Identity in United States and Brazil, 1830–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), an extended triangulation of the history of "edenic" thinking in Europe and two "new world" (post)colonies.
 10. Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different?: A New Look at American Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, ed., *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).
 11. James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Horootunian, "Introduction," *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 1.