

## Post-American Literature

Robert T. Tally Jr.

Texas State University\*

On August 8, 2008, during the dazzling opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games, a worldwide audience marveled at the incredible coordination of over 2,000 drummers smiling and pounding in unison, at the mechanical perfection of rhythmically raised-and-lowered platforms that turned out to be precisely choreographed manpower, at the aerial acrobatics of a man sprinting sideways along the oval opening of the roof above, and at the aching beauty of a painting created by the footfalls of athletes from the entire world. To many, this seemed a fittingly ornate and decorative gateway to “the Chinese Century,” an era when the world’s most populous country made the joyous leap to the centre of history’s world stage. Breathless news accounts explained to the outside world that, in China, the number *eight* has weighty significance, and the eighth day of the eighth month of the eighth year of that century constituted an appropriate date for the global debutante’s emergence. The round and swirling figures of 8-8-8, upended signs of infinity, seemed to symbolise the boundless possibility and everlasting hope of a powerful nation on the rise.

With its grand showiness, its highlighting of multicultural diversity, its display of military and economic might, and the optative mood in its national rhetoric, the opening ceremony seemed to mark China as a worthy successor to the United States as the American Century began to recede into history. Whether we are now living in a “Chinese Century” or some other century—indeed, whether such a label has any meaningful import at all—the “American Century” declared by Henry Luce in *Life* in 1941 seems to have ended, as acknowledged in 2007 in the pages of Luce’s own magazine (in this case, *TIME*<sup>1</sup>) and in a 2004 *New York Times Magazine* cover story.<sup>2</sup> The growing economic might of China and other countries, along with the apparent

---

\* Robert T. Tally Jr. is an assistant professor of English at Texas State University, where he teaches American and world literature, criticism, and theory. He is the author of *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography* and *Melville, Mapping and Globalization: Literary Cartography in the American Baroque Writer*. He is the translator of Bertrand Westphal’s *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* and the editor of *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*. He can be contacted at robert.tally@txstate.edu.

waning of the United States' political influence in the world, are the chief factors in determining the end of the American Century, but, to the extent that the last century ever was "American," it is the cultural and literary aspects of the century that interest me here. The end of the American Century (and the beginning of a new, Chinese, Pacific, or as yet unnamed one) provides an opportunity to reflect on the aims, functions, and effects of a literary culture industry that not only belonged very much to the twentieth century, but had a hand in creating it, at least inasmuch as the "century" is constructed as an ideological, rather than simply temporal, marker. For if, with respect to culture—as well as to politics, economics, technology, and military force—the twentieth was the "American Century," the emergence and flourishing of American Studies (and American literary studies especially) in the immediate postwar era is what established it as such.<sup>3</sup> American literature, as a field and academic discipline, is itself a twentieth-century phenomenon, and one wonders whether there really can even be a specifically *American* literature *after* the American Century. The post-American Century calls for a post-American literature.

### **American Literature, 1941–2000**

Although what we understand as "American Literature" seems to have its origins in early seventeenth-century colonial English narratives, or perhaps sixteenth-century Spanish writings, or even pre-Columbian traditions of native peoples of the Western hemisphere, the emergence of American literature as a field of study is tied to the emergence of the United States as a power in the world, roughly contemporaneous with World War II and the beginnings of the Cold War. The year 1941, the same one in which Luce anointed the century "American," also saw the publication of F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, a work which more than any other established American literature as a serious field of study. From Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* to Henry Nash Smith's *The Virgin Land* (1950), R.W.B. Lewis's *American Adam* (1955), and Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), American literary studies went from a tedious exercise in literary criticism and literary history by a few technicians to being identified as the foundational discourse of

American civilisation, a national culture designed as the national self-image of a world leader and, more pointedly, designed for export to the rest of the world. In such texts as these, American literature established the contours of that culture, and the literary texts studied were, in one way or another, embodiments of that national identity.<sup>4</sup>

Although many others, in Europe and elsewhere, may have found the well nigh religious zeal of the early Americanists amusing, the view within the United States was that this discourse truly represented freedom and equality through the lens of high literary art. Leo Marx likes to retell the story of a young Americanist who so enthusiastically explained the exciting “new” field of American Studies, one that combined history and literature, high culture and low, political rhetoric and artistic achievement, to a somewhat unimpressed Richard Hoggart (who knew that European literary historians had been doing work like that for some time): “After a moment, in a fit of exasperation, his informant blurted out: ‘But you don’t understand, I *believe* in America!’”<sup>5</sup> American literature as a field emerged in the immediate postwar period not only to study and to represent America, but to promote it—*it* being the idea of “America” itself, something that was not coextensive with the political or geographic entity known as the United States. As I have noted elsewhere, the early practitioners of American Studies “were like disciples of a new religion, one whose system of belief they were in fact helping to create.”<sup>6</sup> The “literature” produced by these critics, scholars, and teachers must be viewed in the context of the field’s formation. American literature actually is part of the American Century and properly belongs to it. To this extent, what happens to American literature in a new and different century becomes problematic, calling for redefinition and reassessment.

American literature as a disciplinary field of study, then, is a relatively recent thing. In his exquisite genealogy of the field, David Shumway has shown that American literature’s “most significant achievement was to secure for Americans a belief in their success as a culture. [...] The discipline, in other words, *produced* a widely accepted representation of American civilization that not only defined its character but ‘verified’ its existence [my emphasis].”<sup>7</sup> The work of what Donald Pease has called the “Cold War critics” established the field of American literature, a field that itself produced the imagery that could transcend the historical moment. Luce’s “American Century” offers a

similar trope, in which the apparently temporal designation—a century—stands in for a spatial one, such as territorial empire.<sup>8</sup> The national image of an America is established through the discipline of American literature, which in turn will be able to move beyond the historical and geographic framework, producing a number of images that can stand in for the nation-state itself.

The effect of the collective work of the discipline of American literature was to celebrate American civilization. Thus American literature was used to reinforce the pervasive political messages of the postwar era that America had achieved a legitimate global supremacy, threatened only by the potential illegitimate supremacy of communism. America in this view was not merely a civilization, but the savior of civilization itself. The existence of a great and unique tradition of American literature helped Americans believe this vision.<sup>9</sup>

This is what I mean when I say that American literature is inseparable from the American Century. The same cultural work that Luce hoped to accomplish in naming the century was being performed by the ways in which the discipline of American literature was defined. Although it is certainly the case that a literary nationalism of some sort existed as early as the Anglo-American War (also known as the American Revolution), it did not achieve its dominant form until the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> My argument is that such literary nationalism belongs to this period, and—if we may now venture that the epoch may be over—American literature itself must be viewed as a species of historical artifact.

In the celebratory hoopla of the postwar years, Americanists “discovered” the sacred truths of “America” in the literary writings of certain key figures. Pease has noted that American national narrative emerged from certain mythic elements, an “image repertoire” that enabled American Studies to depict a kind of transhistorical American national identity “through the recitation of its key terms in the national meta-narrative [...] Those images interconnect an exceptional national subject (American Adam) with a representative national scene (Virgin Land) and an exemplary national motive (errand

into the wilderness).”<sup>11</sup> These images then became distinctive myths—indeed, the school of criticism at the time became known as the “Myth and Symbol” school—whose analysis reveals the deeper “truths” of American civilisation. Underlying these images and seeming to corroborate their meanings, an American Exceptionalism posited the unique, almost providential character of “Nature’s nation” in the world, and the literature—or, more to the point, these Americanist critics’ *readings* of that literature—confirmed the “truths.” This generation of scholars essentially *formed* American literature by “discovering America” in it.<sup>12</sup>

So entrenched were the images of this American literary nationalism that even the opponents of American nationalist ideology and of the older Americanists saw themselves as rescuing America and American literature from them. As Sacvan Bercovitch noted in 1993, the dissidents of the 1960s saw themselves as *restoring* America to its sacred, mythic mission, rather than as dismantling the myths altogether. In his autobiographical remembrance of his first experience of “the American Dream,” Bercovitch writes:

I felt like Sancho Panza in a land of Don Quixotes. It was not just that the dream was a patent fiction. It was that the fiction involved an entire hermeneutic system. Mexico may have meant the land of gold, and Canada might be the Dominion of the North; but America was a venture in exegesis. You were supposed to discover it as a believer unveils scripture. America’s meaning was implicit in its destiny, and its destiny was manifest to all who had the grace to discover its meaning. To a Canadian skeptic, a gentile in God’s Country, it made for a breathtaking scene: a poly-ethnic, multi-racial, openly materialistic, self-consciously individualistic people knit together in the bonds of myth, voluntarily, with a force of belief unsurpassed by any other modern society.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, even the opposition to the American national culture cited that same national culture as the authority upon which to base their protest. As such, the waning years of the American century—a “century” of American dominance and relative

goodwill that some might argue lasted only about thirty years, from roughly the end of World War II to roughly the Fall of Saigon—represented as much of an attempt at shoring up America as in transforming it.

As Pease and others have made clear, the development of American literature as a disciplinary formation was tied to the Cold War, and one might suggest that the end of the Cold War marked a significant “end” to American literature as the field had been imagined. The late-1980s did witness the emergence of the “New Americanists”—a term coined derisively by Frederick Crews and embraced by Pease (who in effect canonised the label by making it the name of the highly successful Duke University Press series edited by Pease)—and the establishment of what Alan Wolfe has called “Anti-American Studies,” a label Wolfe uses to indicate just how antagonistic such “new” Americanists are toward older forms of American Studies (like Leo Marx’s) and how opposed they are to the ostensible object of their studies. (Hence, for Wolfe, “Anti-American Studies” is both anti-*American* and anti-*Studies*.) But, as I have suggested elsewhere, the national narrative is not so much undermined as strengthened by the new Americanists, whose triumph seemed to lie in recognising the ways in which the reigning American myth required the exclusion of various people, notably nonwhite men and all women, Indians, “foreigners,” the working classes, gay men and lesbians. But, as I have noted,

The greater inclusiveness also underscores another theme of American ideology, that of constant progressive movement, a teleology as ingrained as the Puritan teleology, assuring Americanists that today is better than yesterday and tomorrow looks even brighter (as the promise of the American Way is extended to those previously left out). This further allows practitioners of American Studies to feel that they are part of the progressive movement of American history, extending liberty and freedom to all.<sup>14</sup>

Pease’s notion of a postnational American Studies is based on the idea, not always credible, that the American national narrative cannot be maintained once the previously excluded classes are included.<sup>15</sup> As Pease argues, the national narrative developed

through and depended on the exclusions of subjected peoples (“women, blacks, ‘foreigners,’ the homeless”). Merely revising the narrative to include these “national subject peoples,” therefore, would not be the same national narrative.<sup>16</sup> It is in this sense that Pease uses the term *postnational*: the idea of “America” cannot hold once these “subject peoples” have asserted their difference from the national symbolic system; this difference cannot be wholly integrated within the national narrative. When these figures “surge up,” as “unintegrated externalities, they expose national identity as an artifact rather than a tacit assumption, a purely contingent social construction rather than a meta-social universal.”<sup>17</sup> But, of course, all national identities are social constructions, even those with linguistic or kinship bases.

If the New Americanist view is right, the older national narrative produced by the founders of American literature in the 1940s and ’50s will not survive their interventions, but the image produced by the New Americanists is hardly *post-national*.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the project of the New Americanists has largely served to monumentalise and solidify the field of American literature even more at the time its century was expiring. Interestingly and ironically perhaps, the insights of their diverse work has reinvigorated the study of American literature, which has had the perverse side-effect of sending more and more students into a nationalistic program of study at the very moment when the nation-state has ceased to be the principal organising power in the world system. In other words, in an era of globalisation, the time has definitively arrived for a postnational literature. Contrary to Francis Fukuyama and his ilk, history did not end with American democracy and free market as the apogee and embodiment of world spirit. The American Century derived its power from an ideology of American literature and American Studies well prepared to shape the past in the service of the present, but quite unprepared for a future in which America’s place was diminished in a postnational (and also post-American) world system. But the articles of faith are no longer valid in a world in which the gods are shown to be false idols. As Shumway has noted, with irony, when “America” became a world power, it “discovered” that it had a unified national literature.<sup>19</sup> After the American Century, can there really be an American literature?

## Worldly Literature

What does a postnational study of literature look like? In several respects, this work has been going on for many years. Perhaps somewhat ironically, given its origins in the comparative study of distinctly national languages and literatures, comparative literature has been at the forefront of a movement to denationalise literature. I am inclined to agree with Edward Said, that the origins of comparative literature—whether practiced in a comparativist way (comparing discreet national literatures) or in a more holistic sense of transcending national boundaries—lie in Goethe’s conception of world literature (*Weltliteratur*).

Goethe’s grandly utopian vision is considered to be the foundation of what was to become the field of comparative literature, whose underlying and perhaps unrealizable rationale was this vast synthesis of the world’s literary production transcending borders and languages but not in any way effacing their individuality and historical concreteness.<sup>20</sup>

In Goethe’s dream, and Said’s as well, the national grounds for literary works would be no more than another element to be considered in reading, and not the basis for any major interpretive judgements in the process.

To name a particularly well-known example of a postnational approach to literature deriving its force from comparative literature or *Weltliteratur*, consider Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*. This astonishing study applies close readings, textually nuanced analyses of the rhetorical styles of individual works, while also ambitiously covering the gamut of western civilisation from the Book of Genesis and Homer to Virginia Woolf. Additionally, it is notable for its lack of nationalism. To be sure, the time and place of a given text (including the historical situation of the nation in which it is written) have a bearing on the readings, but in no way must the text *represent* the nation or state; nor does the critic need or seek to show how the text must do so. Written by a German Jew in exile in Turkey during a war that definitely demonstrated the baleful effects of national identity, *Mimesis*, I would argue, is a proleptic figure for the postnational literary critical



practice and for the *Weltliteratur* of our own, postnational century. Drawing on a premodern insight, albeit one adapted to the altered circumstances of the modern (and perhaps now, postmodern) condition, Auerbach suggests that the critic ought to view the entire world as a foreign land—*mundus totus exilium est*—as I discuss below.

Consider another work, one more clearly situated in the context of American literature and, hence, one more likely to disrupt its assumptions: C.L.R. James's *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*. A study of perhaps the most canonical American writer, Herman Melville, *Mariners* was published at about the same time that American Studies was becoming a recognisable field in the context of “discovering” American civilisation, yet it shares Auerbach's commitment to postnational literature. It was released in 1953 (the same year that *Mimesis* appeared in English) and written by another exile, a foreigner writing in circumstances that estranged him even further from the founding fathers of American Studies. Famously, James completed the book during the six months that he was detained at Ellis Island; he would be deported for “subversive activities” (one of which was the writing of *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, according to I.N.S. officials).<sup>21</sup> James's study undermines the nationalist literary tradition by mobilising the forces of the very writer most valued by that tradition. James argues for a Melville deeply engaged with the world and particularly opposed to the national. The book is significantly subtitled *The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. And the critical depiction of the “world” we live in, as James makes clear, is in fact the main force operating in Melville's writings; Melville is emphatically not a representative American (or any other nation's) author. As if to underscore the point before he even makes it, James dedicates the book: “For my son, Nob, who will be 21 years old in 1970, by which time I hope he and his generation will have left behind them forever all the problems of nationality.”<sup>22</sup> Obviously, such problems persist, but the desire to understand the world—and, as a critic,<sup>23</sup> to understand the ways in which we try to understand our world—outside of the framework of national identity is a step forward.

Auerbach and James are two early examples, outsiders and apostates to be set against the development of national literary studies in the American Century, but recent developments in literary studies suggest that the national model may be finally breaking down, or, at least, becoming restructured. Happily, perhaps, the number of works dealing

with a re-imagined American literature in a postnational context is far too great to list. I will mention only three broad types of postnational literary studies, which each have the additional value of ordinary, common-sense appeal. In some cases, we—as critics, scholars, and teachers—are already doing this postnational work. In an odd sense, these practices are both “nothing new” and utterly transformative of literature that has been hitherto circumscribed within the national.

First, a spatial or geographic focus that does not rely on the political entity of the nation-state can open up literary studies to entirely new readings and connections. A great deal of recent work declares itself transnational, not merely comparing works of American literature to works of, say, British literature, but actively blurring the national boundaries to ascertain a transnational tradition that may not be entirely localisable within any national boundaries. For example, Atlantic or transatlantic studies—including such generic subcategories as Transatlantic Romanticism, for instance—offer a geographical and historical frame of reference that need not rely on national identity, and that even subsumes the national within a broader field. Paul Giles’s fascinating trilogy (*Transatlantic Insurrections*, *Virtual Americas*, and *Atlantic Republic*) offers a transformative approach to “American” and “British” literatures with the space of the Atlantic superseding any national boundaries. An ocean away, Yunte Huang’s *Transpacific Imaginations* performs a similar function in situating so-called “American” literature in a vast, yet limbic and liminal region of the Pacific and Pacific Rim. The transoceanic or circumoceanic examples certainly do not exhaust the geographic or spatial range of postnational studies, and in addition to *supra*-national spaces, one could also organise literature according to *sub*-national geographical considerations. For example, local or regional literature is often understood as distinctive precisely in its differences from a “mainstream” (often national) culture. And types of space—e.g., urban versus rural, industrial versus agrarian, forest versus desert, domestic versus public, and so on—produce the conditions for the possibility of different literary relations, often making connections across otherwise diverse nations while dividing those within nations. A stockbroker’s experiences of metropolitan life in London, Amsterdam, New York, and Hong Kong, albeit with key differences among them, may still be more similar than those between a Manhattanite and a Idaho rancher (or an upstate New York farmer, for that

matter). The national is not excluded from the geographic approach, but examining these other spaces provides a point of entry to critically understanding interrelations not clearly visible in nation-specific studies.

Similarly, the temporal or historical categorisation enables a kind of critical cross-pollination that can lead to interesting results. Too often, history itself, as a discipline and a practice, is bound strictly to the national, or it ventures across state lines only to look at international relations or foreign policy. That history developed by paying close attention to military and political matters, rather more than to, say, dietary or geological ones, says something about its own “field-imaginary.” As Michel Foucault once said, “The abrupt increase in quantities of proteins consumed by a population is, in a sense, much more significant than a change of constitutions or the transition from a monarchy to a republic.”<sup>24</sup> An artificial, temporal category like a “century” might itself be an organisational form for postnational literature, so long as it does not become another code word for the national (as in the “American Century”). To be sure, a course on nineteenth-century literature would not need to limit itself to a particular nation-state. Likewise, more general historical movements (modernism, for example) lend themselves to postnational studies. These courses already exist, and the organisational principles behind them can easily be applied at the curricular level.

Another potentially productive site for postnational literature might be found in genre. This might be understood as involving recognisable generic categories, such as epic, romance, or tragedy, not to mention genre categories used in marketing (another understanding of “genre”) like science fiction, fantasy, or mystery, or broader generic categories of types of reflections on experience, such as urban literature, pastoral poetry, slave narratives, travel writing, and so on. Undoubtedly, this is what many teachers have been doing for years, and a course on science fiction certainly would not need to be limited to “American science fiction.” Wai Chee Dimock has suggested that a generic perspective can facilitate the transnational or postnational study of literature and transform literary history altogether:

What would literary history look like if the field were divided, not into discrete periods, and not into discrete bodies of national literatures? What

other organizing principles might come into play? And how would they affect the mapping of “literature” as an analytic object: the length and width of the field; its lines of filiation, lines of differentiation; the database needed in order to show significant continuity or significant transformation; the bounds of knowledge intimated, the arguments emerging as a result?<sup>25</sup>

Dimock argues that the concept of genre would allow for such a literary history, and the recent work of Franco Moretti on the novel—I am thinking of his explicitly transnational and multivolume collection, *The Novel*, as well as his methodological sketches in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*—has already offered itself as an example of this work. Using a “genre” quite different from novel, epic, or romance, in her introduction to *Shades of the Planet*, Dimock has also argued that an organisational concept like “plantation complex” can create unforeseen connections across space and time, leading to more productive historical and geographical possibilities for literary studies.<sup>26</sup>

A change in the organisation of literary studies undoubtedly involves changes in the curriculum itself. Most English majors in the United States have their “British” and “American” (and perhaps “Canadian”) requirements set out for them, and transnational courses do not always seem to fit.<sup>27</sup> Curricula may be organised according to other factors, just as philosophy departments may require courses in ancient, medieval, and modern (thought not necessarily Greek, Italian, and German). Obviously these are somewhat arbitrary, but they are certainly no more arbitrary than choosing to organise the study of literature around the nation-state.

No more arbitrary, I should add, except in one respect. Because American literature, the *object* as well as a disciplinary *field* of study, arose alongside of, and in support of, the American Century, to disentangle American literature from the national is necessarily to change it. The national is the air it breathes, and one could say—it seems a bit churlish to put it this way—that there is no such thing as an American literature outside of the American Century. That is, a “Transnational American Studies” (as Pease has called it) or “Planetary American Studies” (as Dimock proposes) is by necessity no longer American Studies at all. When Herman Melville or Henry James or Toni

Morrison are extirpated from the specifically American national identity, when they are no longer the representatives and embodiments of that national identity, then, it might be argued, American literature itself no longer exists. It becomes something else entirely: what I call a *post-American literature*.

In our postnational century, typified by the sort of globalisation that renders national identity a residual (though still powerful) form, I believe that the “world” is the proper ground and horizon for literary studies, and that world literature becomes the model for literature in general. Again, this does not preclude subdivisions (even, I suppose, national ones, although I think that the nation-state model is in and of itself less productive than others), and the world of literature may take on many forms. But the task of the critic, the scholar, and the teacher is to bring to light the ways in which writers have tried to understand their world, the “world we live in” as C.L.R. James so aptly put it. As Auerbach himself put it, long ago, the work of the critic (or, as he would have it, the philologist), in making sense of the ways that humans make sense of the world, must go beyond the national:

the more our earth grows closer together, the more must historicist synthesis balance the contraction by expanding its activity. To make men conscious of themselves in their own history is a great task, but the task is small—more like a renunciation—when one considers that man not only lives on earth, but that he is in the world and in the universe. But what earlier epochs dared to do—to designate man’s place in the universe—now appears to be a very far-off objective. In any event, our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation. [...] We must return, in admittedly altered circumstances, to the knowledge that prenational medieval culture already possessed: the knowledge that the spirit [*Geist*] is not national).<sup>28</sup>

Then Auerbach quotes a medieval monk, Hugo of St. Victor (also known as Hugh of Saint Vincent), who finds that the “tender beginner” still finds his homeland sweet, and the man for whom every country is like a homeland is already strong, but he who attains

perfection can see the entire world as a foreign land.<sup>29</sup> What the twelfth-century theologian meant is that one must free oneself of the love of this world, remembering that what really matters is not *of this world* at all, but Auerbach adapts this image to our own circumstances by noting that such estrangement is appropriate “for one who wishes to earn a proper love for the world.”<sup>30</sup> Such worldliness ought to be the goal of literary studies in the postnational condition. After the American Century, post-American literature may find its place in a love for the world that is no longer tied to any native soil.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Elliott, “China Takes on the World,” *TIME Magazine*, 11 Jan., 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ted C. Fishman, “The Chinese Century,” *New York Times Magazine*, 4 Jul., 2004.

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting dramatisation of this process, see Paul Giles, *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), especially Chapter 6, which describes the ways in which Nabakov’s *Lolita* mirror and help to form the national imagery of American Studies in the 1950s.

<sup>4</sup> For a critical retrospective of some of these arguments, as well as alternative readings, see, e.g., Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease’s edited collection *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), and Pease’s own *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Leo Marx, “On Recovering the ‘Ur’ Theory of American Studies,” *American Literary History*, 17.1 (Spring 2005), 120.

<sup>6</sup> Robert T. Tally, Jr., “‘Believing in America’: The Politics of American Studies in a Postnational Era,” *The Americanist* XXIII (2006), 69–70.

<sup>7</sup> David R. Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as a Discipline* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>8</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 50-51.

<sup>9</sup> Shumway, *Creating American Civilization*, 339.

<sup>10</sup> My use of the term *national narrative* is limited here to that produced in twentieth-century American Studies, and does not refer to the nineteenth-century genre, notwithstanding some key affiliations between the otherwise distinct concepts. For an analysis of nineteenth-century national narrative, see Jonathan Arac, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Donald E. Pease, “National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives,” in *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> For a concise analysis of the “Myth and Symbol” school and the Cold War origins of American Studies, see Janice Radway, “What’s in a Name? The Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20

---

November 1998,” *American Quarterly* 51.1 (March 1999): 1–32. Elizabeth Renker has offered a more positive assessment of these origins, noting that the discipline of American literary studies arose through the inclusion of women, minorities, and the working class, and that the discipline’s sense of inferiority within the academy had to do with diverse “teacher and student populations [...] The social functions associated with American literature as a curricular product were thus a foundational part of its identity as a product, quite apart from the content of its canon.” See Elizabeth Renker, *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (London: Routledge, 1993), 29.

<sup>14</sup> Tally, ““Believing in America,”” 75.

<sup>15</sup> I refer primarily to those identified by Donald Pease as New Americanists, especially in his two collections of essays, *Revisionary Interventions into the Americanist Canon* and *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*. See also John Carlos Rowe, *The New American Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> “When understood from within the context of the construction of an imagined national community, the negative class, race, and gender categories of these subject peoples were not a historical aberration but a structural necessity for the construction of a national narrative whose coherence depended upon the internal opposition between Nature’s Nation and peoples understood to be constructed of a ‘different nature.’” Pease, “National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts,” 4

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> As Milette Shamir has argued, the “post” in *postnational* is not a temporal marker, but rather indicates the New Americanists’ antagonism to national narrative. However, as with the disillusioned or disappointed American Left of the 1960s, the New Americanist project replicated the older one, resembling Bercovitch’s American Jeremiad. New American Studies “resembled the Jeremiad in its propensity for self-criticism, lament over past moral failings, and, particularly, in its disguised notion of a promised land, a better, more inclusive, more multicultural America in the act of becoming, an act understood to include speech acts of the New Americanists themselves.” Milette Shamir, “Foreigners Within and Innocents Abroad: Discourse of the Self in the Internationalization of American Studies,” *Journal of American Studies* 37.3 (2007), 380. Far from being postnational, these narratives served to improve the national narrative. Pease has since revised his use of the term to make it more consistent with the exigencies of globalisation and the waning influence of the nation-state form (see his “National Narratives, Postnational Narration,” as well as his “Introduction” to C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001).



---

<sup>19</sup> Shumway, *Creating American Civilization*, 299.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, "Erich Auerbach, Critic of the Earthly World," *Boundary 2* 31.2 (Summer 2004), 18.

<sup>21</sup> For a good summary of the circumstances of James's incarceration, see Pease's Introduction to *Mariners*.

<sup>22</sup> James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, 2

<sup>23</sup> "It is not expected of critics as it is of poets that they should help us to make sense of our lives; they are bound only to attempt the lesser feat of making sense of some of the ways we try to make sense of our lives." Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, "Return to History," trans. Robert Hurley, in Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 429.

<sup>25</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 73.

<sup>26</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, "Introduction: Planet and America, Set and Subset," in *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, eds. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 628.

<sup>27</sup> This issue is addressed in several essays included in David Damrosch's edited collection *Teaching World Literature* (New York: MLA Press, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Erich Auerbach, "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," trans. M. and E.W. Said, *Centennial Review* 13 (Winter 1969), 17.

<sup>29</sup> See Jerome Taylor, *The Didascalion of Hugh of Saint Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, trans. J. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 101.

<sup>30</sup> Auerbach, 17.

## Bibliography

- Arac, Jonathan, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).
- , “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” trans. M. and E.W. Said, *Centennial Review* 13 (Winter 1969): 1–17.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- Dimock, Wai Chee, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- , “Introduction: Planet and America, Set and Subset,” in *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, eds. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- Elliott, Michael, “China Takes on the World,” *TIME Magazine*, 11 Jan. 2007.
- Fishman, Ted C., “The Chinese Century,” *New York Times Magazine*, 4 Jul. 2004.
- Foucault, Michel, “Return to History,” trans. Robert Hurley, in Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998): 419–32.
- Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
- Giles, Paul, *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- , *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).
- , *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
- Habermas, Jürgen, *The Postnational Constellation*, trans. by Max Pensky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).
- Harvey, David, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

- Huang, Yunte, *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- James, C.L.R, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001).
- Kermode, Frank, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).
- Lewis, R.W.B, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).
- Luce, Henry R., "The American Century," *Life Magazine*, 17 Feb. 1941, 61–65.
- Marx, Leo, "On Recovering the 'Ur' Theory of American Studies," *American Literary History* 17.1 (Spring 2005): 118–134.
- Matthiessen, F.O., *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941).
- Michaels, Walter Benn, and Donald E. Pease, eds. *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).
- Miller, Perry, *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956).
- Moretti, Franco, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005).
- Pease, Donald E, "National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives," in *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 1–13.
- , "National Narratives, Postnational Narration," *Modern Fiction Studies* 43.1 (Spring 1997): 1–23.
- , *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).
- Radway, Janice, "What's in a Name? The Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November 1998," *American Quarterly* 51.1 (March 1999): 1–32.
- Renker, Elizabeth, *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- Rowe, John Carlos, *The New American Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

- . “Post-Nationalism, Globalism, and the New American Studies,” in *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 23–37.
- Said, Edward, “Erich Auerbach, Critic of the Earthly World,” *Boundary 2* 31.2 (Summer 2004): 11–34.
- Shamir, Milette, “Foreigners Within and Innocents Abroad: Discourse of the Self in the Internationalization of American Studies,” *Journal of American Studies* 37.3 (2007): 375–88.
- Shumway, David R., *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as a Discipline* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- Smith, Henry Nash, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950).
- Tally, Robert T., Jr., “‘Believing in America’: The Politics of American Studies in a Postnational Era,” *The Americanist* XXIII (2006): 69–81.
- Wolfe, Alan, “Anti-American Studies,” *The New Republic*, 10 Feb., 2003: 25–32.