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Author

Traister, Bryce

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The Object of Study; or, Are We Being Transnational Yet?

BRYCE TRAISTER

It is probably true that any view from seventeen floors up will be something special. In my case, the case I had at the 2006 American Studies Association (ASA) annual meeting in Oakland, California, I spent a lot of time looking at the hills of the East Bay. Viewed from a hotel room window some five miles distant, the undulating skyline moves north into the verdant tranquility (and hidden wealth) of the North Berkeley hills; as my eyes move to the right, the hills back away from the bay before becoming the walls of Livermore valley to the east, the beginnings of Steinbeck country to the south. It's a modern encounter with the landscape, pleasurable not just because unexpected, but because so formally satisfying. The 1991 "Firestorm," whose fifteenth anniversary coincided with the 2006 ASA annual meeting, destroyed some 3,500 buildings and structures, and forever changed the face of at least part of these hills, whose pre-firestorm houses used to be hidden within, indeed seemed at times to be the natural extensions of, the old trees and lush greenery in which they had been built. This is less the case now, in the wake of the fire and the rebuilding that has since taken place; now the houses zigzag up the shorn hillside in neat little lines, like a popcorn garland strung on the Christmas tree. The obtrusions of modern architecture in and against the natural world notwithstanding, it's still a swell landscape, which I know because, when you get closer to the hills, the aesthetic experience changes so radically.

When you get close, you encounter deep canyons, sheer dropoffs, and sharp turns; modern civilization contributes extravagant architecture, obscene wealth, and endless lawsuits. In either natural or artificial order of the particular, the probed landscape discloses its material base, revealing the way in which the scopic vision from afar has the effect of repressing its composite elements. Given and constructed objects, particularized into a more immediate optic, reveal the fictive status of the panoramic fantasia generated from a distance. To be sure, this is often enough the sad encounter with the landscape, its internal logic of melancholia, which, even in its

classic phases in the pictorial and literary traditions of the West, often proceeded either as the nostalgic recollection of the natural world's disappearance, or as the optimistic vision of a natural world good because free from human infringement. My landscape begs slightly different distinctions to be imposed and interrogated. Does the afternoon sun illuminate the beauty of these old hills, or does it, post-firestorm, rather place its human interruption in unavoidable relief? Shall I focus on the aesthetics of the landscape vision, or attend rigorously to the modes of production contained and the social conflict erased by the view of this new event horizon? Is there some *thing* here to be considered, or is its thingness indistinguishable from the historical and abstracting narratives that I summon to organize it? What, in short, is my object of study?

Given my publication record of late, the wrong one. Wondering if the view is one of pale hills, or capitalism's uncanny ability to mystify unequal modes of production and call it an aesthetic experience, doesn't bring me very close to viewing "The United States from Inside and Out: Transnational American Studies," the theme of the 2006 ASA annual meeting. Can one view the conference in the way I've been viewing the East Bay Hills? That is, is there a landscape, some vision of a wholeness, or the idea of a framed totality, that suggests, however tentatively, some sort of a shared experience of the object "the United States" as it manifests itself within the discrete intellectual events of the ASA annual meeting? Shall I go listen to conference papers/objects, or attend to the abstraction/landscape of the conference theme? Is there an "American" landscape even worth talking about anymore? The answer to the last question, offered by many of the panels in the 2006 program, not a few of the papers I heard, and probably many more that I didn't, would seem to be an unequivocal no. "No! In thunder," some remembered American once said in the nineteenth century about another nineteenth-century American, but since neither of these Americans appear anywhere in the 2006 ASA conference program—and probably for good reason—I should probably not pursue that particular close reading at this particular time.¹

The 2006 conference theme of "transnationalism"—its ubiquity in the panels and paper titles, its enforcement by that very program and its organizers, its "organization" of the objects we study into something like a statement of intellectual if not political purpose—presents an invitation to think about the state of affairs we currently call "American" Studies. The bracketing of this term within scare quotes might well be described as tediously aggressive were it not inarguably the case that so much of our metacritical and critical investigations of "the United States from inside and out" have themselves so forcefully called into question the authority of the term "America" as it presides over the intellectual enterprises described by the 2006 ASA annual meeting program, to say nothing of current practices in the field. In her influential 1998 presidential address to the ASA, since reprinted in both *American Quarterly* and a recent essay collection entitled *The Futures of American Studies*, Janice Radway argues that the "work of reconceptualization should now be placed at

the heart of the field's agenda" and then asks "whether this can be adequately done in the current historical context, dominated as it is by a rapidly advancing global neocolonialism that specifically benefits the United States, by an association whose very name still so powerfully evokes the ghostly presence of a fantasmatic, intensely longed-for, unitary American culture."² I will have occasion briefly to return to the trope of the undead as well as the often-cited but seldom-pursued problem of academic neocolonialism below; suffice for now to observe that Radway's penetrating question leads to an equally acute discussion of the problem of the signifier "America" and its characteristic deployment in exceptionalist and nationalist critical narratives about the object(s) we study under the banner of that name. It seems, in short, that we are to study something other than what goes by the name of America, or to study "America" only and perhaps exclusively to the extent that our studies lead us out of its constitutive field-imaginary and into a post-American critical paradise. Speaking of a democracy he took to be a synonym for America, Walt Whitman observed sometime ago that its "fruition . . . resides altogether in the future."³ This essay argues that Whitman's claim continues to preside over some of our very recent pronouncements about the current and future states of America and its study. Indeed, to the extent that the "transnational agenda" presents and depends on American exceptionalism, this essay will argue that transnationalist American Studies amounts to another version of the exceptionalist critical practice it would decry.⁴

This essay does not proceed in any kind of systematic fashion, in no small part because transnationalist methodology itself resists any systematizing schema. Transnationalism might better be described as a set of critical dispositions whose employment is determined in some measure by the problem, text, or object under consideration. Thus a transnationalist critique of Hemingway (modernism, expatriatism, prose style, masculinity, late empire) invites a conceptualization quite different from a transnationalist discussion of Anne Bradstreet (early modern, immigrant, poet, femininity, early empire). There are two overarching dispositions within Americanist transnationalism that will be of interest here: the first concerns the repeatedly stated need to escape, finally, from the prison of American exceptionalism; the second, assumed largely by the first, considers the conceptual arrangement of the static nation-state or national identity with supreme skepticism. So I am concerned more with the metacritical discourse of transnationalism and an intellectual and political set of arguments relative to ongoing disciplinary conversations about the practice of American Studies, as well as the implications, if not impact, made by some of these arguments on the curricular and institutional realities we inhabit as scholars, teachers, and, yes, even administrators. I should also warn the more serious reader that there may be some attempted humor along the way, so I'll just state quite plainly that American Studies has become, in my opinion, a deeply humorless—because so politically charged—field of critical inquiry, and perhaps a bit of injected levity may be permitted without overtly detracting from the

very real seriousness of our political and critical convictions. This essay “intervenes,” therefore, on multiple levels and may not even have much of an argument beyond those particular interventions, although I here promise to attempt one at the end. Now back to Oakland, California.

“I Am Afoot with My Vision”⁵

So here we all are, or were, getting together to talk about America, the Americas, countries that are not an America, countries whose residents dislike America, non-Americans, un-Americans, anti-Americans, new Americans, US-Americans, Americans of different racial and ethnic identifications, colonial Americans, postcolonial Americans, imperial Americans, queer Americans, straight Americans, female Americans, male Americans, transgendered Americans, religious Americans, hyphenated Americans, Americans without borders, Americans in prisons, well-armed Americans, Americans in languages other than English, Americans who read, Americans who can’t read, Americans who don’t vote, Americans who do, Americans who hate the President, Americans who like him, young Americans, Republican Americans, American Democrats, libertarian Americans, old Americans, future Americans, post-Americans, pictures of Americans, pictures by Americans, words about Americans, words by Americans, songs about/by Americans, histories about/by Americans. Let’s just say, provisionally, Americans, and yet we encounter an America that is not. We are, in 2006, trans-America; in 2007, we have become “transhemispheric America.” We pass through and across an America programmatically imagined as critical sleight-of-hand, as unacknowledged imperial ambition, as a factitious liberalism suppressed or hijacked where not pointedly hegemonic in its more forceful articulations. Of late, “America” has served as a kind of airport terminal: a point of departure for what Gunter Lenz calls “a new sense” of American Studies that “should . . . explore the agency of other, non-American cultures in responding to and recodifying the increasing presence of U.S. American mass media and products of popular culture.”⁶

“America” may well be the most frequently occurring proper noun in the ASA conference program, but we seem of late to have convinced ourselves that there is no such thing as an object—“America”—which we collectively and individually study. Instead, we theorize approach, shift paradigms using the clutch of anti-exceptionalist fervor, and choose objects to study that not only trouble the old narratives of American identity but insist on the fantasmatic “constructedness” of those very narratives in the first place. I do not quarrel in principle with the widely accepted claim that nationalism is a “construct” along with everything else, but I do question the extent to which we pass from the “constructedness” of the nation to the idea that it either does or even should lack affective power in the lived reality of the nation and its inhabitants. “From the tautological Americanness of American Studies,” writes Djelal Kadir, “we are witnessing a reconfiguration of American

Studies as an international intellectual enterprise.”⁷ We contemplate the failsafe methodology, a nonlapsarian critical utopia that will not reproduce one of the exclusionary exceptionalist narratives of American culture and experience but will rather account for all of these different Americans and their experiences and will, moreover, do so in such a way so as not to assert a totalizing vision of what America is or has been and extend these “American” values into a universalizing ethic for the world. We are now routinely called to replace our object of study—“America”—not merely with particular objects to study but with a new set of conceptual tools altogether: “to remap,” as Amy Kaplan glosses Kadir, “the terrain of the object of study.”⁸

The old and comforting cartographies will no longer do, as Carolyn Porter so provocatively challenged us to consider the problem of an “America” always and already framed within scare quotes, whose ubiquity “signal[s] the failure of too many of us to ‘rethink’ what we thought we already knew in the context of what we all know that we do not know—how to reconceptualize a field that is clearly no longer mappable by any of the traditional coordinates . . . but that also resists the reconfiguration called for by its own historical and geographical expansion.”⁹ We have, moreover, decided there never really was a legitimate object of study called America, or the United States; there are only fabricated landscapes covering over the reality of unaccountable human experiences whose “Americanness” is only accidental or contingent relative to some still deeper allegiance to or conditioning by the sociopolitical agencies of race, gender, geography, class, sexuality, politics, and, occasionally, religion. Furthermore, our sense of “America” as a spatial whole is part of the problem to be solved: “If the United States can be recuperated as a spatial whole, though, there is a similar danger of reinstating a teleological linear narrative of historical continuity, of viewing American history, even in its imperial dimensions, as a singular march from Columbus to the Puritans to the Monroe Doctrine to 20th-century military interventions to the Bush doctrine.”¹⁰ America, in our current critical and geographical imagination, exists as jejune shorthand at best, one which scratches out countless objects in the service of a monological grand narrative of exceptionalist American identity, whose only apparent destination is the military-political belligerence and constitution-wrecking agenda of George W. Bush’s presidency.¹¹

Where the “New American Studies” (or at least one earlier version thereof), postnational America, borderlands critique, postcolonial America, and the more general turn to cultural studies failed to emancipate us completely from “America,” transnational America will now save us from these collective and repeated errors of the Americanist critical imagination.¹² According to Paul Giles, transnationalist American Studies, and its younger offspring, “transhemispheric American studies,” will put “yet another stake through the heart of the unquiet corpse of American exceptionalism.”¹³ There are many such animated corpses populating the graveyard of our exceptionalist critical necromancy (Puritanism, liberal democracy, manifest

destiny, and so forth); these are only some of the narratives of American exceptionalism we no longer take to be our collective object of study. Merely to wonder whether or not all possible avenues of scholarly investigation into these notions have been exhausted is, of course, to commit the exceptionalist fallacy. Indeed, to criticize America for failing to make good on its promise “is both insular and exceptionalist, as it implicitly makes the United States the bearer of universal values.”¹⁴ In our transnational modality, we will locate America where it most finally belongs: as defined by and constitutive of the postnational forces of globalization, whose primary commitments evade and transcend the affective and political demands made by the nation-state on people who are now, and perhaps always have been, citizens of the world. Only by moving beyond these old categories and into a transnationalist paradigm of Americanist inquiry will we finally free ourselves from those various critical incarcerations that, however well intentioned, contribute to a “unified American studies discipline . . . which usually means one devoted to some version of nationalist study or American exceptionalism.”¹⁵

Is there something uniquely American—indeed, exceptional—about a restless critical search for a failsafe method to do American Studies without repeating the errors of its past or reasserting America in some essentially unchanged form? Transnational/transhemispheric America is only the latest revolution of critical sentiment in a field that has always been in a state of flux where not more specifically defined by what Leo Marx has recently called an “unaccountable extremity . . . inherent in the ur theory of American Studies.”¹⁶ The revolutionary modalities of Americanist critique, that is, extend beyond the expected gestures of totem-tipping and critical throat-clearing; they are sign and symptom of America and its critique. This is, of course, to commit the exceptionalist fallacy—to link the object of critique to the knowledge such critique would produce—but my point here is that, even in our most resolute calls for slaying the exceptionalist beast, we end up doing little more than constructing another enclosure at the zoo in which to house the monster.

The Final Straw

I am a graduate, I strongly suspect, of one of the last generations of PhDs in English whose training in American literature more or less began in relation to Perry Miller’s *New England Mind* and F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*. Even then, the late 1980s or early 1990s, we approached them suspiciously, in no small part because they said things like this, from Matthiessen:

Actually, the pattern of the age’s cultural achievement can be more accurately discerned by remembering that the impulse from Emerson was the most pervasive and far reaching, and that Whitman’s extension of many of Emerson’s values carried far down in the period after the Civil War. We may stay

closest to the pressures of the age, as its creative imaginations responded to them, by going from the transcendental affirmation to its counterstatement by the tragic writers, and by then perceiving how Whitman rode through the years undisturbed by such deep and bitter truths as Melville had found. It would be neater to say that we have in Emerson and Thoreau a thesis, in Hawthorne and Melville its antithesis, and in Whitman a synthesis.¹⁷

The scope of the claim is as ambitious as its population of contributing authors is narrow, and it is some combination of ambition and exclusion that led to the kinds of revisionist inquiry that scholars conceptualized as “the other American Renaissance,” “beneath the American Renaissance,” and “the American Renaissance reconsidered.”¹⁸ The idea that America is to be found and criticized, affirmed and denied in its totality, in the work of four white males who lived and died in the nineteenth century is a notion that had little critical currency even twenty years ago. But we still trade on this specie of critique, maintaining that the white males of the American Renaissance, to say nothing of their twentieth-century celebrants, continue to hold us today in a kind of oracular critical bondage. Paul Giles has found that “while more recent American critics have rejected the narrow dimensions of Mathiessen’s literary canon, they have often reproduced his ideology of cultural nationalism in a different guise.”¹⁹ Giles’s point is that, while such critics may have challenged aspects of what Eric Cheyfitz has called Mathiessen’s “nationalist-formalist version of American exceptionalism,”²⁰ they have succeeded “simply to reinscribe American exceptionalism in a new way.”²¹ Because none of these earlier studies takes issue with the givenness of America, their conclusions lead inexorably—perhaps even jeremiadically, following Bercovitch—into the hypostatization of a nationalist American paradigm. Eric Sundquist’s black counterrenaissance, David Reynolds’s popular pulp, Jane Tompkins’s “scribbling women”: they collectively amount to a totalizing America “oppressively familiar and acculturated, tautologically contained within the established circuits of its own devising” (188).

If it seems, at times, that we’ve made very little progress since Mathiessen, one reason for thinking so is that such interventions—as radical and counterparadigmatic as they seemed back in the day—all subscribe to one or more of the exceptionalist founding myths of America itself—most prominently that of liberalism. This myth now exists beneath the horizon of our contemporary critical regard. One might dwell with considerable aggravation on the disservice done to these works by such a reductive and, indeed, totalizing critical sweep of the hand. All three of these studies remain durably useful and compelling accounts of an earlier literary and cultural period of the United States, if only because these “nationalist-exceptionalist” narratives show how different Americans engaged with

the nation they took to be their object of study. Now mere footnotes in the narrative of American nationalism, they count as little more than affirmations of Mathiessen's own self-evident nationalist "zealous disambiguation"²² of America from the rest of the world. Although Giles focuses his critique on these three studies, both he and other proponents of the transnational/hemispheric turn make the case that a legion of Americanists today continues to indulge the exceptionalist narratives of cultural and critical nationalism that Mathiessen established and his dissenting children unwittingly reaffirmed. It is hard to see this today, based on even a cursory sweep of recent issues of journals like *American Literature*, *American Quarterly*, *American Literary History*, and *Early American Literature*. Leo Marx's recent defense of the "ur-theory" of American Studies can in several senses of the term be described as an "exceptional" article adrift in a sea of what can at this point fairly be described as a post-Americanist internationalist ascendancy.²³

The urgency with which contemporary Americanists are enjoining their colleagues to reject the universalizing narratives of exceptionalism seems to me somewhat misplaced, where not built largely on straw foundations. Scholars like Tompkins, Reynolds, and Sundquist were not, in fact, asserting that the recovered narratives of American women, lowbrow authors, and African Americans claim American values to be "universal," that is, true for the entire planet earth and all of its human residents. *At no point do any of these studies universalize claims about their specific version of a particular period in American culture.* Tompkins, for one, quite famously delimited the conceptual sweep of her main argument by grounding interpretive activity in a pragmatic hermeneutic of "cultural work." They were, rather, building cases for various individuals and groups hitherto marginalized by American cultural and political authority to be considered as urgent participants in United States culture-making (and, as the case often was, unmaking). Giles and others are correct to observe that such critiques do not take issue with the givenness, arguably the "rightness," of American ideals of liberalism, revolution, freedom, and so forth. But he and other transnationalist enthusiasts are quite wrong to translate these specific critiques of American cultural history and literature into would-be "universalizing" *critical* gestures that would subsume the rest of the world under the national banner of America. Observing tendencies in American culture, and assigning those tendencies places within (and also without) America as the object of study, does not amount to asserting a Kantian deontological ethic for all of humanity. So let us begin by dispensing with factitious claims about "universalist" critique undertaken by unrepentant exceptionalist necromancers: arguing that, for example, William Faulkner is interested in "American southernness" does not amount to a critic seizing the podium and singing "God Bless America."²⁴

As such, too much criticism of "nationalist-exceptionalist" Americanist critique proceeds as straw argument, either attacking earlier field-formation statements from such notable and long-dead scholars as Vernon Parrington, R. P. Blackmur, and F. O. Matthiessen, or making generalized and unsubstantiated claims

about contemporary Americanists pursuing the nationalist-exceptionalist dream with, apparently, great zeal. Robyn Wiegman and Donald Pease organize their introduction to *The Futures of American Studies* around a 1979 field-assessment essay by Gene Wise, suggesting that Wise's theory of "paradigm drama" has held American Studies in a vice-like grip from which the essays of their volume will release us.²⁵ In "What's in a Name?" Radway cites essays by Robert Spiller, written in 1960 and 1973 respectively, as examples of the urgent and apparently contemporary exceptionalism we need finally to expunge.²⁶ In 1973, Spiller did indeed make this claim: "There is now in existence a well-formed total and autonomous American culture and it is our business to find out just what it is, how it came into being, how it functions, and how it should be studied, researched and taught."²⁷ The first part of the claim is, of course, indefensible, and, I would hazard further, one that would be difficult to find replicated in any significant study written by any US-based Americanist in the last thirty years or so.²⁸ Making it our business to figure out, with Gene Wise, how "America" came into being and how it functions today does not seem like such a bad idea, so long as the "well-formed and autonomous American culture" does not serve as our point of departure and still less as its destination. As for the final claim, that we must establish the correct way to study, research, and teach this thing America, contemporary advocates of transnationalist America could fairly be accused—I do so below—of enjoining a distressingly similar imperative.²⁹ In much recent theorizing of transnationalism (and in earlier work-ups of postnationalism and border studies, among others), there is a tendency to resurrect earlier and largely discarded—where even remembered—field statements of what American Studies is or should be, and to resurrect these monsters in the service of self-authorizing critique.³⁰

With the publication of *Ideology and Classic American Literature* in 1986 and *The New American Studies* in 1991, the political agency of Americanist critique became an explicitly theorized component of the business of American literary and cultural study. This isn't to say that "classic" American literary study or its African American or "area studies" successors were politically neutral in their intellectual encounters with America; far from it. Rather these essay anthologies established unequivocally the mutual imbrication of literary and critical agencies. Philip Fisher's introduction to *The New American Studies* proves remarkably durable in its critique of the suppressed political interiority of the classic period in American Studies. As he puts it,

Beginning with the work of Perry Miller in the late thirties, the explanation of America as a long history of Puritan hope and decline resulted from the fact that academic intellectuals, looking into the past to find not necessarily its chief actors but precisely those congenial figures whose analytic and critical stance most resembled their own, discovered in the Puritan writers what was for them the most intelligible feature of the past. . . . They too were intellectuals, engaged

in holding up a mirror of admonition or exhortation to their society. In theocratic New England they found embodied the secret self-image of all intellectual cultures, a society in which critics and intellectuals were not marginal, but actually in power.³¹

This is, in one view, an *ad hominem* critique of the worst kind: Perry Miller studied Puritans because they enjoyed a cultural power he envied and craved, and this envious regard of Puritan cultural authority conditions the claims Miller made about their impact on American intellectual history. Fisher's claim, on reconsideration, says something quite persuasive about the historical role of intellectual labor in the United States. Intellectuals are marginal, ivory-tower academics even more so; what's not to like about a theocracy of overeducated philosopher-kings whose metaphysical conceits enjoyed the rule of law? In America, Fisher continues, "lay . . . a utopian or even moral radicalism combined with or concealing the resentment of artists and intellectuals at their rather small voice in a national life dominated by business and politics" (xi). The agency of art and critique collapses here into a shared politics of knowing resentment; our critique of American art enables our critique of the nation whose art/critique it ignores with the certainty of faith. Americanists have been criticized for taking up an oppositional position relative to their object of study, but this particular perspective misses the irony of Fisher's position: that, in equating text and critique in this way, the text's study and its production end up looking a lot alike.³² This is, of course, one of Fisher's points relative to the achievement of Perry Miller. But it is also a point worth thinking about again relative to our current preoccupation with articulating a critical paradigm whose objects and politics of study coincide without reiterating the discarded critical narratives of the past. Fisher's Miller studied his objects because they reflexively asserted his own critical sensibility onto and as the condition of "America" itself. Granting for the sake of argument that there is some truth to Fisher's reading of Miller and the critical tradition he inaugurates and embodies, I offer as hypothesis, at the midway point of this essay, that our current methodological commitments are no less a politics of projection than those Fisher tucks safely away in the earlier "classic" tradition. "I write with a sense of urgency," begins Amy Kaplan in her 2003 presidential address to the ASA, an address which goes on to encourage Americanists to locate their research and critique at the center of international crisis and domestic conflict in which the US government plays a significant part.³³ Calls for politically informed if not explicitly activist cultural critique are nothing new, of course, but proponents of the transnationalist agenda have repeatedly linked nontransnationalized Americanist inquiry, which sustains the "nationalist-exceptionalist" model of American Studies, to the anodyne, conservative, or reactionary critical and real politics of the nation.³⁴ How we study America today, compelled by the urgency of contemporary politics, must follow from the need to intervene into contemporary political and cultural

crises. No less so for us than for a young man living in Africa pondering his troubled nation from afar, the location (or locationlessness) of America in the world requires our most urgent attention. We are Perry Miller.³⁵

The Nation under Erasure

We had only been on the “New Americanist” highway for a few years before we took a postnational turn. Not merely with the publication of two high-profile essay collections, *Revisionary Interventions in the Americanist Canon* and *Post-National Narratives* (both edited by Donald Pease), but with a slew of other books and articles throughout the 1990s, postnationalist critique went further than any other revisionist position in exposing the nationalist framework within which Americanist cultural study had always operated. A couple of quotations here:

American literary study in the dominant institutional form it has taken to the present moment has exhausted itself—hence the insurgence of multicultural studies—and that in order to energize itself American literary study must take the form of an *Americas Cultural Studies* that breaks decisively with the American exceptionalism that has constituted in one way or another the dominant form.³⁶

many of the most compelling postnationalist challenges to the study of the Americas as primarily (if not exclusively) coherent nation-states are the consequences of the impact of cultural studies on American studies and related area[s]. . . . the relevance of a postnationalist perspective for the new American studies is evident in the new work being done on U.S. national ideology and its concomitant imperialist ambitions in North America, Latin American, and outside the Western hemisphere.³⁷

After postnationalism—I know, a hideous redundancy—the nation becomes the overdetermined agent of prescriptive literary and cultural possibility, as well as the object of critique itself. While it may well be the case that the postnationalist attack on the nation has to some extent both overdetermined and underanalyzed the power of the nation to organize affect in both productive and critical modes, there is little doubt that the concept of the nation and/or nationalist affect has assumed a prominence in contemporary Americanist criticism equal to or even greater than it ever achieved even in the “classic” phase of American literary criticism. Although it may have been true that earlier schools of criticism assumed the natural givenness of the nation, postnational critique brought the determinative power of the nation into inescapably visible relief and argued that the category of the nation itself was a

conceptual frame, which perforce assumed a nearly prophetic critical agency over literary and cultural critique undertaken under the Name of the Nation. At no point has “the nation” ever been more realized, which is to say reified, than under the sign of postnationalism’s designation of nationalism’s authoritative agency.

In 2002, Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman coedited *The Futures of American Studies*, a volume whose essays individually and collectively “deliver the future mutations of American Studies from a past mode of representation in which it was incubating” and so provide the “portals through which alternative futures will have entered American studies.”³⁸ If the monstrous birth metaphor does not immediately suggest itself, it may well be because it is being swaddled in a blanket of utopic optimism. Unlike all past attempts to negotiate the “paradigm drama” that American Studies has always staged, this volume imagines Americanist practice in terms that do not merely reiterate or reimagine unacceptable versions of our Americanist past; indeed, the multiple significations on “America” in this anterior heterotopic American Studies will finally emancipate us from our subordination to paradigmatic narratives that tell us what or what not to study or say about an “America” we can no longer assume. The new “radical imaginary” (as good an academic description of a ghost as I can come up with) of American Studies “announces the possibility of a break from previous historical determinations,” a break that will “exploit the radical imaginary and construct multiple pasts and imagine disparate futures out of nonsynchronous historical materials embedded within American studies as a heterotopia” (22). Pease and Wiegman’s introduction is far more complex than this redaction can detail. Suffice it to observe the optimistic political rhetoric of the claims, a rhetoric which stakes (as did Perry Miller so many years ago) the vantage point of intellectual counternarrative as its starting point, a counternarrative with a disruptive anti-institutional critique that promises nothing less than futurity’s release from the suffocating influences of historical burden and politically suspect critical hegemony. We will no longer revisit or restage the errors of the past; our futures are more or less what we make of them and, as it turns out, those futures are presently available to us: “[these essays] inhabit the problematic of present futures and past presents . . . in [their] unfinished encounter with the future that American studies now occupies” (23).

The first and arguably most disabling problem of this sort of methodological prognosticating is that it invariably proposes a paradigm in the service of releasing us from servitude to paradigmatic authority. This paradigm involves engaging in what they call a “posthegemonic” critique outside “the already constituted categories within the institutional boundaries” of American Studies that will “link this outside with the disruptive temporalities of the social movements traversing the field” (22–23). This radical imaginary will consider aspects of American culture in terms of contemporary social movements—migrations, globalizations, gender critique, anticapitalism, antiracism, and so forth—but do so in such a way that the old founding narratives of the nation will not determine or evaluate the outcome of

critique or the possibility for agency such critique is intended to provide. Fair enough, although I would offer that people have been trying to do things like this for some time now, and in any case the Pease and Kaplan introduction is more or less proscribing the terms of legitimate critical agency in the future-which-is-the-now of American Studies.³⁹

The second problem with this account stems from its emancipatory gestures. The essay's desire to release the present from the burden of the past in order to create unanticipated possibilities for a new community of scholars and Americans, freed from the carceral narratives of that past, reanimates one of the oldest and most familiar narratives of American national self-fashioning, a story told from the American Revolution to Civil Rights and beyond by, literally, a legion of American authors, thinkers, activists, and politicians, to say nothing of soccer moms, schoolteachers, parish priests, and the young queer-identified Filipino man who cut my hair at a salon near the 2006 American Studies Association conference hotel in Oakland, California. If we substitute "England" and "the United States of America" for "institutional boundaries" and the "futures of American studies" respectively, we can see pretty clearly that this newest version of Americanist critique remains at least conceptually beholden to one of America's most powerful mythological narratives of national identity: the new nation rising from the ashes of the historical house burned down by the revolutionary arson of the present. Susie O'Brien has observed that "the figure of the American Adam, supposedly vanquished by the deconstructive forces of postnationalism, rises shakily to his feet in the heroic stance of the New Americanist."⁴⁰ In related fashion, Pease and Wiegman commit their essay to imagining an Americanist agency always-in-process, always unfinished, and in some latter-day stage of development: it is "part of an unfinished encounter with the emergence of futurity."⁴¹ It is America and Americanist critique as unfinished business, as the always not-yet, awaiting its apotheosis and fulfillment in a critical syntax that, however emancipated from either the past or God or Locke, nonetheless proposes a sociocritical eschatology familiar to readers of Whitman's "Democratic Vistas": "I submit, therefore," remarks Whitman, "that the fruition of democracy, on aught like a grand scale, resides altogether in the future."⁴² The "future" of American Studies reenters as its repudiated, if still haunting, originary ghost.

Having approvingly mentioned Leo Marx's recent intervention into the transnational debate, it is only fair to consider its critique. Appearing as part of the 2005 forum on transnationalism in *American Literary History*, George Lipsitz's "Our America" takes issue with Marx for insisting on the value of a "unified American studies" critical agenda. Although Lipsitz's pointed and principled rejoinder suggests there is "common ground" between Marx's defense of the coherence of American Studies and transnationalist critique's deconstruction of it, he detects a significant difference between the older American Studies "ur-theory" and its dissenting replacements. Marx and his "unified field" successors "work exclusively within the terrain of citizenship and national purpose," which will possibly, again quoting

Lipsitz, “constrain the culture of America to a narrow exercise in militaristic, racist, and plutocratic self-justification.”⁴³ The “unified studies” model depends on a “binaristic” and exclusionary vision, which can only deal with those texts and topoi that fit within a coherent vision of the field itself underwritten by the nationalist narrative (“national purpose”) that gives rise to it. While it is fair to say that the disciplinary coherence of American Studies emerges largely in reference to exceptionalist narratives of national identity, it is not fair to say that the only outcome of such studies is a racist, xenophobic, and citizens-only political compact. Some allowance must be made for the reductiveness that always accompanies polemic, but surely the trajectory implied here—that an “ur-theory” of academic Americanist disciplinarity leads to Abu-Ghraib—is one we cannot afford to pass without comment.

Between the 2002 publication date of *The Futures of American Studies* on the one hand, and our inveterately restless search for better ways to think about American Studies method and practice on the other, is it fair to say that the individual and collective search for a paradigmatic solution to our Americanist problems remains unfinished business? Would it be apposite, in assuming an affirmative answer to this question, to propose, first of all, that this unfinished critical project is probably a good thing, and that, second, retaining some sense of “America” at the center of Americanist inquiry can be something other than a retrograde commitment to conservative politics and triumphalist nationalism? In the spirit of Amy Kaplan’s “Call for a Truce” between those (largely unnamed and infrequently published) recusants who would subscribe to an “ur-theory” of American Studies and those (frequently published and often cited) proponents of transnationalism,⁴⁴ I ask that we all just think a little bit before we accuse each other of abetting reactionary politics because we study certain objects or place them in certain conceptual frames. I would offer that the endless search for the new (the original), the pure (the innocent), and the just (the Right) is the most abidingly *American* way to go about doing things that this Americanist can think of. Although launched under the banner of an antinationalist dream, a great deal of “post-Americanist” critique either unwittingly or unwillingly reaffirms some of the very narratives of America otherwise dismissed as nationalist ideology and politically insane delirium. Is it even possible to think “America” without assuming the burden of its pressing and affective nation-ness? Enter transnationalism: our latest critical messiah.

Are We Being Transnational Yet?

Judging from the 2006 ASA conference program, one would be inclined to think so, but the actual meaning of the term remains somewhat evasive, even having had the benefit of the conference and having recently finished teaching a graduate seminar on the topic. What is transnationalism? Can it be something like Hawthorne sitting in a London consular office writing a novel about young Americans set in Italy? Perhaps,

although Hawthorne has become one of those canonical objects standing in dubiously isomorphic relation to the “institutional foundations” of exceptionalist American Studies; the same would have to be conceded relative to Anglophile queer Henry James and his legion of alienated Americans in Europe. How about Martin Delaney imagining the conditions of African American revolution and state establishment in a place other than the United States? With its link of racial and democratic politics, to say nothing of its forthright attack on the founding political hypocrisies of the United States, this is a more promising proposition, although I suspect it would have to answer to the charge of “African American exceptionalism” that has emerged in the wake of Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* and the pan-African critique of the black diaspora. So what about the widespread consumption of Japanese anime and Chinese martial-arts films in the United States, or, obversely, the staging of “Angels in America” in Tokyo, or the underground life of the internet in mainland China? These examples are probably more representative of the kinds of objects and artifacts discussed at the 2006 ASA conference, but they do not, in and of themselves, provide us with any paradigmatic account of transnationalism.

In a recent essay that concedes certain “blind spots” in the transnationalization of American Studies, Donald Pease offers the following:

Rather than construing the territorial nation-state as the instrument for evaluating and representing America’s global inter-relationships, this transnational model called for the reconceptualization of social movements as models for transnational understandings of cultural and political processes as passing back and forth between disparate cultural systems, whose analyses required the retrieval of forgotten histories and the imagining of new geographies. In adopting this transnational model of knowledge production, I recommended that the focus of scholarly attention be shifted away from US culture and society as an identifiable unit so as to effect a redescription of the US as inhabiting but one node in a vast interlocking network of commercial, political, and cultural forces.⁴⁵

This is probably one of the better enactments of transnational conceptualization because it succinctly describes both the problems and its solution. One problem is taking “US culture and society as an identifiable unit.” Another is the history of Americanists generating knowledge about this unit based on an unquestioned assumption of exceptionalist modes of America-making. Against both this “identifiable unit” and critical unawareness, Pease advises we read reconceptualized “social movements as models for transnational understandings of cultural and political processes as passing back and forth between disparate cultural systems.” So rather than national affect we study social effect, and we do so in a framework

essentially comparative in nature: different (“disparate”) cultures will offer relational viewpoints on the “social,” whose “movements” will reveal “understandings of cultural and political processes” hitherto erased by exceptionalist versions of America. So in a postexceptionalist study of, say, women’s rights, we consider its history and texts across national boundaries (Great Britain, Mexico, Canada, the US) whose respective cultural and political processes also “pass back and forth” across these now less-significant national boundaries “in a vast interlocking network of commercial, political, and cultural forces.” The ambition here is no less breathtaking than that of Perry Miller or F. O. Matthiessen in their day, and setting aside the obvious problem—women’s rights as both history and active movement looks decidedly different in each of these transnationalized “nodes” (AKA nations)—we might observe at least provisionally that transnational American Studies, at least as formulated here, demands an encyclopedic disciplinary extension to say nothing of a decidedly global reach. Is it only me, or does this sound uncomfortably like the literary critical equivalent of the World Trade Organization?⁴⁶

Others have sounded this caution as well. Masao Miyoshi has argued, for example, that the transnationalization of capital across the globe has spawned a pervasive “neocolonialism,” which extends the tendrils of transnational corporate power into ever more remote locations spanning the globe.⁴⁷ Transnational capitalism thus shares with postnational critique a skeptical view of national borders and agents and their abilities to regulate either market forces or cultural outcomes. Elena Glasberg suggests with Miyoshi that “TNCs [transnational corporations] need to be investigated as key operators in the fundamental realignment of capital flows and cultural and geographic boundaries in which nation-states seem to recede from power even while retaining a nostalgic appeal on the level of representation of their populations.”⁴⁸ Aihwa Ong agrees, arguing that “a neoliberal ethos is now transforming citizens into self-governing subjects whose human capital becomes a passport toward realizing individual freedom in diverse transnational realms.”⁴⁹ The transnationalization of capital perforce extends the history of imperialism under the aegis of neocolonial economics. At the same time, it reasserts “new (or very old) forms of alternative nation building” (233). Transnationalism thus makes possible a symbolic order of representation that consolidates its actions under a nationalist imaginary, which, however borderless or “deterritorialized,” nonetheless remains committed in some of its more extreme forms “to remake existing nation-states and establish new nations” (233). These reservations notwithstanding, we can only assume that the transnational American Studies to come will be doing something other than abetting the economic authority of national borders, and the political authority of territorial sovereignties (and their abilities to enforce regulatory compliance for things like labor practices and the environment) that neoliberal economic and political theory has argued to be the “end of history” and the fulfillment of western economics. The mimetic fit between transnationalized American Studies and the recent history of US geopolitics (foreign policy, diplomatic

initiatives, and military interventions into other countries) is too close to be easily denied.

In continuing a discussion of what transnationalism is not, we can observe that it must not be comparative literature. With its pedagogical and critical dependence on national traditions whose integrity is assumed as a point of departure, comp. lit. embodies the problems of nationally identified critical practices that the transnationalization of American Studies seeks to solve. In a work that pursues a “comparative style”⁵⁰ of considering American and British literature alongside one another, Paul Giles makes the case that his “comparative methodology here should be seen as significantly different from that quest for the ‘ideal universality,’ in René Wellek’s phrase, characteristic of comparative literature when the subject began to flourish in the American academy during the 1950s” (11–12). Giles is more interested in a method that “works to refract . . . identities through its medium of diffusion and dispersal” (196). The newer vocabulary of transnational America includes terms like “comparatist” and “comparativist,” thereby producing, in their simultaneous citation and evasion of the term “comparative,” a critical syntax that “complicate[s] comparative literature’s conventional reliance on the national as a default container for literary texts.”⁵¹ Implicit in transnational comparativism, then, is a critique of the traditional modes of comparative literature, even those forms of the discipline no longer beholden to the 1963 formulations of René Wellek.⁵² In no longer recognizing the integrity of national borders whether conceptually or pedagogically deployed, comparativist transnationalist critique “must problematize the older area designations that are often subsumed wholesale into their own transnational configurations.”⁵³ These “older area designations”—the discrete national disciplinary imaginaries that anchor comparative literature methodology—reflect and replicate the nationalist logic of cultural critique. Comparative literature therefore emerges as the bigger problem of persistent nationalist disciplinarity, which American transnationalism will help solve. Not only must American Studies become transnational, so, it seems, must everyone else.⁵⁴

It appears at times that academic researchers in the humanities and the social sciences need to become like the postexceptionalist Americanists that mostly American-based American Studies transnationalist practitioners are theorizing. Where we decry the presumptive “universality” of America as a bounded, stable, and unchanging nation, it would appear that an America unleashed from its nationalist imaginary will provide a template for how everyone else will do transnationalized cultural studies. How is this not a form of academic imperialism? Others have asked the same question in the service, nonetheless, of promoting both postnational and transnational paradigms. Gregory Jay wrote as early as 1991 that the postnational comparatist model “could end up repeating the history of colonial imperialism at the level of academic study.”⁵⁵ In 1994, Carolyn Porter capably identified the potential emergence of a new kind of academic imperialism undertaken by well-intentioned Americanists, optimistically finding in the work of

some critics “the promise of approaching America’s literature as the very opposite of parochial or insulated or exceptional, without thereby assuming a global or imperialist perspective.”⁵⁶ A few years later (in the essay later republished in *The Futures of American Studies*), John Carlos Rowe worried that “the new American studies threatens its own kind of cultural imperialism, a tendency often overlooked even by the most ideologically attentive scholars.”⁵⁷ In his ASA presidential address, Emory Elliott notes, “The recent and continuing development of diasporic and transnational studies can also be seen as yet another infringement upon territories already occupied by scholars doing similar work in other departments and programs.”⁵⁸

In spite of these reservations, essay after essay continues to expand the territorial designations of “America,” locating it in other countries (“including Canada”⁵⁹), other continents (South America is frequently named), and, now, even other hemispheres.⁶⁰ In his response to Elliott’s ASA presidential address, Winfried Fluck considers the problem of “inside and outside” in the study of the United States, noting that “on occasion, outside and inside may even be ironically inverted, as for example when the ASA encourages scholars from the outside to introduce new perspectives, and these scholars oblige by confirming the need for transnationalism as it has been developed as a theoretical paradigm within the United States.”⁶¹ Many of us are aware that the ASA has in recent years promoted this new brand of inclusiveness, inviting non-US-based scholars to participate in the annual meeting, and sponsoring panels at the meetings that directly address questions of international American Studies. As a Canadian-based academic, I applaud the gesture and agree that an internationalized conversation about American Studies will benefit all of us. But an internationalized cohort of Americanist practitioners does not, in and of itself, mean that the object of study is inter- or transnationalized as a consequence. What is more, to the extent that the “international” exists on the margin of the “national,” the imagined collapse of those divisions could quite seamlessly reinstall the metropole-province (“America from inside and out”) dyad of colonialist imperial relations. Winfried Fluck deftly describes the “self-provincialization” that occurs when non-US-based scholars aggressively adopt “cutting edge” theories of transnationalism coming out of the United States (25). The good ship transnationalism will traverse ever-widening oceans of a denationalized American Studies agenda emerging, for the most part, from American-based academics publishing in American-based university presses and journals.

The curricular reorganization of the American literary and cultural studies classroom is another desired consequence of transnationalist projection. Needless to say, the “canon wars” as they relate to United States literatures have raged for a long time and have in some ways contributed to our current theories about transnationalism; it would be impossible, of course, to rehearse those debates here. Sophia McClennen puts a deft finger on the curriculum problem when she speculates

that “if inter-American studies are to effectively dislocate the United States from the center of the hemisphere’s academic purview, then comparisons of works from within Latin America should also form part of the work of inter-American studies.”⁶² Transnational critique of American Studies takes as a starting point the notion that the curricular life of American Studies begins and ends with a bounded, stable, autonomous, exclusive, and never-changing United States literature and culture. While it may be true that, in US-based departments of English, history, American Studies, and many of the social sciences, courses about the United States do indeed occupy many pages of academic calendars published from sea to shining sea, they do not, however, in countries that happen not to be the US. In non-US countries, American Studies is often a marginal pursuit, an afterthought, an optional requirement for the major. It is only in the United States that “America” emerges as a curricular behemoth, which suggests that the need to “dislocate” America from the “hemisphere’s academic purview” is a beast that mostly US-based American Studies practitioners feel an urgent need to disembowel. Indeed, to propose that US American Studies dominates “the hemisphere” is to advance an inveterately US-based—might we even say, exceptionalist—view of the problem. Quite a few countries—even Canada, which exists in the shadow of the United States in a way few US-based Americanists can even begin to recognize—pursue academic studies in which the United States counts for very little in terms of tenure-stream appointments, resource allocation, and curricular demands. Ironically, some of the (very few) studies that fret about a new “Monroe Doctrine” replacing the old national discretions perforce assert a transnational field-imaginary that has relevance only in the territorially specific entity whose disciplinary imaginary we are all supposed to be getting away from: namely, the United States of America.

In some Canadian universities, to illustrate the point further, American and Canadian literature used to be taught as parts of the same course; “North American Studies” or “Inter-Americas Studies” used to be the norm. Part of the purpose of the disarticulation exercise was to help students develop a sense of what may (or, as the case could also be, may not) have constituted differences between these two literary traditions and the nations they were then believed to represent.⁶³ The disarticulation of the two national traditions and their confinement in separate courses was in large part undertaken as much to provide elbow room for Canadian literary studies to develop its own disciplinary arrangements as it was to reflect the sense that many Canadians have that they are not, in fact, Americans, and that the respective literatures tell us so. As such, we may note (and some no doubt decry) that Canada has its own version of “nationalist-exceptionalism,” one which often takes the form of wondering and worrying about what defines Canada and its peoples as a nation separately from its neighbors to the south. Do a universal healthcare system, a naturally occurring obsession with hockey, and a tendency to drink better beer make a nation? Is there a case to be made that Margaret Atwood’s dystopic novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* belongs on one syllabus and not the other? To ask the question is to

indulge the nationalist-exceptionalist fantasy, but where Americanists today assume an urgent need to dematerialize the nation and expunge its disciplinary authority, many Canadians—and ordinary ones at that—pursue with equal urgency the quarry of the defined nation, long an elusive creature of the Canadian cultural imagination. Indeed, some might argue that in a country where national identity has always been either weakly or negatively articulated (healthcare system in the former, not American in the latter), the need to articulate what makes a country unique persists with an “urgency” most Americans would find unnecessary to make for themselves, but which increasing numbers of mostly US-based Americanists are implicitly assuring Canadianists they should probably stop doing if they want to be more like transnational Americanist critics. This is to say that the deconstruction of “America” under the agency of the transnational is an academic and even political problem that exists largely within the house of American Studies itself, and which too many of us today are implicitly redesigning as a new architecture for studying literary and cultural objects the world over.

In her introductory polemic to the special issue on transnationalism in *American Literary History*, Wai Chee Dimock asks if the linking of “*transnational, citizenship, and humanities*” can “bring anything new” to our consideration of America.⁶⁴ For what it’s worth, I would offer that the quest for the “new,” what she later calls an “innovation” that “is now coming from fields other than our own” (220), sounds an inveterately American clarion call for *native* inventiveness. To be sure, Dimock is not intentionally lamenting American Studies’ parasitic reliance on fields like population ethnography. Be that as it may, one suspects that her real target is the apparently still static category of American literature: “Nowhere is the adjective *American* more secure than when it is offered as *American literature*; nowhere is it more naturalized, more reflexively affirmed as inviolate. American literature is a self-evident field, as American physics and American biology are not” (223). Against this reflexive self-evidence, Dimock proposes the categories “*prenational, subnational, and transnational*” as a way to “significantly transform” American literary study “simply by suspending its default (which is to say, nation-based) form of aggregation and engaging its database as material not yet classified” (226, emphasis original). Such unclassified data would include—and one imagines this to be a partial list—“world religions . . . [and] new expressive genres such as rock and roll” (226). Dimock describes such cultural domains as “uncharted waters” (226), although I suspect not a few scholars working in disciplines like religion and music history might already possess some good maps here. More problematically, Dimock, like Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman before her, locates this unrealized post/transnational potential in the future anterior, in the “not yet” spatiotemporal domain of a critical inquiry that need only not commit the nation-based sins of the Americanist past in order to realize its ultimate potential as transnational critical apotheosis. “Facing west from California’s shores,” begins Whitman, “Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound”⁶⁵: the restless search for

a post- or transnational chiliarad ends up redeploying some very familiar gestures of the American literature construct it would deny.

The Object of Study

Amy Kaplan has recently called for a “truce” between those she sees advancing the anti-exceptionalist banner and those she sees resisting it. In Kaplan’s view, the debate can be seen largely in generational terms, as older scholars dismayed with the present state of things—a discipline without a center, an “anti-America” critical edge, a denial of mythic or cultural coherence—reject a younger generation’s interest in viewing America from transnational, global, or “international” perspectives (the terms are often used interchangeably).⁶⁶ Kaplan’s is a noble gesture: where she rightly understands that “the need to attack the founding fathers of the field to clear space for new work seems outworn and unproductive” (141), it is also the case that totem-tipping and oedipal homicide remain inevitable critical gestures, not least because graduate students and young scholars alike are routinely told to demonstrate clearly how they differ from and offer genuine alternatives to claims already made about this or that author or discipline. Because these scholars and those texts reiterate certain overly familiar claims about an “America” we all already know about, then it must be the case that it is the field itself—the discipline that is American Studies and the discipline it imposes on us—that must be “interrogated” more closely if we are ever to find anything new or useful or compelling to say about America, “America,” or its academic study. The desire for new ideas, better ways of doing things, improvement on tradition, the shocking cognitive delight of the unexpected—“Hello Central!” as Twain sarcastically put it—animates our methodological adventures as much as do our political commitments or intellectual unease with US-centric studies of, well, US-centric culture. While transnationalism offers us a paradigmatic shift in perspective, it is clearly part of the narrative of the study of the United States, exceptionalist in both its origin and outcome regardless of the object(s) it studies or claims not to study. The transnational claim of critical emancipation from “America” is the sign of America itself.

It is the affect of the nation-state, conceived as both historically and presently vital, that to my mind encourages us to keep the nation in view, and to do so without universalizing the exceptionalist narratives that do, indeed, animate America’s national imaginaries. In a transnationalized encounter with, for example, Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” we take Eric Sundquist’s brilliant reading of the novella’s connection to New World, specifically Caribbean, slave revolution as our point of critical departure.⁶⁷ Melville’s New England narrator disappears into the interstices between “American” and “black” revolutionary ideology, exposing in his guileless noncomprehension the dissonance that existed in Melville’s America between various desires for that state of individual freedom both defined and withheld by the

nation along racially demarcated lines of legal and political authority. In this reading, narrative outcome—the containment of slave insurrection—and political life—the legal erasure of black personhood—are the twinned results of the same national imaginary. Melville seems to have been something of a transnationalist himself; however, he relocates this dramatic double encounter with America’s unresolved national demons to the geopolitical margins of Europe’s imperial past. The canonical American author internationalizes the story of American race-slavery, but it is equally clear that he does so in order to dramatize some exceptionally American problems and, it should be added, hopes: the hope to realize America’s revolutionary claim on liberty; the hope to maintain a state of moral innocence in the face of catastrophic evidence of its corruption; the hope to recognize black Americans as sovereign persons when legal and political authority found otherwise; the hope, finally, to tell a story about America that would not merely result in the story of America’s undoing. The individual’s desire for the nation-state’s recognition of his or her personhood tells indeed a “universal” story about the world, but in this case that story is being told from a particular American perspective, which is, all things taken together, somewhat unique and exceptional, and it is the very ambition of that national affect whose interior life Americanists explore.

Reading Melville’s novella of American slavery undone and refashioned gives us surprising purchase on a more recent text of the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, published in 2004.⁶⁸ Mandated by Congress, over the objections of the George W. Bush presidency, the Commission and its *Report* dwell in the familiar precincts of American storytelling and American ideology. We see, following “Benito Cereno,” how American jurisprudence manufactures its others (the “illegal” revolution of slaves becomes the “illegal” terrorism of the 9/11 assailants); how the American ideology of freedom sustains carceral practices (Amasa Delano’s liberality depends on where it doesn’t create the conditions of marginalized resentment); and how the story of one nation under God carries with it the traces (and the desired elimination of those traces) of supranational and intranational practices (the international traffic in slaves becomes the neocolonial imperialism of contemporary global geopolitics). Reading in a confessedly exceptionalist and transhistorical way, we see how both certain historical practices of American slavery and contemporary practices of terrorism’s rhetorical management depend on the persistent affect of an exceptionalist American ideology.

Transnationalized Americanist study need not erase either the tug of national affect or the effects of national power on individuals, in order to identify and criticize those moments, movements, texts, or objects of Americanist study. To do so would be to repudiate the responsibility and answerability of the United States of America to the world of which it is only a part. From the moment of Winthrop’s “Modell of Christian Charity”—a text which defined New England Puritan exceptionalism as the cause for the world at large—to Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*—surely a text that establishes revolutionary democracy as America’s most exceptionalist narrative—to

David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured People of America*—a jeremiad of the first order, which criticized American practices only to insist on the revolutionary potential of its ideals—the US has imagined itself as a nation responsible to the human demand for things Americans eventually came to take for granted.

Studying these and countless other texts—familiar and not, beloved and loathed, progressive and reactionary—can and indeed should lead to precisely the kinds of progressive political critique the transnationalist agenda claims possible only by collapsing a nation-based critical tent. Without that national construct, understood as both practice and theory, I submit, the political value of Americanist inquiry loses far more than it gains. If an undisturbed nationalism and the regressive politics it inspires are the real monsters we would together subdue, then it only makes sense to take the potential monstrosity of the nation seriously enough to believe it: know it, study it, interpret it, challenge it, parry its attacks, disbelieve its feints, unravel its ruses. In short, keep the actual enemy in view.

Notes

¹ The 2006 Annual Meeting Program is as remarkable for what it says as for what it does not. There is, for example, mention of exactly two “canonical” nineteenth-century authors in the entire program (Tocqueville and Twain). On the other hand, the term “transnational” appears in sixty-eight panel titles and in eighty-seven individual presentation titles.

² Jan Radway, “What’s in a Name?” *The Futures of American Studies*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 51.

³ Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” in *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. James E. Miller (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 475.

⁴ I put “transnational agenda” in quotation marks to indicate my unease with the term’s invitation to conspiratorial thinking. For what it is worth, the term was actually supplied to me by an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this essay.

⁵ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in Miller, *Complete Poetry*, 48.

⁶ Günter H. Lenz, “Toward a Dialogics of International American Culture Studies: Transnationality, Border Discourses, and Public Culture(s),” in Pease and Wiegman, *Futures of American Studies*, 475.

⁷ Djelal Kadir, “Defending America against Its Devotees,” in *How Far Is America from Here? Selected Proceedings of the First World Congress of the International American Studies Association, 22–24 May 2003*, ed. Theo D’haen, Paul Giles, Djelal Kadir, and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 14.

⁸ Amy Kaplan, “The Tenacious Grasp of American Exceptionalism: A Response to Djelal Kadir, ‘Defending America against Its Devotees,’” *Comparative American Studies* 2, no. 2 (2004): 154. See also Djelal Kadir, “Introduction: America and Its Studies,” *PMLA* 118, no. 1 (2003): 9–24.

⁹ Carolyn Porter, "What We Know That We Don't Know: Remapping American Studies," *American Literary History* 6, no. 3 (1994): 476.

¹⁰ Kaplan, "Tenacious Grasp," 155.

¹¹ A more recent example of the kind of criticism that equates "US-centered" American studies with overtly regressive politics can be found in a recent essay by Pease: "But did not the Bush administration's refusal to disavow its imperial ambitions constitute a case study in how to emancipate American studies and US culture from the discourse of American exceptionalism?" Donald Pease, "Re-thinking 'American Studies after US Exceptionalism,'" *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (2009): 23. It should be added that, in this essay, Pease asks a few of the questions I am raising here, particularly regarding the uncomfortable fit between "globalized" American studies and capitalism's globalization (22).

¹² I note here as well the resurgence of the term "the New American Studies" in the new millennium, not to be confused with what now must be considered the "old 'new' American studies" vision of the early 1990s.

¹³ Paul Giles, "Commentary: Hemispheric Partiality," *American Literary History* 18, no. 3 (2006): 648. In a discussion that connects traditional American studies to "Eurocentrism," John Muthyala also confronts what he calls "a one-eyed monster, deformed, partially grown, its vision blurred and myopic." John Muthyala, "Reworlding America: The Globalization of American Studies," *Cultural Critique* 47, no. 1 (2001): 93. Grace Hong refers to "the ghosts of transnational studies" in her response to Emory Elliot's 2006 ASA presidential address. Grace Kyungwon Hong, "The Ghosts of Transnational American Studies: A Response to the Presidential Address," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2007): 33–39.

¹⁴ Kaplan, "Tenacious Grasp," 156.

¹⁵ John Carlos Rowe, "Postnationalism, Globalism, and the New American Studies," in Pease and Wiegman, *Futures of American Studies*, 173.

¹⁶ Leo Marx, "On Recovering the 'Ur' Theory of American Studies," *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 125.

¹⁷ F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 179.

¹⁸ See Jane Tompkins, "The Other American Renaissance," in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 147–85; David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988); and Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease, eds., *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

¹⁹ Paul Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 5. Giles's examples of such cultural nationalism include the following: Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard

University Press, 1993); Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*; and Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*.

²⁰ Eric Cheyfitz, "What Work Is There for Us to Do? American Literary Studies or American Cultural Studies?" *American Literature* 67, no. 4 (1995): 849.

²¹ Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections*, 188.

²² Kadir, "Introduction," 10.

²³ Giles has more recently declared that "the internationalization of American studies must now be considered an established fact." Paul Giles, "Response to the Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, Hartford, Connecticut, October 17, 2003," *American Quarterly* 56, no.1 (2004): 19.

²⁴ Lest I stand fairly accused of engaging in the sort of critical caricature I have just identified as being a problem belonging only to *other people*: "Earlier approaches, such as the Puritan-origins and myth-symbol schools, attempted to elaborate those features of American identity and social organization that are unique national characteristics. Often implicit in this nationalist approach to the study of U.S. culture was the assumption that the United States constituted a model for democratic nationality that might be imitated or otherwise adapted by other nations in varying stages of their 'development'" (Rowe, "Postnationalism," 167). I completely agree with the first sentence, but note the slippage completed by the second: Puritan-origins is firstly recast as "nationalist" and, secondly, accused in the abstract of promoting the United States as kind of template for global democracy. Because Rowe does not name any actual, living critic who does this sort of thing (a troubling tendency in much recent Americanist criticism), I cannot be certain whom he may have in mind here. This sort of casual indictment, depending as it does on surefooted vagary, receives interesting treatment in Martin Jay's essay "Name-Dropping or Dropping Names? Modes of Legitimation in the Humanities," in *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 169–70.

²⁵ Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman, "Futures," in Pease and Wiegman, *Futures of American Studies*, 23.

²⁶ Radway, "What's in a Name?" 56.

²⁷ Robert E. Spiller, "Unity and Diversity in the Study of American Culture: The American Studies Association in Perspective," *American Quarterly* 25, no. 5 (1973): 613.

²⁸ In 1986, Henry Nash Smith reassessed some of the underlying issues of his seminal work, *Virgin Land*, offering that his "own attitudes were influenced by the basic myth or ideology to a greater extent than [he] had realized" and that he "did not realize to what extent the notion of civilization embodied a doctrine of inevitable progress so deeply buried it was almost inaccessible to critical examination." He concludes by conceding how powerfully the ideology of American expansionism "with its imaginative aura of myth, had . . . survived to some degree as a collective representation in the minds of a considerable fraction of the general public." Henry Nash Smith, "Symbol and Idea in *Virgin Land*," in *Ideology and Classic*

American Literature, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 27–28, 31. This is a measured and limited assertion that can only through terrific exertion be converted into the monstrous exceptionalism we are being invited to behold.

²⁹ A notable exception is Shelley Fisher Fishkin, whose 2004 presidential address to the ASA, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies,” paused long enough to qualify her own advocacy of the transnational: “I don’t want my remarks here to suggest that everyone needs to do transnational work. There’s important work that scholars in American studies are doing that is not transnational—on American history, literature, race, religion, social movements, communities, gender and sexuality, politics, material culture, and visual culture.” Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,” *American Quarterly* 57, no.1 (2005): 22.

³⁰ I have made this observation before, to apparently little effect, in an earlier discussion of postnationalism. See Bryce Traister, “Risking Nationalism: NAFTA and the Limits of the New American Studies,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 27, no.3 (1997): 197.

³¹ Philip Fisher, “Introduction: The New American Studies,” in *The New American Studies: Essays from Representations*, ed. Philip Fisher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), x.

³² For an aggressively ill-tempered critique of what he calls “anti-American studies,” see Alan Wolfe, “The Difference between Criticism and Hatred: Anti-American Studies,” *New Republic*, February 10, 2003, 25–32. Although Wolfe’s remarks are often serenely scurrilous and ideologically self-serving, Wolfe is altogether correct to question the value of denying, as several prominent Americanist scholars have, that America “actually exists, and its actions are of consequence” (32).

³³ Amy Kaplan, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 17, 2003,” *American Quarterly* 56, no.1 (2004): 1.

³⁴ For a more aggressive example, see George Lipsitz, who finds that exceptionalist America “is an America of white male propertied power, of imperial ambition, of collectivist coercion disguised as the defense of individual freedom. This America proves itself through patriarchal power and military might, not by keeping its political promises. This America is a country, not a continent. In the name of unity, our leaders seek unanimity. They seek to foster through fear what they cannot inspire by faith. When they cannot lead us, they lie to us. They insist that the story of America must be a unified narrative told from one point of view.” Thus those Americanists (Lipsitz reluctantly identifies Leo Marx here) who tell the exceptionalist story are working on the side of white male privilege, imperialism, and coercion. George Lipsitz, “Our America,” *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 136.

³⁵ This is one point I take from Amy Kaplan’s brilliant revisionary reading of Miller, “‘Left Alone with America’: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 3–21.

- ³⁶ Cheyfitz, "What Work Is There," 843.
- ³⁷ Rowe, "Postnationalism," 170.
- ³⁸ Pease and Wiegman, "Futures," 4.
- ³⁹ Relative to developments in sociology and anthropology, particularly in Southeast Asian and Sino-Japanese studies, American studies is a little bit behind the times in turning to transnationalism. Indeed, as Sophia McClennen observes in a recent article, a comparative "inter-Americas" approach was first theorized as early as 1933. See Sophia A. McClennen, "Inter-American Studies or Imperial American Studies?" *Comparative American Studies* 3, no. 4 (2005): 403–5.
- ⁴⁰ Susie O'Brien, "New Postnational Narratives, Old American Dreams; or, The Problem with Coming-of-Age Stories," in *Postcolonial America*, ed. C. Richard King (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 68.
- ⁴¹ Pease and Wiegman, "Futures," 4.
- ⁴² Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 475.
- ⁴³ Lipsitz, "Our America," 137, 138, 139.
- ⁴⁴ See Amy Kaplan, "A Call for a Truce," *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 141–47.
- ⁴⁵ Pease, "Re-thinking 'American Studies,'" 20–21.
- ⁴⁶ Pease himself puts this question to the transnational critique of American studies: "Does not the representation of the US as altogether embedded in economic and global processes turn a blind eye to the exceptions to market regulations that US policy makers have constructed to give the US an economic edge in the global economy" (22).
- ⁴⁷ Masao Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (1993): 728.
- ⁴⁸ Elena Glasberg, "On the Road with Chrysler: From Nation to Virtual Empire," in King, *Postcolonial America*, 159.
- ⁴⁹ Aihwa Ong, "Experiments with Freedom: Milieus of the Human," *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 231.
- ⁵⁰ Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections*, 196.
- ⁵¹ Claire F. Fox, "Comparative Literary Studies of the Americas," *American Literature* 76, no. 4 (2004): 872.
- ⁵² René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 287.
- ⁵³ Fox, "Comparative Literary Studies," 884.
- ⁵⁴ Sophia McClennen also observes that the comparativist approach that Janice Radway nominalizes as the "Inter-Americas Association" "suggests a name that widens the territorial

realm of US Americanists” (McClennen, “Inter-American Studies,” 402).

⁵⁵ Gregory Jay, “The End of American Literature: Toward a Multicultural Practice,” in *The Canon in the Classroom: The Pedagogical Implications of Canon Revision in American Literature*, ed. John Alberti (New York: Garland Press, 1995), 9.

⁵⁶ Porter, “What We Know,” 521.

⁵⁷ Rowe, “Postnationalism,” 170.

⁵⁸ Emory Elliott, “Diversity in the United States and Abroad: What Does It Mean When American Studies Is Transnational?” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2007): 9.

⁵⁹ Rowe, “Postnationalism,” 169.

⁶⁰ Giles, “Commentary,” 648 and passim.

⁶¹ Winfried Fluck, “Inside and Outside: What Kind of Knowledge Do We Need? A Response to the Presidential Address,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2007): 25.

⁶² McClennen, “Inter-American Studies,” 394.

⁶³ There were other reasons for this arrangement, not least of which was the fact that most Canadian English departments (then and now) concerned themselves with an English literature curriculum. American and Canadian literatures were tangential outposts at best, if not the equivalent of military band music or hats made out of dead beavers.

⁶⁴ Wai Chee Dimock, “Scales of Aggregation: Prenational, Subnational, Transnational,” *American Literary History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 219, emphasis original.

⁶⁵ Walt Whitman, “Facing West from California’s Shores,” in Miller, *Complete Poetry*, 83.

⁶⁶ Kaplan, “Call for a Truce,” 141–47.

⁶⁷ See Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 139–75.

⁶⁸ Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (Washington, DC: United States GPO, 2004).