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**Post-Americanist Criticism:
The New Americanists after the American Century**

Abstract

In his landmark reassessment of American Studies in *Visionary Compacts* and other works, Donald E. Pease established a profoundly metacritical practice through which the study of U.S. literature, culture, and society could be considered properly only in connection with the institution of American Studies itself. As he made clear, the rise of American Studies as a disciplinary field (and of American literary studies, in particular) was coextensive with the emergence and proliferation of discourses fashioned to perform the ideological work of the Cold War. For Pease, the “Cold War critics” created the framework in which U.S. literature and history was to be understood, and at the moment in the late 1980s and early ’90s when a post-Cold War era seemed eminent, Pease embraced the label “New Americanist”—which had been coined by Frederick Crews as a pejorative term—to identify the varied work being done by him and other post-Cold War critics. The revisionary project of the New Americanists has dramatically altered the shape and direction of American Studies in the past 25 years.

This is all to the good (almost). Although the interventions of the New Americanists have reinvigorated American Studies, this very success has sometimes had the (admittedly unintended) consequence of further strengthening an American exceptionalism in theory, and in practice it has justified a focus on American literature to the exclusion of other linguistic and cultural traditions outside of the United States. Even though many of the practitioners (such as Pease, Arac, Bové, O’Hara, and Spanos, to name a few) have cast their gazes abroad, to transnational or hemispheric studies, the effect of the New Americanism was to relegitimize a nationalist project by making the object of study more “real,” creating a truer “America” to be studied. As I have suggested (in “Believing in America” and “Post-American Literature,” for instance), the project of American Studies is still profoundly tied to a national mission that, like the Cold War itself, has largely disappeared but which still wields a great deal of ideological power.

If the “American Century” announced by Henry Luce in 1941 required a national literary tradition worthy of such an epoch, then the post-American century offers an excellent opportunity to negate and to transcend the American Studies of the last hundred years, and the New Americanist metacritique of the field provides the conceptual tools needed to dismantle the paradoxically nationalist project of the New Americanists themselves, and to disclose vistas onto a true world literature in the era of globalization. In this talk, I will discuss the ways that the insights of the New Americanists can be brought to bear fruitfully on a *post-Americanist criticism* worthy of the present moment.

About the author

Robert T. Tally Jr. is an associate professor of English at Texas State University. He is the author of *Melville, Mapping and Globalization: Literary Cartography in the American Baroque Writer*; *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography; Spatiality (The New Critical Idiom)*; *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representation, and the World System*; *Poe and the Subversion of American Literature: Satire, Fantasy, Critique*; and the forthcoming *Fredric Jameson: The Project of Dialectical Criticism*. The translator of Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, Tally is also the editor of *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies* and *Kurt Vonnegut: Critical Insights*, as well as the general editor of Palgrave Macmillan's *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* book series.

Post-Americanist Criticism:

The New Americanists after the American Century

I'd like to begin with a brief autobiographical note, but as a critic, I find that my own thoughts inevitably become entangled with my reading, so I'll actually allow another erstwhile Americanist, Harry Levin, offer a preliminary remark. In his preface to *The Power of Blackness*, Levin writes:

To begin a book with a personal word is, as I have learned from Hawthorne, rather an act of diffidence than of presumption. It would be presumptuous indeed for me to venture, without the preliminaries of explanation or apology, into a field which is being so expertly cultivated today. One who is by profession a student of literature, and by birthright a citizen of the United States, would be doubly remiss if he were not keenly interested in the work of the major American writers; but he might well be deterred from commenting on them at length by the current reorganization of American Studies as an academic discipline. This is a logical and productive consequence of the movement toward self-examination and rediscovery which has been underway since the First World War, and which has gained particular momentum since the Second. During the course of the forty-year discussion, which has sensitively reflected the course of contemporary history, the tone has gradually tended to change from the self-critical to the self-congratulatory.

Levin cites the career of Van Wyck Brooks as exemplary of this shift. Then, in a bold yet somehow subtle transition from the field of study to the object of study, Levin observes that this development represents “a cultural progression which, in moving from the rebellions of youth to the consolidations of middle age, has replaced an old-fashioned colonial viewpoint with an up-and-coming sense of national importance.”¹ Levin wrote these words in 1958, but I think that the dynamic he identified, between self-criticism and self-congratulation, continues to typify a lot of the work being done in American Studies over the past fifty years.

I cannot deny my own position as an Americanist; I was hired as a specialist in pre-1900 American literature, I regularly teach American literature, and obviously I have written and continue to write books and essays on the subject. However, like Levin, my intellectual formation initially lay elsewhere. Interested primarily in Marx, Nietzsche, and above all Sartre, I majored in philosophy, and gravitated to European literature and theory largely through the influence of undergraduate professors, particularly the Sartrean-Marxist critic, Fredric Jameson.² When I went to grad school, my principle aim was to study European theory, and my attraction to the University of Pittsburgh owed mostly to the presence there of many notable Foucault scholars. From them, especially Paul Bové and Jonathan Arac, I was gently nudged – almost imperceptibly at first – toward American studies, but it was clearly already a sort of “new” American studies. Bové had written on American poetry, sure, but it was “Heidegger and American Poetry”; Arac’s transatlantic *Commissioned Spirits* and metacritical book on criticism marked him as an eccentric within American Studies (and his contribution to Bercovitch’s *Cambridge History of American Literature* would be notable for its aversion to the older Americanist models). Under their influence, and through others in the *boundary 2* group, especially Don Pease and later Bill Spanos, I found myself simultaneously studying the texts under consideration and the contexts or institutional frameworks in which those texts were produced, disseminated, and received. Informed by this sort of metacommentary, I first delved into American literary studies as, simultaneously, a thing to do and an institution to analyze. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was already becoming a “New Americanist.”

Indeed, to a certain extent, this was a problem, as I needed to spend several years familiarizing myself with the “old Americanist” traditions with which I missed out on. In the process, inevitably, I found that the development of an American Studies – a field of literary and historical study of great works of nineteenth-century literature written in the United States – had to be traced alongside the development of a twentieth-century national political ideology, which I consider to be aptly registered by the slogan coined by Henry Luce in 1941, “The American Century.” In my view, which is of course most heavily influenced by the work of the New Americanists, American Studies belongs to, and remains part of, the American Century. Consequently, I think, American Studies does not really have a place in the post-American Century, and that the disciplinary field – like those evanescent former fields of knowledge discussed in Foucault’s *Order of Things*, which no longer carry scientific weight after the epistemic break – ought to fade away “like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.”³ But, then, this is easier said than done.

The most influential of the “old” Americanist writings, for me, were themselves anomalies in that tradition: D.H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael*, C.L.R. James’s *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, the aforementioned *Power of Blackness*, or even F.O. Matthiessen’s field-establishing *American Renaissance*. Although these are important precursors and outliers, what is called “American Studies” really begins with what Pease rightly named the “Cold War critics,” a largely post-World-War-II brigade that truly institutionalized the field as well as its objects of study. The “field-Imaginary” identified by Pease as including “an exceptional national subject (American Adam) with a representative national scene

(Virgin Land) and an exemplary national motive (errand into the wilderness).”⁴ While it is true that one could locate the broadly archetypal images, manifested in various guises, throughout American history and literature, it is not surprising that the three iconic images Pease identifies here also appeared as the titles of three major contributions to American Studies in the 1950s: R.W.B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* (1955), Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* (1950), and Perry Miller’s *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956). The image repertoire of American national narrative was thus nearly simultaneously discovered, established, and reinforced through the scholarly practices of American Studies in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. The genealogy of American literary studies, such as that of David Shumway or Elizabeth Renker, reveals a great deal of earlier writings that are usefully understood as proto-American Studies,⁵ but the post-war consensus made American Studies the institutional force it was ... which, in turn, makes it the worthy target of a subsequent generation of critics.

Leo Marx tells a story about Richard Hoggart that is perhaps emblematic of the mood of American Studies in the 1950s:

He [Hoggart] recently had met a young Fulbright scholar who identified himself as a teacher of something called *American studies*. “And what is *that*?” Hoggart had asked. “An exciting new field of interdisciplinary teaching and research.” “What is *new* about that?” “It combines the study of history and literature.” “In England we’ve been doing that for a long time,” Hoggart protests. “Yes,” said the eager Americanist, “but *we* look at American society as a whole—the entire culture, at *all* levels, high and low.” But Hoggart, who was about to publish his groundbreaking study of British working-class culture—*The Uses of Literacy* (1957)—remained unimpressed. After a moment, in a fit of exasperation, his informant blurted out: “But you don’t understand, I *believe* in America!”

At this point, Hoggart understood completely just what the young man meant. However, he also noted that no British scholar would ever be heard to say, “I believe in Britain!”⁶

American Studies as a field originally functioned, and continues in many respects to

function, as a means not only of studying the literature, history, and cultures of the United States, but of somehow promoting them, and promoting the idea of “America” itself (a figure that is not really coextensive with the political or geographical entity known as the United States). Many of the Americanists of this era were like disciples of a new religion, whose system of belief they were in fact helping to create. In studying America, they could reveal its mysteries and uncover its spiritually uplifting significance like apostles spreading the Gospel, thereby also helping to making the mundane world of the United States a richer and ultimately better place. The Myth and Symbol school is, after all, what some scholars of the day became known as. *Believing in America* appeared to be a prerequisite for the study of America.

As Sacvan Bercovitch has observed, so entrenched were the images of this American nationalist ideology that even its opponents tended to couch their opposition in paradoxically nationalist ideological terms, often seeing themselves as rescuers of an America that had lost its way. Recounting his own astonishment at the persistence of a Puritan-like “American jeremiad” in contemporary culture, Bercovitch marveled that the dissidents of the 1960s were less likely to imagine themselves as revolutionaries unmasking the false consciousness of a corrupt state, and more apt to see their protests as a way to *restoring* America to its sacred, mythic mission.⁷ That is, rather than dismantling the myths altogether, they sought to bolster and embellish the great national mythology. Coming on the heels of this sort of revisionist mythologizing, the New Americanists, many inspired by Bercovitch’s transformative work, sought to reassess just this sort of “religious” criticism (as Edward Said has named it).

If the development of American literature as a disciplinary field was closely tied to the Cold War,⁸ one could say that the end of the Cold War marked a significant “end” to American literature so conceived. In the 1980s, the “New Americanists” – a phrase used with derision by Frederick Crews, but embraced by Pease in a wonderfully effective dialectical reversal – were in a sense *post-Cold War* critics, examining the ideological underpinnings of both “America” and American Studies, to the point that the political scientist Alan Wolfe dubbed their work “Anti-American Studies.” But in some respects the national narrative fashioned by the Cold War critics from the raw materials of American literary history was not so much undermined as perversely strengthened by the New Americanists, whose triumph lay in the recognition of the ways in which the regnant national mythology or ideology necessarily involved the exclusion of various people, such as non-white men and nearly all women, plus Indians, “foreigners,” the working classes, gay men and lesbians, and so on.

By identifying the previously overlooked or actively repressed characters in an American national narrative, the New Americanist inclusiveness became a critical means of correcting the historical record, of giving voice to those previously silenced, and of making visible those subjects who had been forced into the margins of the picture. In so doing, the project of many New Americanist works in effect reinforced a central claim of the older nationalist or even triumphalist strand within American Studies: specifically, that “America” is a site of self-reflective, expanding democracy and progressively advancing liberty. According to that story, just as the almost mythic Pilgrims sought religious freedom but also imposed a brutally intolerant form of Puritanism upon New England, and the Founding Fathers established a “land of the free” on the backs of

African-American slaves, and the wealth and power of the Gilded Age depended on brutal working conditions and persistent union-busting, *et cetera, et cetera*, so too the more recent gains by religious minorities, women, African-Americans, the working class, or immigrants proved that the progressive and corrective movement of American history continued unabated. The story of America, in this view, is a tale of the ineluctable advance and spread of freedom, where the mistakes of the past are rectified by a forward-thinking and essentially good-hearted nation.⁹ Moreover, like the older types of Americanists who had helped to shape this narrative, the New Americanists not only registered the failings of the past and called for reparation, but they also became agents of this narrative. That is, the new recognition and correction of errors in the national narrative by revisionist critics were themselves signs of the advancing freedoms of American society. Now an updated, multicultural, and more progressive American Studies could set the record straight, present a more complete and accurate image by extending new forms of ideological freedom to those previously excluded from the promise of this Americanism, thus now making the previously mythic “America” more realistic. Or, to put differently, a basic idea within and of American Studies has been that “America” is progressively self-correcting, perfecting itself through its own history by recognizing and overcoming its past failures. The New Americanists, some perhaps unwittingly, produce visions that thus fit neatly into the narrative established already in work of the Cold War critics.

Nevertheless, the revisionary project of the New Americanists has dramatically altered the shape and direction of American Studies in the past 25 years. The New Americanists have reinvigorated American Studies, and this very success has sometimes

had the (admittedly unintended) consequence of further strengthening an American exceptionalism in theory, and in practice it has justified a focus on American literature to the exclusion of other linguistic and cultural traditions outside of the United States. In a ruse of history, we have seen a repetition of the irony attached to Matthiessen and the American Renaissance, a text that (per Arac's marvelous essay) "authorized" the nationalist study of American literature, even though Matthiessen himself was intellectually and politically an internationalist. The New Americanists have re-authorized the study of American literature and culture, partly by making that study more open to transnational enquiries, but the result has likely been that more and more students feel comfortable focusing on almost exclusively American sources. Thanks in part to the successes of the New Americanists, American Studies is hip. (Here's an unscientific factoid: In 2010, English PhD dissertations on "American Literature" exceeded those on "British and Irish Literature" by nearly 40%; in 1980, nearly the reverse was true [Brit Lit was +28%].)

Even though many of the most significant practitioners in the New Americanist critics (such as Pease, Arac, Bové, Dimock, O'Hara, Rowe, and Spanos, to name a few) have cast their gazes abroad, to transnational, hemispheric, or planetary studies, a practical effect of the New Americanism has been to relegitimize a nationalist project by making the object of study more "real," creating a truer "America" to be studied and, if not celebrated, at least appreciated. As I have suggested elsewhere, the project of American Studies is still profoundly tied to a national mission that, like the Cold War itself, has largely disappeared but which still wields a great deal of ideological power. Don Pease's book on *The New American Exceptionalism* depicts this ideological tenacity

brilliantly, as he observes that “American exceptionalism is a transgenerational state of fantasy.”¹⁰ If the “American Century” required a national literary tradition worthy of such an epoch, then the post-American century offers an excellent opportunity to negate and to transcend the American Studies of the last hundred years, and the New Americanist metacritique of the field provides the conceptual tools needed to dismantle the paradoxically nationalist project of the New Americanists themselves, and to disclose vistas onto a true world literature in the era of globalization. This would require what I am calling a *post-Americanist criticism*.

Post-Americanist criticism would, I hope, avoid the tendencies toward either self-criticism or self-congratulation, identified by Levin in the 1950s, in part because it would take that national “self” out of almost every equation. Because American literature, the object as well as the 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, and to change it in substantive ways that cannot, one hopes, be co-opted into the older national narrative once more, as some new Americanist approaches have. Unlike some other national literatures, whose contours have often been established more directly through language than political ideology,¹¹ the history of American literature as a field of study is coextensive with the political, economic, and ideological project of the American Century. The national is the air it breathes, and one could say—although it seems a bit churlish to put it this way—that there is no such thing as an American literature outside of American Century. That is, a “Transnational American Studies” (as Pease has called it) or “Planetary American Studies” (Dimock) is by necessity no longer American Studies in the former sense. However, in practice – in the undergraduate curriculum, for example

– the limitations of the national impose themselves almost constantly. I believe we must resist such impositions.

The task of the a postnational critic is to bring to light the ways in which writers have tried to give form to their world, which is also to say, the “world we live in” (as C.L.R. James so aptly put it). James had dedicated his incredible 1953 *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* to his 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.” At almost the same moment, another quite different critic expresses a similar view. In arguing against the ideological narrowness of nationalist approaches to literature, Erich Auerbach found that the emerging globalization of culture in the post-World War II period required a critical approach suited to this “post-national” age. Writing in 1952, Auerbach asserts that

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. The most priceless and indispensable part of a philologist’s heritage is still his own nation’s culture and language. Only when he is first separated from this heritage, however, and then transcends it does it become truly effective. 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.¹²

Then Auerbach, quoting a medieval monk, Hugo of St. Victor, who finds perfection in the man who can see the entire world as a foreign land, notes that such estrangement

from one's own nationality may be the most appropriate condition "for one who wishes to earn a proper love for the world."

Unbeknownst to me, perhaps, this "old-fashioned" mid-century internationalism clearly infected my own New Americanism long ago, as I was becoming a professor of American literature who could not shake his deep mistrust of the disciplinary field of American Studies. Like Harry Levin, who rediscovered the power of blackness in "classic" American literature in part through his encounters with European realism and modernism, I could not quite be "at home" in the literary culture of my native land until I had experienced it estranged. A key problem with the old Americanist studies was this profound sense of being an insider, a true "believer" in America, and it fostered an American study of America by Americans and for Americans – what, I believe, Jonathan Arac opposes in his forthcoming title, *Against Americanistics* – which, perhaps unwittingly, projected a "national credo [...] that seems more and more self-evidently composed of eupeptic half-truths."¹³ Thanks to the revolutionary efforts of scholars and critics associated with the New Americanist tendency, a critical "power of blackness" has helped to overcome and banish such a credo, at least among academic critics, while also introducing new ways of grappling with this ungraspable phantom of the national fantasy. However, in the post-American century and in an age of globalization, it may be that the field itself must be open to a post-American studies in which the problems of nationality are displaced by a more worldly criticism.

Notes

¹ Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* [1958] (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980), v–vi. Levin refers in particular to the career of Van Wyck Brooks as exemplary of this tonal shift in American Studies.

² In a 2012 interview, for instance, Jameson remarked that “in lots of ways I am always surprised to find to what degree I am still a Sartrean.” See Maria Elisa Cevalco, “Imagining a Space that is Outside: An Interview with Fredric Jameson,” *minnesota review* 78 (2012), 85.

³ Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Penguin, 1970), 387.

⁴ Pease, “National Identities,” 3–4.

⁵ See David Shumway, *Creating American Studies: A Genealogy of American Literature as a Discipline* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Elizabeth Renker, *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

⁶ Marx, “On Recovering the ‘Ur’ Theory of American Studies,” 120.

⁷ Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* (London: Routledge, 1993), 29–30.

⁸ Of course, this is not merely an ambient or atmospheric ideological connection, as if the *Zeitgeist* requires the overlapping of literature and Cold War politics. It is now well known that both the CIA and the State Department in the United States were directly involved with, among other things, *The Paris Review*, one of the leading “little magazines” of literary culture of the day, and that the promulgation of American literature and culture as an alternative to communist and other Leftist European writers (such as Jean-Paul Sartre, to name one prominent figure) was an explicit goal of these largely secretive operations.

⁹ In 2012, the year that the President of the United States—the first African-American president, at that—unexpectedly came out in favor of gay marriage, the national narrative’s progressive movement of ever-expanding freedom seemed evident once more, as liberal pundits could not fail to remind us.

¹⁰ Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 38.

¹¹ Even this is questionable, of course, as Benedict Anderson has made clear in his *Imagined Communities* that national literatures written in vernacular languages were crucial to the formation of nationalism more generally. In fact, arguably, in nation-states like the unified Italy or Germany of the 1870s, the identification and promulgation of a single “national literature” were keys aspects of the cultural and ideological forces making national unification possible.

¹² Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” 17.

¹³ Levin, *The Power of Blackness*, 6–7.