

American Literature for a Post-American Era

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Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, eds. *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. 304 pp. \$ 24.95 paper. ISBN: 0691128529.

It is one of the mordant ironies of the post 9/11 era that the objective of the so-called “post-nationalist” turn in American Studies—dislodging the study of American literature and culture from the parochial framework of the nation-state—now seems at once precipitate and obsolete. It appears precipitate to the extent that what followed it in the first years of this century was a recrudescence of the most virulent forms of U.S. imperial nationalism—an eventuality which, like that of 9/11 itself, appears to have been as unforeseen by experts as it was profoundly consequential for both the U.S. and the world. But the call for a “post-nationalist” critical agenda also now strikes one as curiously beside the point, given the fact that the project of overcoming the self-indulgent insularism that dogged American Studies seems thoroughly ironized by what Immanuel Wallerstein’s eponymous study prophetically described as “the decline of American power.” The cumulative combination of waning consumer confidence, corporate insolvency, rapidly expanding national debt, rising inflation and currency depreciation has demonstrably burst the “bubble” of U.S. global economic hegemony, giving considerable weight to the forecasts of Robert Brenner’s *The Boom and the Bubble* (2003) a study perhaps not accidentally published in the same year that Wallerstein made his own, seemingly counterfactual, predictions.

To put it otherwise, the kind of imperial nationalism the “new American Studies” sought to challenge has proven at once both far more recalcitrant to cultural dismantling than it had appeared to be, and more exposed toward the structural realities of the world system than merely

cultural critique could ever hope to demonstrate. The title of Fareed Zakaria's recent *The Post-American World* (2008) is in this sense an apt commentary on the historical fate of the preoccupations evidenced in John Carlos Rowe's earlier *Post-Nationalist American Studies* (2000): the vision of a "post-nationalist" Americanism is now increasingly offset by a "post-American" reality, one shaped less by the voluntaristic imperative to open the disciplinary domains of U.S. history, culture and literature to the world, than by the brute weight of a particular nation state's economic decline and the dissipation of its formerly hegemonic status.

Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell's *Shades of the Planet* (2007)—subtitled "American Literature as World Literature"—seems to me to reflect a consequent uncertainty as regards the present state and future prospects of the "post-nationalist" wager in literary scholarship. The primary symptom of such uncertainty here is the frequently evasive or unreflectively instrumentalized status of "literature" itself, and further, the lack of a stead-fast exposition of its cognitive and epistemological place vis-a-vis those geopolitical, spatial, and ecological markers the volume's title incorporates: "American," "world" and "planet." For one, Dimock's introduction to the volume assumes the crisis of the "fiction" of U.S. territorial sovereignty, imaging it in terms not of literary or socio-political history but in those of natural catastrophe, with hurricane Katrina functioning as a means of bringing to the surface the nation's reduction to an "epiphenomenon," a "set of erasable lines on the face of the earth" (1). Such a formulation eschews direct engagement not simply with the specificities of literary geography and literary history, but also with the current, socio-historical circumstances of their study: on the one hand, the affective and structural persistence of the nation notwithstanding the ritualized blanket diagnosis of its decline, and on the other, the multiple crises that have laid waste to much of its utopian, promise-based aura in the United States itself (indeed, the impact of hurricane Katrina was one among many recent reminders of the sorry state of infrastructure and welfare investments in the U.S.). Dimock's striking unwillingness to frame the volume's agenda in terms compatible with its nominal scope is further evidenced in her foregrounding of the essentially mathematical concepts of set and subset, whose conceptual implications—the provisionality of any strategically chosen "set" of evidentiary analysis, the reversibility of the hierarchy between "sets" and "subsets"—are anatomized both internally and in relation to their refraction in the preoccupations of the essays which comprise the volume.

The first and last of these—Jonathan Arac’s “Global and Babel: Language and Planet in American Literature” and Dimock’s own “African, Caribbean, American”—are in turn less centered on comparative textual analysis or extensive theoretical excursions into emergent possibilities for literary study than one might have cause to expect. Arac’s essay takes stock of the pressures and challenges which the turn from Europe-centered comparative literature to “world literature” embodies for an American Studies largely shaped by traditional “area studies” models. The author views the practical consequences of such challenges as involving institutional investment in a “new language studies” (Arac’s program is rather unreflectively grounded on the curricular basis of U.S. graduate schools) that would focus on practical, quotidian foreign language skills instead of traditional models of formal language acquisition. Juxtaposing the homogenizing impact of the global to the diversification of “babel,” Arac then proposes a re-excavation of the classics of the American literary canon—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Ralph Ellison—in search of a buried linguistic polyvocality, which in turn is taken to provide fragmentary evidence of the socio-historical interaction between continents, cultures, and peoples in the American contact zone. Intriguing as it appears, the hermeneutic gesture proposed here is simply that—a gesture, no sooner made than replaced with a renewed ethical plea for institutionally nourished multilingualism, including linguistic competence in “either non-Indo-European” or “global South” (34) languages. Things take a similar direction in Dimock’s concluding essay, which undertakes the task of complicating the hyphen in the category of African-American literature by way of an extensive foray into linguistics. Thus, existing linguistic contiguities between African languages and the African-American dialect, the definition of creole and of the process of creolization, the relationship between creole and culturally necessitated bilingualism and the democratic universality implied in Chomskian conceptions of syntactical deep structure are all mined for their implications for the kinship of world cultures. Such kinship, Dimock argues, is “anything but transparent,” taking as it does the form not of “linear descent” but of “arcs, loops, curves”—“complex paths of temporal and spatial displacement” (276). As with Arac’s own essay, literature occupies a quantitatively rather peripheral status, even if Dimock, unlike Arac, does invest the literary with a certain kind of seemingly counterfactual privilege: literary study takes over where linguistics stops, with the entry into the analytical field of affect (rather than cognition) and of “nonverbal” or

“preverbal” expressive media (290, 293)—music, dance, rhythm. Dimock is particularly suggestive in discussing some such instances in the zone that extends between U.S. and Caribbean literary engagements with the African diaspora—Paule Marshall’s, Gloria Naylor’s, Derek Walcott’s, Wilson Harris’—but the epistemological consequences of the paradoxical connection of literary study to the non-verbal are rather underdeveloped.

At the antipodes of Arac and Dimock’s suggestive but elliptical forays into the significance of the literary in rethinking “America” in terms of “planet” and “world” are Eric J. Sundquist and Ross Posnock’s excursions into the East European entanglements of single U.S. authors, William Styron and Philip Roth respectively. Antithetical as regards their informing assumptions—Sundquist is meticulous in historically grounding and critiquing the assumptions of Styron’s engagement with Polish invasion and Judeocide, while Posnock privileges the freedom, unpredictability and creativity of authorial agency in forging transnational networks of literary affiliation—these two essays share a meticulous attentiveness to textual particularities that comes at the expense of generalizable—that is to say, theoretical—insight. This is the case more emphatically in Sundquist’s essay, which is so attentive to the particularity both of the fate of Polish Jews and of the overheated and slanted nature of Styron’s attempt to translate Polish national tragedy for an American audience that it deprives itself of virtually any potential for comparative usability. Theoretical underdevelopment is also a significant, if more implicit, limitation for Posnock, whose tracing of the “circles” of affective dispensation, aesthetic predilection and ontological worldview, linking Emerson to Vaclav Havel and Milan Kundera and subsequently to Roth, draws heavily upon an unreflectively deployed assumption: namely, that the link between Emersonian individualism, East European literary critiques of abstract rationality, and Roth’s espousal of attentiveness to the irreducible complexities of human (in)experience are somehow free of determinate historical and ideological ballast. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the threads that form Posnock’s transnational literary circuit—individualistic non-conformity, the distaste for organized and collectively orchestrated social reform, and the distrust of ideological abstractions—reveal themselves as anything but ideologically or historically neutral. It is, quite clearly, the “Robespierrian” and “utopian” (148) specter of Soviet communism that both overdetermines the Czech dissidents’ turn to an author like Emerson and guides Roth’s own predication of his own project on Czech dissident preoccupations with the hopelessly tangled, irreducible, and unsolvable qualities of the “human stain,” one that in

Posnock's own ideologically symptomatic phrasing, dictates acts of "aggressive disaffiliation from any collective 'we' " (160).

In contradistinction, the most convincing and successful essays of the volume manage a difficult balancing act, mediating between, on the one hand, a theoretical and historical attentiveness to the constitution of "national" and "global" and, on the other, an engagement with the specifically literary means through which both "nation" and "world" are fleshed out, elaborated upon, and concretized in American literature. The first of these essays, Paul Giles' "The Deterritorialization of American Literature," usefully periodizes the nationalization of the very concept of "American Literature" in the span between the end of the Civil War and the global economic crisis of the late seventies. Having shown how cartographical, political and literary discourses contributed to the fashioning of a national imaginary that privileged the diversity, inclusiveness, coherence, and sublime exceptionality of the U.S. territorial state, Giles traces the economic, cultural and political dimensions of the deterritorialization of this imaginary in the period from 1980 onward. To this end, he provides a particularly astute and revealing reading of the ways in which a number of contemporary U.S. authors (William Gibson, John Updike, Leslie Marmon Silko) have attempted to mediate the centrifugal pressures of (primarily economic) deterritorialization.

The significance of literary form as a means of mediation—between self and other, between author and reader, between alternately diverging and converging cultures—is the theoretical core of David Palumbo-Liu's "Atlantic to Pacific: James, Todorov, Blackmur and Intercontinental Form." In Palumbo-Liu's thoughtful and reflective argument, "transnational community" cannot be a "'representation' derived from the lexicon and assumptions of the nation-state" but can only emerge through the "mediated space of nonrepresentation" (197). The transnational thus becomes an affair not of substantive narrative content as such but rather of the desire to "find a form that allegorizes the near/far dynamics of in-forming planetary thinking" (197). The author turns to the exemplary function of Henry James' "The Jolly Corner" in broaching the relationship between architectural/spatial and literary form and in hence producing an interface between literary aesthetics and the concern with the transformation of the built environment that resurfaces in a series of national contexts, all marked by a symptomatic attentiveness to James' import. James' own oblique meditation of the social and aesthetic impact of the transformation of the built environment of New York during his absence in Europe (a

transformation ironically drawing upon Parisian architectural models) resurfaces in Tzvetan Todorov's own turn to James in the context of elaborating a formalist poetics in the midst of Parisian urban and suburban upheaval and protest in 1968; and then, across the Pacific, in the encounter between Japanese debates on the aesthetics and politics of urban architecture and the Japanese sojourn of New Critic R.P. Blackmur, significantly a scholar both of James himself and of the mediating, intersubjective dimensions of aesthetic form.

The third of these essays is also one that remains attentive to the figural significance of space, though, in this case, the unbuilt environment gains an analytical prominence it does not possess in Palumbo-Liu's study. Buell's "Ecoglobalist Affects" wisely concedes that "there's simply no possibility that the nation form ... will go away any time soon" (228) and pays a welcome degree of attention to the ways in which ecocriticism has continued to invest "putatively national modes and myths of landscape imagination" with significance (228-29). Indeed, landscape ideology, from "nature's nation" to suburban "middle landscapes" constitutes a useful way of rethinking U.S. history; by the same token, however, it unveils the "transnational repercussions and/or interdependencies" (230) that shape nominally "national" existence—from the system of price supports that have sustained national ideals of American plenty to "automotive-based transportation networks that make the United States increasingly energy-dependent on foreign suppliers" (230). What Buell terms "ecoglobalist affect" consequently becomes a means of aesthetically encoding existing economic, technological, social and political forms of mediation between the local and the planetary; the essay deftly threads together the partly converging, partly jarring eco-global sensibilities of Wendell Berry, Silko and Karen Tei Yamashita before examining the import of "figures of anticipation" (235) in nineteenth-century landscape painting and early twentieth-century literary depictions of farming [Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913)], and of the admixture of local and global detail in mid-nineteenth century literature [Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851)] and science [George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* (1864)].

Erudite, insightful and engaging, Buell's essay, along with those of Palumbo-Liu and Giles, promises the sustainability of transnational American Studies beyond the end of the rhetorical, analytical and political viability of Clinton-era "post-nationalist" sentiment. What one would hope for in the years to come is that American cultural criticism may develop a

fuller, more comprehensive vocabulary with which to gauge the lineaments of the present—one less schematically prescriptive or programmatic, more attuned to the political and economic complexities that haunt “worlded” knowledge-production, more thoughtful in explicating both the gains and the limitations of literary scholarship as a means of dealing with what is often removed from its increasingly residual domain, and more reflective about the material, spatially and historically mediated grounds on which “America,” “the world” and the “planet” take shape as figures of discourse and vehicles of thought.

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