

The Worlding of American Studies  
Rachel Adams, Columbia University

*Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II.* By John Carlos Rowe. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

*Post-Nationalist American Studies.* Edited by John Carlos Rowe. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2000.

*Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature.* Edited by Amerjit Singh and Peter Schmidt. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2000.

Surveying the legacy of U.S. foreign policy at the height of the Cold War, Henry Nash Smith found a contradictory mixture of isolationism and imperial ambitions. As the nation extended its borders westward, its economic and political programs were buttressed by a symbolic constellation that he called “the myth of the garden.” The requisite utopianism surrounding the garden of America gave rise to a dangerous xenophobia, a belief that “other men [sic] and other continents, having no share in the conditions of American virtue and happiness were by implication unfortunate or wicked” (187). Instead of looking east to see themselves as “members of a world community,” Americans had been excessively oriented towards continental expansion as the means to fulfilling the promise of Manifest Destiny.<sup>1</sup>

---

Thanks to Jon Connolly, Jen Fleissner, and Ross Posnock for the valuable insight they provided as I wrote this review.

Fifty years later, the muted critique of isolationism advanced by *Virgin Land* has become one of the central concerns for scholars working in American Studies, which has turned increasingly towards comparative, multicultural, and transnational perspectives as a way of combating the field's more traditional focus on a homogenous national culture.<sup>2</sup> However, in place of the transatlantic community Smith saw as the antidote to national insularity, contemporary critics are faced with a dizzying network of geopolitical relations that make oppositions between us and them, inside and outside, far more complicated than they appeared in the middle of the twentieth century. Although the changing contours of this scholarship may be attributed partly to historical changes that make the world of 2001 a very different place than it was for critics of the 1950s, they are also in large part due to the influence of postcolonial theory and work in U.S. ethnic studies that assumes a transnational rather than a nation-based frame of analysis. As a result of these developments, some of the most interesting recent work in the field engages the critical juncture between American Studies and postcolonial theory, comparative literature, and the study of globalization. This engagement has already begun to transform established methods and curricula. Three books published in 2000—*Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* by John Carlos Rowe (Oxford), *Post-Nationalist American Studies* edited by John Carlos Rowe (California), and *Postcolonial Theory*

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Recently, it has become almost de rigeur to chart the field's evolution from the exceptionalist, consensus-oriented paradigm of the 1950s into its new, more multicultural and transnational emphasis. This shift is evident in titles of ASA annual conferences and presidential addresses over the past decade. Taking the last three years as examples, conferences have been devoted to "American Studies and the Question of Empire: Histories, Cultures, and Practices" (1998), "Crossing Borders/Crossing Centuries" (1999), and "The World in American Studies; American Studies in the World" (2000). A number of important essays have also explored the changing direction of American Studies, including Carolyn Porter, "What We Know That We Don't Know: Remapping American Literary Studies" *American Literary History* 6.3 (Fall 1994): 467-526; Gregory S. Jay, "The End of American Literature," *College English* 53.3 (March 1991): 264-281; and Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Dominguez, "Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism," *American Quarterly* 48 (Fall 1996): 475-490. Michael Denning finds alternative roots for American Studies by locating its origins in scholarship of the 1930s rather than the 1950s in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: Verso,

*and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature* edited by Amerjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Mississippi)—model a variety of approaches to an American Studies that is more attentive to its position in the complex global environment of the new millennium. Together they show the potential of postcolonial studies to invigorate the field; however, they also reveal that American Studies still has something to learn from its relatively new partner.

John Carlos Rowe's *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism* joins a growing body of research on the subject of the North American empire. In its concern with the impact of foreign policy on domestic affairs, this scholarship expands on previous studies devoted to the problem of internal colonization by critics such as Robert Berkhofer, Richard Drinnon, Annette Kolodny, Arnold Krupat, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Michael Rogin, Richard Slotkin, and Ronald Takaki.<sup>3</sup> The interrelationship between the national and the international is one of the fundamental premises of Rowe's study, which proposes that the literary culture of the United States has been profoundly shaped by an ideology of empire that has fueled the nation's foreign policy virtually from its inception. Economic, political, and military expansionism went hand in hand with the rise of the nation state, making empire a constitutive feature of global modernity. Discounting the notion of American exceptionalism, Rowe argues that U.S. imperialism evolved along very

---

1996). A similar point is made by Elaine Tyler May's Presidential Address to the ASA, "The Radical Roots of American Studies," published in *American Quarterly* 48.2 (June 1996).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Robert Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Random House, 1978); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1980); Arnold Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1989) and *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1996); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1988); Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Vintage, 1975); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973); *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985); and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992); Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 1979); and many of the essays in *Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from Oroonoko to Anita Hill*, ed. Michael Moon and Cathy Davidson (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), including those by Annette Kolodny and Laura Romero.

similar lines to its Western European counterparts. As he describes it, U.S. imperialism is characterized by three definitive features: imperial designs that extend back to the period when the nation was little more than a colony itself; a paradoxical tendency to condemn the imperial activities of other nations while engaging in its own empire building, often under the guise of benign intervention or commercial relations; and strategies of economic, technological, and cultural domination that either accompanied, or were alternatives to, the acquisition of land.

In his preface, Rowe names Edward Said as one of the primary influences on his thinking about U.S. imperialism, a debt acknowledged by his title, which pays homage to Said's 1993 study, *Culture and Imperialism*.<sup>4</sup> Like Said, Rowe believes that the intellectual should be an informed and rigorous critic of his own historical moment, one who is especially knowledgeable about the involvement of the United States in world affairs. And Rowe echoes Said's contention that the novel has played a significant role in the formation of national culture. "Among other cultural products of modern capitalism," writes Rowe, "literature has been especially important in representing such powerful economic and political interests as the 'nation,' 'people,' 'government,' or 'way of life'" (xi). Because literature was instrumental in disseminating the ideology of imperial expansion during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Rowe proposes that it can provide insight about how Americans came to accept the project of empire as rightful and just. At the same time, the cultural authority enjoyed by authors during this period granted them a privileged position from which to condemn the practice of empire building. Rowe thus devotes his study to print culture not because he wants to contribute yet another interpretation of well-known literary works, but to better understand their contribution to a broader historical setting. A series of "anti-formal close readings" are designed to unmask "the discursive forces that contribute to larger social, political, economic, and psychological

narratives” (16). Those familiar with Rowe’s career will notice considerable overlap between the current menu of authors and those he has studied in the past, reconsidered here vis-a-vis the literary and historical problems posed by imperialism. Individual chapters devoted to Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, John Rollin Ridge, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Henry Adams, W.E.B. DuBois, Nick Black Elk, and Zora Neale Hurston aim to pinpoint each author’s attitude towards the nation’s imperial entanglements through a combination of close reading and intensive analysis of historical context.

Rowe’s readings assume that the content of a literary work is largely determined by its author’s biography and surrounding geopolitical events, historical knowledge that is readily available to the contemporary critic. But it would be inaccurate to label Rowe a New Historicist, despite that fact that he relies on a welter of historical detail combined with a disinterest in comprehensive theories (24).<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the dazzling mode of immanent analysis on display in Walter Benn Michaels’s *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*—the work most closely identified with this school’s Americanist strain<sup>6</sup>—Rowe practices a historicism devoted to solving a single, transcendent political problem: “to distinguish the limitations of an anti-imperialist cultural critique from the complicity of a text (or other cultural practice) in the work of imperial domination” (224). In other words, is a given author an advocate or a critic of imperialism? Martialing an elaborate arsenal of historical information, Rowe approaches a range of literary figures, from such canonical fixtures as Melville and Adams to popular best-sellers

---

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> The preoccupations of the New Historicism are exposed in two important essays: Frederic Jameson’s chapter, “Immanence and Nominalism in Postmodern Theoretical Discourse,” in *Postmodernisms, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 181-259; and Alan Liu, “The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism,” *ELH* 56.4 (Winter 1989): 721-771.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1987). In a controversial passage on pp. 18-19, Michaels argues against the kind of transcendent criticism employed by *Literature Culture and U.S. Imperialism*, which assumes enough critical distance from the culture under analysis to condemn its empire-building activities.

like Ridge. The fiction of Poe, who many critics have recognized as racist, is implicated here in the imperial fantasies of frontier expansion. Rowe asserts that Crane's anti-imperialism must be read in light of his belief in the inferiority of non-Western peoples, a prejudice that informs his treatment of non-white American characters such as Henry Johnson of "The Monster." Adams stands accused of a similar ethnocentrism. His eloquent turn away from politics in the *Autobiography* is all the more egregious because Rowe claims that Adams actually was involved with the pro-imperialist foreign policies of his close friend, Secretary of State John Hay. Despite her commitment to fighting domestic racism, Zora Neale Hurston advocated U.S. occupation of Haiti, a contradictory stance Rowe explores through extended readings of *Tell My Horse* and *Of Mules and Men*. He commends the anti-imperialist writings of Melville and Twain, which extend back further in each author's oeuvre than other critics have recognized, are commendable for their recognition that imperialism has as much to do with commerce and trade as conquest of land. This connection was understood with even greater clarity by W.E.B. DuBois, causing him to emerge as the most prescient critic of U.S. imperialism on Rowe's roster.

Few would deny the importance of imperialism as a historical frame for the study of American literature, or the interest of applying postcolonial paradigms to the analysis of U.S. culture. But readers may find Rowe's particular approach disappointing, with its constant return to the question of whether or not a given author was an advocate of imperialism. For instance, of Adams and Hay he writes, "a more nuanced historical account is needed of both figures, each of whom was a product of his historical moment and the good fortune that had positioned both men in situations of political power and social authority" (176-177). The repetition of the word "historical" bespeaks the heavy lifting contextual detail does for Rowe, as if the more firmly he

could anchor his writers in the bedrock of their own moment the more lucid his insights about their underlying beliefs and, by extension, their literary output. As he puts it, “my method in this book is to establish relationships among texts that are historically determined.” In other words, authors, as Rowe portrays them, are creatures trapped within their own historical eras like ants suspended in a drop of resin. And literature, like the fleshly mortals who apply pen to paper, is rigidly cemented within the context of its production. The critic’s task is to examine that drop of amber under the penetrating light of historical distance, which grants him insight unavailable to the author or her contemporaries. This type of historicism leads to a rather impoverished understanding of the connection between literature and history, since any given author, no matter how progressive for her time, is locked in the iron cage of the past. Regardless of her political commitments, the author will always fail to live up to the expectations of the late twentieth-century critic, who stands outside the cage looking in. Since previous forms of radicalism are inevitably doomed to failure in the eyes of the present—making the pro-imperialists the unfortunate victors time and again—I found myself wishing for a more subtle analysis of those failures.<sup>7</sup> A more supple historiographic method might be less invested in demanding that the past answer the questions of the present in a coherent voice.<sup>8</sup>

This faith in the knowledge of hindsight leads to some of Rowe’s more unfortunate tendencies as a reader of literature. It is here that he parts ways with his self-proclaimed model, Edward Said, who sees literature as an important site for understanding the mechanisms of imperial culture without looking to writers of fiction to answer questions of foreign policy.

---

<sup>7</sup> This is the premise of Michael Denning’s masterful study of the 1930s, *The Cultural Front*, which begins by acknowledging the political failure of the Popular Front and then proceeds to make a case for its enduring cultural importance. Jameson makes a similar point in his reading of Michaels.

<sup>8</sup> My understanding of this dilemma is indebted to Jennifer Fleissner’s “Why Feminism Is Not a Historicism” (forthcoming in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*), an insightful analysis of how historicism has limited the enterprise of feminist literary history by positioning the text within a too-rigid grip of its own historical moment.

Said's sensible remark that "[o]f course Forster was a novelist, not a political officer or theorist or prophet," recognizes that authors are often contradictory, ambivalent, or otherwise inconsistent in their views on world affairs (205). Rowe would probably agree. Nonetheless, his authors always seem to let him down, and he struggles to account for their failures. He introduces *Literary Culture* by acknowledging some disappointment that none of them "solves the problem...of how to criticize and thus overcome neoimperialist tendencies of the United States, although many of those considered offer specific alternatives to the racial, gender, and class hierarchies that U.S. democracy is supposed to reject" (23). If one believes that literature is meaningful for reasons other than its ability to forecast contemporary variants of neoimperialism, this may seem like something of a non-problem. Speaking of literature's "complicity," its capacity to perform "ideological work" in the service of erecting or dismantling empire, an unfortunate self-righteousness creeps into Rowe's tone. His reading of Hurston illustrates the consequences of this approach when he writes: "We may be shocked by her apparent embrace of what we include today as part of U.S. 'cultural imperialism,' but Hurston still believed in the 1930s in the universality of U.S. democratic institutions. In this respect, she is a product of her times and was less sensitive than late twentieth-century cultural critics to the negative consequences of exporting 'America'" (282). Hurston's liberal universalism is shocking only if one turns to her work expecting a coherent excursus on foreign policy. Rowe finds it "odd" that Hurston does not connect domestic and international forms of racial oppression; her failure to protest the U.S. occupation of Haiti is "striking and disturbing" (280). On the contrary, it seems unsurprising that the corpus of her work would contain moments that echo our own

---

Fleissner suggests recent, psychoanalytically-inflected criticism of African American literature as one way out of this impasse; I will suggest another towards the end of this review.

contemporary views alongside those that do not. Those views that jar with our own seem less an opportunity for moral approbation than a reminder of her historical alterity.

While his method is unsatisfying in certain respects, Rowe is on solid ground with his argument that U.S. literary culture is enriched by locating it within a more worldly context. The best qualities of *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism* are echoed in his edited collection, *Post-Nationalist American Studies*. For those who are tired of “posts,” the unlovely timbre of this book’s title may be off-putting. Although an introduction collectively-authored by all of the contributors provides a solid rationale for their invocation of the “post-national,” the term (combined with the volume’s rather drab cover) does not do justice to the inspired assemblage of essays within. As the authors explain, the “post” in “post-national” is not intended to imply a developmental trajectory in which the nation state has been superceded by transnational or global formations. Indeed, the nation state and persistent forms of nationalism are approached as problems by many of the individual essays. The concept of a “post-national American Studies” thus refers more to method than to the object of analysis; it is meant to suggest the authors’ commitment to “a version of American Studies that is less insular and parochial, and more internationalist and comparative” (2). In his own contribution to the volume, Rowe calls for an American Studies that is comparative, attentive to border zones between nations, cultures, and languages, and fluent in cultural studies and critical theory.

Two of the most important features of *Post-Nationalist American Studies* are its emphasis on institutional issues facing the contemporary university and its commitment to connecting scholarly with pedagogical concerns. Although most of the contributions are too challenging for an undergraduate audience, each is followed by a sample syllabus designed as a resource for teachers of American Studies. In addition, the essays by Rowe, Jay Mechling, and Barbara

Brinson Curiel specifically address matters of pedagogy. The discussion of curricular matters is placed in a broader context in pieces by Rowe, George Sanchez, and Henry Yu that analyze the institutional politics of a post-nationalist American Studies. They explore the tensions that have erupted between American Studies and ethnic studies, the limitations of current curricular design and pedagogical theory, and the role of the university scholar within local and national communities. The collection also provides a series of fine essays on more specific topics intended to demonstrate the new American Studies in practice. These include pieces by Catherine Kinney on wartime fiction by women, David Kazanjian on Olaudah Equiano, and Shelley Streeby on Joaquin Murrieta.

Other distinctive aspects of *Post-Nationalist American Studies* are thrown into relief when it is read beside a second recent collection of essays dealing with very similar issues, *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, edited by Amerjit Singh and Peter Schmidt. Whereas Rowe's volume is the result of a prolonged period of collaboration and intellectual exchange among its contributors, the Singh and Schmidt anthology unites a more disparate selection of essays. The divergent circumstances of each volume's composition explain some of the differences in product. *Post-Nationalist American Studies* is linked to a specific time and place: a research group at the University of California, concerned largely, if not exclusively, with controversies within that institutional system and local context, such as the recent passage of Proposition 187 and the University Regents' decision to rescind affirmative action. Singh and Schmidt, by contrast, have compiled work written over a decade by scholars located in many different institutional settings and advancing more varied critical agendas. Whereas Rowe's collection maintains a consistent level of scholarship, the essays in *Postcolonial Theory* are of uneven quality. The former presents a relatively coherent set of

perspectives, whereas the latter is more diverse in its subjects and methods, including critics who question the application of postcolonial theory to American Studies. One of the more interesting consequences of Singh and Schmidt's "greatest hits" approach is the new introductions some of the contributors have provided to their essays. The authors of particularly controversial selections, such as Lawrence Buell and Sau-ling C. Wong, take this as an opportunity to respond to the debates that ensued following the initial publication of their work. These commentaries provide a new edge to well-known pieces by recounting the afterlife they achieved by provoking ongoing critical conversation.

Before describing the content of this volume further, I find it necessary to remark on the sloppiness of its editing, a flaw more evident in comparison with the high production quality of both Rowe volumes. *Postcolonial Theory* is peppered with typographical errors ranging from misspellings to grammatical mistakes. One of the contributors is even left out of the biographical notes. Copious errors detract attention from the argument of the essays, many of which could also benefit from the application of a firm editorial hand to their content and prose. Several of these pieces are important interventions in the field that have already withstood the test of time and some newcomers make important contributions to contemporary debates. Others are relatively uninteresting forays that repeat familiar truisms about race, class, and gender, while seemingly engaged with postcolonial theory only insofar as they invoke, rather uncritically, terms such as "hybridity," "colonization," or "mimicry." The less successful selections give the impression that postcolonial theory has little to add to more established traditions of ethnic studies beyond a slight shift in vocabulary.

Singh and Schmidt's own introduction goes further to justify the union of postcolonial theory and American Studies. Surveying the field, they divide scholarship on U.S. culture into

the “post-ethnicity” and the “borders” schools. The editors themselves acknowledge that this distinction is perhaps overly schematic, leading them to lump Werner Sollers with the likes of Francis Fukayama and Dinesh D’Souza. Under this rubric, post-ethnicity emphasizes the overcoming of identitarian categories in favor of an overarching American identity, whereas borders refers to more radical perspectives that recognize the enduring presence of difference and conflict among U.S. ethnic groups. Of the two, the borders school is the domain for productive critical exchanges with postcolonial studies. Despite its schematic feeling, the introductory essay is not always clear and it could do more to facilitate an understanding of the more difficult works of postcolonial theory. Perhaps because it is so evidently the product of two distinctive authorial voices, this piece tends to slip between the categories of U.S. Studies (the authors’ preferred alternative to American Studies) and ethnic studies. This slippage leads to a certain confusion, since U.S. Studies is used both in reference to the more conservative scholarship the editors associate with the post-ethnicity school and as an umbrella term that includes ethnic studies as a subset. Whereas the authors in *Post-Nationalist American Studies* revealed the overlap between these interdisciplinary categories as the site of institutional struggles for power and resources, Singh and Schmidt use them as if they were relatively interchangeable. Aside from a rather cryptic remark at the end of a footnote that many of the post-ethnicity authors are published by trade rather than university presses (49), the introduction and most of the essays do little to connect shifting intellectual currents with controversies over cannons, curricula, and funding for programs and departments.<sup>9</sup>

These oversights aside, the Singh and Schmidt collection raises timely questions about how postcolonial theory and American Studies can mutually inform one another. If the two

---

<sup>9</sup> One exception is the essay by Leny Mendoza Stobel on changing perceptions of identity among Filipino Americans. However the sociological tone and methods of this piece seem out of place in a collection dominated by

fields are truly going to engage, they will need to go further than acknowledging that the United States, like Europe, has a history of imperialism, or applying the now familiar terminology of post-colonial theory to an analysis of U.S. culture. Rather, each field must interrogate its assumptions in light of the perspective generated by the new alliance. As the most valuable essays in this collection show, American Studies has something to contribute to postcolonial studies.<sup>10</sup> The volume is worth reading for those pieces that really grapple with this intersection on a theoretical level, rather than taking it for granted. Arnold Krupat, for example, asks whether the notion of postcoloniality, which implies that the period of imperialism is in the past, may be usefully applied to Native American literatures produced under ongoing conditions of colonial domination. In different ways, Mae G. Henderson and Kenneth Mostern both show how certain insights attributed to postcolonial theory are incipient in earlier African American intellectual history. They caution that the excitement of new critical paradigms should not obscure the contributions of previous generations of U.S.-based minority scholars. Sau-ling C. Wong and Bruce Simon work through key concepts introduced by postcolonial studies such as transnationalism, diaspora, and hybridity as they apply to the United States. Essays by Lawrence Buell and Amy Kaplan show that postcolonial paradigms may be productively engaged to study literature of the dominant culture, as well as that of ethnic minorities.

Taken as a whole, these essays demonstrate that postcolonial studies has more to contribute to our knowledge of U.S. literature than proving it to be the product of an imperial culture. My point is not to dismiss the importance of this insight, or the work it has inspired, but simply to recognize something that scholars of postcolonial literature have known for a long

---

literary critics and devoted to the analysis of literature.

<sup>10</sup> Amy Kaplan makes this point in "Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," her introductory essay to *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham: Duke UP, 1993): 3-21. Gayatri Spivak also notes this intersection approvingly in her forward to *A*

time: that their work is enriched by moving beyond an analysis of colonizer and colonized to the wide array of cultural forms produced under conditions of imperialism and its aftermath.<sup>11</sup> This sentiment is echoed in Rowe's contribution to *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, where he sets forth a more ambitious project for American Studies than he actually undertakes in his own book: "The new American Studies tries to work genuinely as a comparatist discipline that will respect the many different social systems and cultural affiliations of the Americas. Rather than treating such cultural differences as discrete entities, however, this new comparative approach stresses the ways different cultures are transformed by their contact and interaction with one another" (24-25). The recent interest in comparative studies of the Americas, transatlantic routes, and the cultures of the Pacific Rim seems like one of the most promising developments in our field. Essays by Steven Mailloux, Shelley Streeby, and Henry Yu in *Post-nationalist American Studies* and Rhonda Cobham, Juan Flores, and Bruce Simon in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States* move in this direction by approaching comparison as a theoretical and literary problem.

As many have already noted, the challenges posed by a new, more worldly American Studies are great, ranging from the difficulties of reading literature written in different languages and cultural contexts, to problems of how to reconstitute canons and curricula. While it is unclear how these changes will transform American Studies, they have already had a noticeable impact on the field. In her oft-cited 1994 essay Carolyn Porter remarked on "what we know that we don't know"; in 2001 we know just a little bit more about both what we know and don't know. Porter sounded an important cautionary note when she warned against an American

---

*Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (London: Blackwell, 2000), which includes several essays on U.S imperialism

<sup>11</sup> This was a key contribution of Homi Bhabba's *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), which applied psychoanalytic concepts such as fetishism, ambivalence, and fantasy to postcolonial theory.

Studies that would simply expand in response to a new hemispheric or global awareness. Instead, she advocated a better understanding of “how the cultural, political, and economic relations between and within the Americas might work to reconstitute the field itself, reinfecting its questions in accord with a larger frame” (510). Since the appearance of her review, new publications by Frederick Buell, Paul Gilroy, Amy Kaplan, Lisa Lowe, Donald Pease, Gary Okihiro, Jose David Saldivar, E. San Juan, Jr., Jenny Sharpe, Werner Sollers, Doris Sommer, Penny Von Eschen, Winston James and many others have worked towards this goal by examining U.S. culture within the context of the Americas and larger world systems. The methodological diversity displayed by these critics challenges the claim advanced by Rowe’s *Literary Culture* that historicism, the more extensive the better, provides the exclusive answer to the questions raised by the postcolonial condition. A dramatically different paradigm is offered by Wai Chee Dimock, who has recently proposed that globalization invites readings of literature that exceed the limits of national time and space.<sup>12</sup> She writes, “Instead of upholding territorial sovereignty and enforcing a regime of simultaneity, literature, in my view, unsettles both. It holds out to its readers dimensions of space and time so far-flung and so deeply recessional that they can never be made to coincide with the synchronic plane of the geopolitical map” (175). Dimock’s eloquent advocacy of a “literature for the planet” is appealing because it shows that literary criticism can be politically and theoretically engaged without a proscriptive historicism. Of course I am not suggesting that we dispense with historicism, but rather a recognition that a more worldly approach to U.S. literature does not presuppose one particular method. This is a lesson postcolonial criticism, a field defined by voices as diverse as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabba, can teach to American Studies.

---

<sup>12</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, “Literature for the Planet,” *PMLA* 116.1 (January 2001): 173-188.

Postcolonial studies, globalization studies, and American studies may prove to be a workable partnership precisely because none of these fields, in their current formations, are rigid about their methods or objects of inquiry. Far from the isolationism that disturbed Henry Nash Smith in 1950, contemporary forms of globalization make it impossible for the United States to deny the planetary reach of its commercial, military, and political interests. And the new American Studies seems more determined than ever to pursue and interrogate the consequences of those global engagements. Each of the three works under review has something important to contribute to that project. And if they are evidence of what is to come, American Studies is well on the way to becoming a vocal member of the world community.