

# Writing, Criticism and the Imagination of Nation: American Exceptionalism and the Evolution of American Studies

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For years we studied American exceptionalism as if it were simply an examination of the character of the United States found in writing from the country and its colonial ancestors; today we more readily recognize that study itself to have contained an implied wish for national identity. I want to suggest the ways in which the imagination of the United States as a country has been complicated by the identification of that imagination within the discipline of American Studies – an identification which is, to be sure, its own imagining of the nation. What I shall emphasize, therefore, is not only early writing in the United States that suggests the nation is an exceptional entity, but also the history of our writing and scholarship about such descriptions. I do not mean to suggest, however, that it is illegitimate to study or to generalize about the United States as a nation; in fact the study of national identity is a vital and unavoidable area of study. But this essay nonetheless implies that we need not frame our investigations of culture or history to further our emphasis upon nations even while studying them, and the point of the essay is we have often done just that: the state of American Studies today bears witness to the increasingly popular desire to find some other means of evaluating such things as territories, groups of peoples, and the shaping of identities within the series of continents America designates. For the ends I identify

above, this essay briefly surveys writing from the United States about its character and then considers twentieth-century writing about such writings which are important to the formation of American Studies in the United States.

I begin with a brief and general consideration of my premises. I take it as a given that to be exceptional, like most ideas of identity, requires the recognition of something by means of its difference from others, and that it suggests some special recognition – conscious or otherwise – of that exceptional status. Whether one invokes, for example, Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* or one of a number of more contemporary texts, from Emmanuel Levinas to Homi Bhabha, we understand what we are in relation to what we are not; and this *necessary* difference is sometimes explicit and intentional and sometimes not. The me and not me of Hegel, the other with a capital O – in each case the question of what we identify results from establishing a difference from something else, and the effects of doing so depends on how different that otherness is, how remote we find ourselves to be, as a result of that difference, from our own capacities to imagine the interests of that other.

For the exceptionalism of a nation, we might further ask what in the interest of defining a nation such remoteness creates in our relations with those who are not part of it. A concern with the cultural distinctiveness of a nation is of course one means by which nations narrate their histories to themselves. It is one way nations tell themselves this is what they are, this is what distinguishes them. The very question "What makes the United States exceptional?" is therefore full of the wish to imagine the world in terms of nations, to shape how we think of the world in terms of national entities. It is a question that carries with it the shadow of nationalism. But for national identity to exist in cultural form, those defined as outside of it play a vital role. This dynamic occurs in our earliest records of Europeans on the western side of the Atlantic. According to Bartholomew de las Casas, Christopher Columbus honors Spain in his journal

by naming an island "San Salvador," and he describes the people he sees on his first voyage as Indians. In so doing, his actions are complicated acts of imagination, in which what he sees before him results in part from the imperial task at hand. Before him are people he finds on what we now identify as San Salvador, Cuba, the Bahamas and Hispaniola. At the moment Columbus recognizes and names them "Indians," they become for him a kind of common people, thereby rendering invisible their different understandings of how they see themselves and their landscape. As an essential part of Columbus' identification, the New World is imagined as something which made another kind of past the land had for its inhabitants monolithic as well as invisible, because that other past had been neither written, to a large extent, nor nationally conceived. The pasts the inhabitants had before Columbus were largely the result of oral cultures and were thus literally written over by the domination of books (Western societies, after all, depend upon writing to function, documents are the means by which they perpetuate our history.)<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, in the earliest uses of the words "New World" and "America," one finds something both exceptional and troubling: an imagination by Europeans of a land extending over multiple continents whose meaning, the result of the aspirations of Western nations – in particular Spain, Britain, and France – eclipses the histories of its oldest inhabitants. The New World is exceptional for the explorers, full of their longing to establish trade routes and thereby to see the land as part of this distinctive goal. The exceptional status of this New World thereby depends, albeit not implicitly, upon erasing a different, less usable past that belonged to the other peoples these explorers encountered there. For that other past, the explorers substituted a history that defines the New World as new, a part of the grand history of European empires; its previous inhabitants become the exemplary figures of that other world which these explorers imagined in order to identify themselves and their respective countries.

As a result, the very language by which one now identifies what has preceded the invention of America becomes inadequate. How, for example, does one refer to its previous inhabitants – as first peoples or

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of the relation of writing to the development of nations, see Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha.

native Americans? – without effecting a similar, monolithic imagination of them that depends upon the acts of these explorers for its originating identification? Nonetheless, this earliest idea of America and eventually the United States nearly always comes up in discussions of its exceptional status: an imagination of landscape, land and country that furthers an imperial goal by imagining itself as someplace new, fresh, unpeopled, and exceptional; and which becomes something exceptional as a result. Paradoxically, this idea of the New World imagines the explorers themselves as first peoples in a profound, nearly unshakable way, and it exemplifies how these explorers identify themselves by identifying who they find in the New World as those other people they so desperately needed to imagine.

As Thomas Byers suggests in the previous essay, the religious imagination of the land by Puritans in what is now the United States performs a similar act in which the land itself is invested with a quality of promise, rebirth, and near salvation, and its previous inhabitants rendered nearly invisible, as if dissolved into the landscape and the religious allegory through which New England colonial settlers understood their experiences. In his lay sermon aboard the ship *Arbella* in 1630, en route to what was soon to become the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop imagines the land he anticipates in a manner inseparable from his religious vision. In this speech, he defines America as special because it is the material manifestation of that religious vision. America is the place where a new Israel might be founded, where for the instruction of the rest of the world these Puritan colonists can live the life of the Lord. Significantly, Winthrop declares that they are not like other Englishmen: "That which most in their Churches maintain as a truth in profession only, we must bring into familiar and constant practice" (198 Miller Puritans). The role of other is performed here by the English. Winthrop anticipates a social compact which is fundamentally religious and depends upon the colonists' exceptional ability to follow the ways of God better than their fellow countrymen back in England. He declares the presence of a covenant, which implies his group of colonists is potentially a very special if not elect group, like the tribe of Israel:

Thus stands the cause between God and us, we are entered into Covenant with him for this work, we have taken out a Commission, the Lord hath given us leave to draw our own Articles ... (198).

This covenant invests the future actions of the people with special import. According to Winthrop, the colonists are doing God's work in building this colony; all they do in their lives will be so governed. With this in mind, having preached these last words, Winthrop declares those often repeated words: The people and their community will be "as a city upon a hill," exceptional and constantly demonstrative of its exceptional status for the rest of the world (198). Land itself is taken here as a sign of wonder. Using the metaphor of a city, which is both landscape and human settlement, Winthrop materializes America's exceptional condition, giving it not only social and religious but geographic meaning.

I am only alluding to the necessary texts in these examples; much else can and should be said about the early formation of America and the United States. My point, however, is to suggest not so much the importance of the land to an idea of American exceptionalism but the need for identifying a difference from something else to do so. This is the case not only before but after the colonies become a nation. In our idea of the revolutionary war today, the United States helps to imagine itself by a written declaration which defines the country according to its opposition to Britain and the declaration of an idea of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that would distinguish their lives from that under British rule. This imagination of the United States not only institutionalizes the soon-to-be former colonists' claims but, in one fell swoop, elides our own disturbing past and that of these colonists, who simultaneously called for freedom while maintaining slavery. In identifying themselves as independent, the colonists both acknowledge a sense of their difference from English colonists by their stated ideals, and yet suppress the wholesale exploitation of Africans that was so vital to the imagination of early economic life and post-colonial identity in the United States. The conditions of national identity appear a fragile balance of remembering and forgetting figures of "otherness" that, whether visible or invisible, are nonetheless vital to its establishment.

That vital relation helps to explain why, during the Revolutionary War, we find enthusiastic reception of Crèvecoeur's *Letters to an American Farmer*: because to be a nation requires a continual imagination of what it is and what it is not. Crèvecoeur's "What is an American?" letter effectively identifies Americans by its difference from Europe. The United States is distinct by virtue of the absence of monarchy, nobility, or

Church domination and the pursuit, on more egalitarian terms, of an agrarian-based life. Hence Crèvecoeur implies that the United States is exceptional because it is not like Europe and of course, paradoxically, that it fulfills the ideal of French Enlightenment philosophes and physiocrats.

Similarly, in his *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson identifies the United States as exceptional through a defense of its natural resources and agrarian life against the claims of the Comte de Buffon and the Abbe Reynal that its animals (including people) were smaller and more degenerate. The vision of the United States that Jefferson's *Notes* proposes is once again a paean to the land as its unique feature – and also to the agrarian – but in the context of its difference from Europe, that necessary standard against which the United States measures its identity. An agrarian myth, moreover, both distinguishes the United States and, as Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx analyze, resolves the contradictory impulses toward civilized life and flight from it. This idea of the agrarian implies that the frontier lands of the late eighteenth century are vital to the dynamic of flight and civilization through which the nation defines itself; and the interests of the earlier inhabitants of that frontier – the tribes of North Carolina, Virginia, and New York, for example – are rendered remote by the urgent need for imagining the nation.<sup>2</sup> We see this implication born out in Jefferson's *Notes*. Following the French physiocrats, Jefferson argues that the magnificence of the natural landscape corresponds with the potential genius of its people. Jefferson thereby uses this book to suggest the exceptional nature of the American people. But his example of American potential is, of all things, the rhetorical brilliance in a speech by Logan, a Mingo Indian Chief whose family has been murdered by whites and who has subsequently taken his revenge and been captured by the Virginia militia. There is a deep irony here that reflects on what exceptionalism does and what national identity perhaps requires. In this instance, the very act of taking over the land and making the nation results in the murder of earlier inhabitants, so that the creation of this exceptional country which Jefferson wants to show is represented

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of the relation of land to the identification of the United States in early national texts, see Jehlen.

by the speech of one victimized by that country. America is exceptional not for having committed this act, however, but for the potential of what the land can produce – "genius" is the word Jefferson uses to describe Logan's speech (608-9). So exceptionalism maltes the plight of those inhabitants who define themselves in ways other than by the term "United States" nearly invisible, a ltind of instrument for proving American exceptionalism rather than an example of what might cast shadows over its value and understanding.

I am speeding toward the twentieth century in this survey of the United States as exceptional and imagined, so much so that I will all but overlook the Jaclsonian period. With Emerson and later Whitman, however, the idea of Genius, present in all of us, is a virtual call for the equation of individual discovery with national discovery. Within this myth, America is, to paraphrase Sacvan Bercovitch, a great dream that is always on the horizon, always under formation, a dream that does cultural work.<sup>3</sup> This secular myth calls for identifying the United States by a rejection of the traditions of Europe and relying upon a form of revelation which is to be found by the individual within the country. To no surprise, such a myth is enormously suitable for the United States as it is transformed into an entrepreneurial and eventually urban, industrialized nation. In late antebellum and postbellum America, American exceptionalism is most evident in the idea of manifest destiny, through which the United States justified wholesale attacks upon Indian tribes, the breaking of treaties with Indians, and the symbolic representation of the West as both the material resources for and the property of the United States and its citizens.<sup>4</sup> The special status of the country justifies its expansion, for which an imagination of the "aggrandizing Mexican" and the "savage Indian" played an integral role.

Of course, as Henry James writes in his famous list in his study of Hawthorne, the United States is, arguably, also exceptional for what it lacks. The anxiety present in James' remarks reflects on his own ambivalent sense of belonging, at a distance, to the United States; but it also describes the United States as exceptional for what it would become

<sup>3</sup> See Bercovitch, *Assents*.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of manifest destiny, national identity and the expansion of the United States westward, see Slotkin and Trachtenberg.

but had not arrived at. While the country is defined by potential, that potential is in turn defined by how it is not like European countries in its cultural development though it promises to be so. Hence the exceptional status continues its special relationship with Europe by virtue of its continual and declared identification of itself by its difference. James' definition of the United States is part of what leads James in *The American Scene* to urge the creation through means such as writing of the rituals around which national symbols could be made and a national culture born.<sup>5</sup>

One could cite many other texts now invoked as important documents or canonical writing or literature in the nineteenth century in the United States – the Seneca Falls Convention, Mark Twain, W. E. B. Du Bois, George Santayana. Each suggests the means by which writing served the formation of a national symbolic, an imagined identity of what the United States is by virtue of what it is not, which in a certain moment of its history, through its claim to be special, marks how the country shapes itself. In so doing one widens these few examples to include the ways in which those who were not powerful or privileged – African Americans and women, for example – invoked the exceptional character of the United States to argue for their inclusion in its national community.

But to go on in this way would not perhaps explain how I came to choose these texts to exemplify American exceptionalism, how this supposed history is not exclusively a reflection on the past but a sense of how American Studies narrates what the United States is today. In this regard, there is a second story to be told, that in which twentieth-century intellectuals, critics and scholars identify the United States. It too bears relation to nationalism. When we examine the work of many writers and

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, his comments on *New York opera goes* and Laurence Holland's comments upon these passages in *The Expense of Vision*.



scholars whose goal is to identify an American tradition and, consciously and unconsciously, to describe American identity, we find it not simply identifying but contributing to the ideological development of nationalism via cultural tradition.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, for example, one sees emerging in the United States a call for identifying the country through literature, a call generated by those in opposition to the increasingly commercialized, industrial order of the country who seek explicitly a replacement in culture for what was in the past a political identity for the United States. Van Wyck Broolts, Waldo Frank, and more generally the members of the Seven Arts group sought in their lionizing of Walt Whitman, among others, a pre-industrial sense of the country and its workers, such that they would no longer be alienated by their place in the capitalist order. In the development of American Studies, Broolts' concept of "the usable past" is a virtual call for pursuing a national identity via a literary legacy. Writing in *America's Coming of Age* (1915), Broolts declares that American culture must avoid what he calls its twin traditions of "piety" and "advertisement." Piety is exemplified in the Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, Transcendentalists and professors, who create a kind of unreality, a "priggish, paralyzing idealism"; advertisement is in contrast the product of crass commercialism, a "catchpenny opportunism" found also in the Puritans, in Franklin, among American humorists, and of course in business life (84). The usable past is primarily represented by the "personal" approach of "our poets" – especially Walt Whitman – so that writing, and especially literature, is exceptional to and distinguishing of the United States; a cultural identification of the nation can stand apart from capitalism and socially dominant forces in distinguishing the country (95-98).

The United States is therefore exceptional to Brooks by virtue of its literature and literary tradition, or at least the tradition it has begun but has yet to nurture adequately. With Whitman, moreover, Broolts signals his interest in a figure that celebrates an evolving sense of potential citizenship that aspires to be deeply democratic and populist. In both the traditions he wishes to avoid and the poets he lionizes, however, the idea of the American past and of the nation is problematic for a population that in the second decade of the century was radically different in geographic origins than in the usable past he claims. As Claire Sprague

points out, Broolts calls for retaking the American past from upstarts like H.L. Menclten, "with a German-American mind" (SO), and he asserts that the writer and artist depends upon "the accretion of countless generations of ancestors, trained to one deep, local, indigenous attitude toward life" (xvi). Broolts' idea of American exceptionalism either depends upon or encourages a kind of cultural nativism that in turn potentially identifies non-natives as ethnic, cultural, and indeed political outsiders and wannabes. Such attitudes were not confined to Broolts nor should Broolts' more laudatory contributions be ignored; but they do suggest the ways in which the study and identification of American exceptionalism also served the national goals of some of the population and further insinuated an idea of nation by virtue of who did not belong. Studying American exceptionalism in this way carries a nationalist implication and defines the country by virtue of identifying who among its inhabitants do not uphold its exceptional impulses; hence the figure of the other becomes more explicitly located among the citizens or aspiring citizens of the country. It identifies the nation through analyzing the character of its literature and judging who best fits such an identification. (This development finds its way into that bastion of piety, the academy, at the same time. For example, the first publication of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* was in 1917.<sup>6</sup> More generally, as English departments shifted from the study of philology to the development of literary studies, literary histories of the nation played a vital part, so that the discipline of English began to reflect not only a shift in methods of analysis but a reflection upon national identity shaped in literature.)

Broolts, moreover, was but one of several liberal to left-leaning cultural critics of American exceptionalism who, early in the twentieth century, encouraged a particular form of nationalism while analyzing the nation. In *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927) – a book often associated with the beginning of American Studies – Vernon Parrington expands the scope of examination beyond American letters to something that prefigures cultural studies today but describes the United States as a country produced out of its differences and debts to European thought

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of how American literary history "assisted the gradual displacement of philology by literary studies," see Spengemann (12).

and culture. Rather than focus upon literature, Parrington devoted himself to identifying the values and concepts that have determined the "form and scope of our characteristic ideals and institutions ... with their ramifications into theology and politics and economics"; literature is then valued as an expression of "certain germinal ideas that have come to be reckoned traditionally American." We must, he adds, "follow the broad path of our political, economic and social development, rather than the narrower belletristic" (iii). Rich in its description of the complex and contradictory elements of national history, Parrington's study offers a new methodology for his era. He identifies America through ways we might recognize as prefiguring contemporary American studies, where American culture is construed more widely and where there are relationships found between the shape of institutions, politics, economics, and writing.

While Parrington is less of a proselytizer than Brooks, he nonetheless describes America in terms of a European legacy, exceptional for its ability to amalgamate European traditions to create the forms of its culture and thought. Parrington describes the exceptional character of the United States as the result of a "grafting" of French, German, and English thoughts and institutions: "bequests" of English independence, French romantic theory (by which he means Rousseau and the Enlightenment), the industrial revolution, *laissez faire* capitalism, nineteenth-century science, and "Continental theories of collectivism" (iii). He identifies each of these elements in relation to specific formative moments in the United States, including Puritan settlement culture, Jeffersonian agrarianism, the rise of capitalism and industrialism, and in a final volume, what he calls the "beginnings of dissatisfactions with the regnant middle class," which is manifested in realism and naturalism. Here one sees the thesis that the earliest roots of the United States lie in twin traditions. On the one hand, there is independence from England and theories of natural rights and property deriving from the texts of John Locke and Rousseau; on the other hand there is the religious absolutism of what he calls a "reactionary theology" that thought human nature to be evil and believed divine sovereignty to be absolute and arbitrary – so much so that it "projected caste divisions into eternity." The nation creates later roots by importing still more of the doctrine of natural rights and democratic theory, which substitute a more promising idea of human nature for the

Puritan idea of the corrupt soul. This later development, Parrington argues, is largely the result of the Physiocratic school, the consequent honor bestowed upon the farmer as an ideal citizen, and then the co-optation of such beliefs by an emergent laissez-faire capitalism in the early nineteenth century, which believed "human nature neither good nor bad, but ... acquisitive" (v). On the one hand, Parrington analyzes with sophistication American exceptionalism, which he describes as complex because of its different roots and potential forms within American culture and thought (a critical observation that is important for our sense of the union of form and content that F. O. Matthiessen later capitalized upon). On the other hand, he describes the United States as exceptional for its capacity to amalgamate Western traditions, so that the place and substance of Indian, African, Caribbean, and Latin traditions upon the continent and nation are understated in the name of identifying the country or the land as a product of a European past. Parrington's study exemplifies how the study of American exceptionalism develops an imagination of the nation as being born out of its recognized difference from Europe.

This effort continued with even greater urgency in the 1930s. In *The Great Tradition* (1933), Granville Hicks searches the post-civil war period to identify a literature that is able to interpret and oppose the times. Hicks champions belletristic writing against what he calls a dominant industrial culture, but his analysis is both a call for a new order, with explicit nationalist overtones, as well as a critique of the recent past in favor of a nativist tradition. For Hicks, the writer and artist himself is exceptional, needing and able to mirror the times especially when they are chaotic; but the writer is currently threatened by the industrial order which displaces the importance of literature:

*In a society that regarded chaos as natural, that made greed a virtue, that placed financial achievement before personal integrity, culture was not likely to flourish. When things are in the saddle, the artist; if he deserves the name, is almost certain to be trampled underfoot. Especially hazardous is the position of any artist who might venture to do what artists so commonly try to do, to mirror his own times (3).*

Nostalgic for the era before the Civil War, Hicks finds the artist to be the great synthesizer, the order he creates the enemy of capitalism. Hence the post-Civil War period, during which industrialism develops, means for

him the potential end of such cultural possibilities. What is most American for Hicks is the possibility of a literature that can produce a contemporary vision of American culture and which, he goes on to write, can incorporate the wide variety of American types into active myths of the United States. Surveying Longfellow, Whittier, and Holmes among others, he finds no equivalent to Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne or Melville. James Russell Lowell provides a momentary possibility but Hiclts criticizes him for abandoning socialism – which Hiclts describes as the opposition to the pull of economic life in favor of a kind of enlightened humanism, collectivism and a valuing of the common woman and man. Lowell, moreover, ignores the changing demographics of the nation. Hiclts' complaint recalls George Santayana, especially when he declares that more recent writers "cast a fog of gentility over our literature." His dissatisfaction with many post-Civil War writers implies much about what he believes made the nation exceptional in the past:

kindly men, well-informed, well-intentioned ... but they were nevertheless parasites – parasites upon the past, upon foreign culture, upon an industrial order that they did not try to understand, did not think of reforming, and did not venture to defend and advance (19-20).

Although Hiclts disparages Lowell for nativism, he calls for an advancing army of writers who cast off foreign influence and who develop a modern, urban idea of national culture. Like his predecessors Waldo Frank and Van Wyck Broolts, Hiclts finds the proper tradition not in contemporary writers of different origins but in Whitman. Whitman's belief in individualism is generous enough for the factory worker and the farmer, among other things, and therefore able to generate a kind of myth that is constitutive of the conflicts and complexities of American life in the industrial age.

In the texts of Broolts and Hicks, one can see the momentum for forming a national literary tradition which, while analyzing the character of the country, urges a particular past upon it. Matthiessen's *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941) canonized a group of writers still further and encouraged a sense of American exceptionalism, dating the now familiar 1850-1855 period as the time in which American culture emerges, its social

significance manifested in the very literary form and content of these works, which constitute a complicated, exhilarating national legacy:<sup>7</sup>

It may not seem precisely accurate to refer to our mid-nineteenth century as a re-birth; but that was how the writers themselves judged it. Not as a re-birth of values that had existed previously in America, but as America's way of producing a renaissance, by coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture (vii).

Matthiessen's goal, therefore, is to show how in form and content the art and culture of this period claims an identity – a first identity – for the United States, that he will in turn claim in the series of essays that make up *American Renaissance*. His goal is explicitly to avoid the "descriptive" narrative of literary history that Brooks sought and the evaluation of how these writers interpreted their time, of which Hicls is for Matthiessen exemplary (viii). Without ignoring the relation of these writers to the development of the republic, Matthiessen wishes to examine belletristic writers for their capacity to write about writing and to practice what their theories of writing assert, which together describe a common literary legacy that identifies the country and indeed "illuminates" even more than "reflects" the age: This is literature, to adapt Emerson, as the pole star of an era and a country (x). As a work exemplary of methodology, of what can and should be made of the relation of writing and art to one another, Matthiessen's book can hardly be overrated. But its contribution to forming a sense of the nation via the identification of a complex literary heritage is what I wish to emphasize here.

A similar contribution results from Perry Miller's monumental intellectual history of Puritan culture *The New England Mind*, which led him eventually to declare Puritanism "the fundamental theme," the "origin of origins" that describes the "uniqueness of the American experience" [(*Errand*).] This theological errand into the wilderness is anything but material in Miller's assessment, history having been

<sup>7</sup> Of course, Matthiessen adds Hawthorne to the group of writers Hicls identifies. For Hicls, Hawthorne is too "remote from his period" and isolated from the "occupations and preoccupations of his fellowmen." Consequently, the characters of his book are "remote and insubstantial" (5-6).

relegated to a minor place in relation to the spiritual and mythifying status of Puritanism and eventually to transcendentalism. Here, too, one finds a precursor for the identification of myths by American studies, which Miller identifies specifically with the early religious settlers of the northeastern United States rather than, for example, southwestern settlements, or the Virginians, or previous inhabitants of the continent.<sup>8</sup> Even more so than their predecessors, Matthiessen and Miller are exemplary figures in the founding of American Studies as an academic discipline. As colleagues at Harvard, their attempts to do just that are hardly surprising, and indeed Matthiessen cites Miller's *The New England Mind* in his introduction as a work that, once finished, will contribute greatly to the development of American Studies (Only its first volume had been published as of 1941.). But in each of their cases, the identification of the nation urges a certain form of nationalism.

That tendency begins to change in the late forties. Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* begins what came to be known, pejoratively and perhaps unfairly, as the myth and symbol school.<sup>9</sup> In *Virgin Land* and later Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (to name just two examples), one sees an explicit consideration of myth, a cultural symbology whose activity it was to study how myths fuse conflicting and diverse strains in the United States' imagination of itself. Smith's book investigates how, in the continuing treatment of the frontier and the garden, cultural formation leads to and from ideological formation. Similarly, Marx's book argues that pastoralism arises from the capacity of a literary form to be adapted for the construction of a national, social myth. Smith has been criticized and has strongly criticized himself for the lack of attention to Indians in his characterization of how a myth of virgin land contributed to westward expansion and national formation, and both he and Marx have been critiqued for not emphasizing ideology enough, so that in describing cultural symbolism, they produce a hegemonic vision of the nation. Arguably, Smith notes how such myths had devastating effects upon the tribes that westward expansion all but destroyed.<sup>10</sup> In both *Virgin Land*

8 See Amy Kaplan, introduction.

9 For the identification and critique of the myth and symbol school, see Kucklick

10 See Smith in Jehlen and Bercovitch.

and *The Machine in the Garden*, moreover, the emphasis is upon how the nation forms itself, and they are therefore more self-consciously descriptive of the country's evolving sense of its national identity than their predecessors. Rather than urging a national legacy, they provide a means for studying the evolution of national identity that later scholars of American studies capitalize upon.

Such discussion of myths and symbols is part of what underlies Sacvan Bercovitch's work since the 1970s, when he turned to Puritan texts as well as the writings Matthiessen promoted and finds within them the rhetorical formation of an American ideology, fantastic for its capacity to represent the United States as an ongoing project that is always being reborn. Bercovitch noted the exceptional status of this ideology. It maltes dissent implicit in the status quo, a consensus born out of it. Such ideology is especially present, moreover, in the invocation of ordinary and everyday life within these writings, so that what maltes the United States exceptional is that it locates its history, culture, even philosophy according to Stanley Cavell, in the ordinary. For Bercovitch, this ideology is both pervasive and limiting of the capacity for change in the United States, so that the underlying tone of his analysis is hardly celebratory and the identification of the nation, while monolithic in implication, does not inspire unreflective nationalism.

Even more so today, the focus upon ideology has led many in American Studies to cast a colder eye upon exceptionalism and to re-examine yet again the role of American studies in the twentieth century – to consider how culture is a distinct but often reinforcing entity of nationalism. It has led many to pursue ways in which we might characterize the place of culture in the definition of the nation rather than assume it exists independent of nationalism. A few typical, perhaps obvious questions underlie much of this work: How do the myths of the country use a sense of difference or otherness to define what the nation is? How does it, for example, use ethnicity, race, gender, sexual preference, and class to produce national identity? How is the experience of the nation distinct according to differences produced by the social formations of gender and race? From such questions, the canon of American literature and the characterization of its past has been reassessed, nearly continuously, to both widen the range of texts used to describe the country and to argue against our capacity to describe the



country succinctly or monolithically, given the vast differences in experience." Foregrounding the need to create an other to define national identity, these re-evaluations describe not only a dominant culture but its sub-alterns.

Still other areas of inquiry lead us to consider what kinds of deceptions exceptionalism may promote. For example, it may create the illusion the United States has not been an imperialist power. This effect may arise from the myth of the isolation of the country and its sui genesis nature. William Appleman Williams has argued and Amy Kaplan has more recently urged us to consider, in an illuminating critique of Perry Miller and others, that the United States is exceptional for its ability to avoid the status of empire.

Such recent developments have led us to look at the idea of America in the designation American Studies. What it has most often meant in the last century, many point out, has been not America as it was generally conceived by most of the early European explorers but the United States. In response to this usurpation of the term, a growing body of scholars and educators (at least) have widened their analysis to include Canada, Mexico, and the countries of Latin America, South America and the Caribbean Basin. It has also led many to pursue an analysis of writing and culture that is not beholden to nations and that wishes to avoid tacit promotion of them. For example, these studies consider what we can understand about the constellation of forces that make nations and make identities when we examine those on their margins who do not identify themselves so readily by nationality. How does the need for national identity affect the constituents of the United States, those identified as outside its domain, or those who think of themselves as both within and without the nation? What can such questions tell us about national formation and extra-national ideas of subjectivity? Hence there has recently been interest in analysis that is influenced by the work on boundaries and borders begun by anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Frederick Barth and then revised by Renato Rosaldo and James Clifford as well as theorists such as Homi Bhabha. There have also been studies such as Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations* that assert

11 For a volume that exemplifies such work, see Michaels and Pease.

American literature should not be defined as exclusively national because it is inextricably composed of at least African and Anglo-European legacies. Other studies assess *Comparative American Identities*, to use the title of one collection of essays, or they focus upon exile, gender, race, class and sexual identities to note the mechanisms by which the nation is formed as well as to describe worlds that are dependent upon but not of national formation. And it has led us to evaluate the implication of our own studies and of the role of academic institution – as I have been attempting in modest ways in this essay.

But it may be more accurate to assert that we have simply refashioned an idea of the United States in a manner less deliberate and more anxious about national identity and about our own identification with our studies than scholars and writers about American exceptionalism in the past. Gone, then, is the celebratory connotation of the term, but in its place remains the interest in nationalism which past scholars have exhibited. The form of that nationalism may be as idiosyncratic, its presentation every bit as blind to history as its predecessors. The use of multiple descriptions of American culture and of America; the identification of differences according to gender, "race," class, and sexual identity; and the suspicion of nationalism – all of these are forms of inquiry in the present, which Larzer Ziff – reviewing the most recent *Cambridge History of American Literature* – describes as a "new exceptionalism," in which "only in America" no longer designates a single culture but conflicting "cultures" (191).<sup>12</sup> This comment may be a gloss, however polemical, upon the idea that we write out of a present which we cannot help but assume advances an understanding over the past and in which our own superior ability to study America is proved by our critique of past scholars and writers. But one does not avoid imagining the country any more than in the past. What emerges, then, in the multiple stories of America in American Studies is more than an analysis of the ruling class and its subordinates and more than an account of American exceptional-

<sup>12</sup> For Ziff this is no cause for celebration. Rather than describe a democratization of study, in which differing communities are represented, this new exceptionalism conforms to a present that Ziff names as "the time of the mall." Ziff asserts that the description of conflicting cultures describes a refusal to study differences in languages and nations with depth or to make willful, intellectual judgements about what "American" might mean (191).

ism, furthered by our own self-awareness – although it certainly is all of these; what emerges as well is an implicit identification of the scholar and citizen of the moment, whose necessary "other" includes elements of the present, his or her predecessors in the field, and the past he or she studies. The movement between self-identification and analysis of the past is neither surprising nor to be avoided. As if it could be.<sup>13</sup> But it does suggest that at present the study of America develops out of both a sense of identifying oneself in what one studies and of attempting to study something we imagine as a distant but usable past. Whether or not American exceptionalism should be avoided might well be answered best by a question directed toward the former impulse – what does such an idea mean for us? – whose answer delivers an account of the present we might well include in our accounts of the past, as we have been doing, knowingly or unconsciously, all along.

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<sup>13</sup> For an elegant description of this tendency in literary history, see Breitweiser.

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