

Reviews

Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera, *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism*. New York: Routledge, 2018. 186 pages. ISBN: 978-1-138-05405-9.

With *After American Studies*, Herlihy-Mera seeks to draw attention to the limits of the transnational approach within recent American Studies research, and to highlight important issues with which the field of American Studies, both in the United States and abroad, needs to grapple. However, his negative view of the transnational as nothing more than a state-enforced policy colors the book unfavorably and weakens the overall discussion. Herlihy-Mera charges American Studies with offering nothing more than a center from which to assess the essentialist binaries the field itself upholds, but does not engage in a full discussion with some of the field's well-known works on the transnational that seek to disrupt the logic on which the national, communal and cultural are created and articulated, such as, for example, the anthology *Reframing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* from 2011.

Herlihy-Mera's central argument is that there has been and continues to be a link between American Studies and the U.S. government, as both are capable of setting national political agendas, and promoting them. "The transnational state is the realization of a utopian dream. Like all paradise constructions, it treads on a proclaimed emotional and cultural superiority, an imagined unity, and a supposed natural (or divinely anointed) status," he asserts (149). But Herlihy-Mera seems to ignore, or discount the work within the humanities that has continually questioned and put to test the political and its manifestations. One example of Herlihy-Mera's myopic view of the field is his accusation that American Studies is complicit in promoting the "English-only" policies of the US government. The author himself hails from Puerto Rico, a predominately Spanish-speaking community that he says is given representation in the transnational only when it represents and benefits the vision desired by the "US political body."

A “transnational” American Studies should also consider literature written about the United States in other languages. This is a fair point, but scholars in American Studies have indeed problematized this issue: Norwegian scholar Orm Øverland, for example, has written about the problem of overlooking literature written by immigrants in their native language.

In his chapter, “Literature as a Device of Cultural Appropriation,” Herlihy-Mera repeats a debate well-known in American Studies regarding the un-hyphenated-American author (see, for example, Madsen 206-217). Herlihy-Mera uses the issue of hyphenations to assert that literature should be disentangled from the limits of its labels, which he feels restrict its potential; abandoning the label “American,” he argues, will open up new spaces of inquiry. Here we reach a central problem with *After American Studies*: in demanding that all national and communal labels be erased, Herlihy-Mera ignores the important ways that people identify and make meaning in their lives. In *Who Sings the Nation-State*, Judith Butler asks: “Are there modes of belonging that can be rigorously non-nationalist?”¹ This question appears as the epigraph to the final chapter of *After American Studies*, and hovers over the entire book, but the question is never answered.

In his arguments Herlihy-Mera gives too much agency to the state: it “engages in silent censorship” (135), it “provides images that accompany and support the overarching narrative of rights” (98), and it uses “place-manipulation controls” (41). All of this comes at the expense of the human: we are seemingly unable to escape the machine that is the “US political body,” and we are all willing participants in its message. In his recounting of the discovery of the remains of a man in Deadwood, South Dakota, which drew a media circus that turned the finding into a “cultural event,” Herlihy-Mera concludes: “So work the cultural myths of the US political body: an event is historicized and institutionalized ... celebrated as representative of the society of the spaces claimed by the US political body” (110). That voices of dissent exist at all in American Studies goes unrecognized by Herlihy-Mera. Despite the fact that *After American Studies* repeatedly criticizes the lumping of individuals into a single, unified community or culture, Herlihy-Mera neglects the agency of individual Americans, in particular scholars, and places them within a singular state force. Another example is the chapter on “Transmedia Storytelling.” What might have been an interesting

1 Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Who Sings the Nation-State: Language, Politics, Belonging*. (New York: Seagull Books, 2017), 49.

exploration into the potential of the transnational in new digital forms, the chapter simply repeats what we have already been told: these forms “reiterate the conventional cultural discourse about the spaces claimed by the US political body” (143).

The experience of reading *After American Studies* is that of being trapped in a small room: we can never escape the system. “If we are presumed to be (trans)national beings, already patriated from supposed exposure to cultural canons, there is to be no horizon of new inquiry” (166), the author concludes in his closing chapter. How then will the “new modes of study” desired by Herlihy-Mera come about? It is a catch-22. To give up all ties to nation and culture would be the realization of another utopian dream.

References

- Madsen, Deborah A. “Un-American exceptionalism in the disciplinary field.” In *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*. Eds. Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru, and Sarah Lawson Welsh. London: Routledge. 2009.
- Øverland, Orm. “The American Novel Beyond English.” *The Oxford History of the Novel in English. Volume 6. The American Novel 1879-1940*. Eds. Priscilla Wald and Michael A. Elliott. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2014.

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Rani-Henrik Andersson, *A Whirlwind Passed Through Our Country: Lakota Voices of the Ghost Dance*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. 432 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8061-6007-8.

Rani-Henrik Andersson’s latest book offers readers access to a variety of Lakota attitudes regarding the pan-Indian religious movement known as the 1890 Ghost Dance. Andersson’s familiarity with the Lakota language is reflected in this meticulously curated collection of primary sources, some of which he retranslated from the Eugene Buechel manuscripts and other collections. Though fragmentary, these sources offer readers access to new evidence for thinking about this consequential movement across a range of Lakota perspectives.

Rather than make the mistake of lumping Lakota views into one homogenous group, Andersson is attentive to the fractured political circumstances characterizing Lakota society around the turn of the century. This is evident in two ways: first, as he writes, “The ceremony of the Lakota Ghost Dance