



# BOOK REVIEW:

Frank Kelleter and Alexander Starre, eds. *Projecting American Studies: Essays on Theory, Method, and Practice*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018. 314 pages. ISBN: 978-3-8253-6847-0.

Questions of what American Studies is, and discussions about what theories, methods, and practices that ought to shape it, are almost as old as the field itself. Taking a cue from Henry Nash Smith's 1957 article "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?," and Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman's anthology *The Futures of American Studies* from 2002, the edited volume *Projecting American Studies* sets out to "look for emerging agendas and timely conversations in American Studies" (p. 9). The book is a product of the German American Studies conference "Looking Forward, 2014," organized in the fall of 2014 in Berlin. As with any printed discussion about a state of the field, this volume too provides a snapshot of a particular moment in time. Judging by references made in several of its essays, the volume was finalized in the immediate wake of the 2016 presidential elections and first months of the Trump Administration.

Edited by cultural studies scholars at the JFK Institute for North American Studies at the Free University of Berlin, Frank Kelleter and Alexander Starre, the book centers its inquiry on the word "project." As explained

by the editors, "everyone who is project-ing (pursuing a research project) is always also projecting (forecasting on the basis of available data)" (p. 10).

The volume thus attempts to both canvass current trends within the field, and to outline prospective futures for American Studies, in Germany and beyond. The volume contains nineteen essays, introduced by a preface and a prologue, structured in seven thematic sections: "Reading Narrative, Narrative Readings," "Fields and Spaces of Cultural Exchange," "New Urbanisms," "Affective Resonances," "The Uses of Interdisciplinarity," "Literary Actions," and the concluding section "Where Are We Now?" The sections thus highlight aspects of narrative, affect, space, and interdisciplinarity. Although the motivations for selecting these themes are not explicitly addressed, the thematic structure itself can thus be read as both an inventory of the current field (in Germany, in 2014–2016), as well as a potential call for its future development. Of the twenty-three contributing authors, a full twenty-one comes from literary studies or cultural

studies, joined by one historian and one political scientist. This roster of authors is, at least partly, a testament to current landscape of American Studies at German universities, which is dominated by literature and culture. Given the book's dual meaning of *project-ing*, it is however unclear how this disciplinary lopsidedness may affect a discussion about the future of a broad and interdisciplinary research field. Such an acknowledgement would have been welcome.

The style and presentation of the chapters spans the personal, the academic, the theoretically explorative, and the artfully creative. Some essays engage with scholarships and inquires that might primarily be of interest to readers working within a certain area of study. This includes James Dorson's reading of naturalism after the New Historicism; Rita Felski's essay on literary criticism, attachment, and identification; and Daniel Stein's exploration of methodological approaches in American Studies and Superhero Studies. Other essays present scholarship-in-progress, and outline empirical and theoretical insights from ongoing research, such as Florian Sedlmeier's study of William Dean Howells and the late-nineteenth century institutionalization of U.S. literature; Heike Paul's essay on civil sentimentalism in contemporary U.S. culture; and Alexandra Boss and Martin Klepper's analysis of 1930s commercial mass culture through an unorthodox comparison of the young adult fictional character "Nancy Drew" and the African American newspaper the *Chicago Defender*. A notable essay—the longest of the volume—is

Winfried Fluck's exploration of narratives about the American South. Part review of southern historiography and part critique of New Southern Studies and Hemispheric Studies, Fluck argues that the South today "defines America to a much larger degree than realized before" (p. 74), and should be granted a different, more prominent, role in examinations of national U.S. narratives.

A couple of essays bring forth themes that more explicitly engage the present and future of the field itself. Although grounded in particular German American Studies circumstances, these themes have clear resonance also in a Nordic American Studies context. The first broad theme concerns the nature of American Studies conducted in and from Europe, relating to the last decades' transnational turn of the field. Frank Kelleter, for example, discusses the benefits of the outside vantage point. Noting that much American Studies scholarship outside the U.S. tends to "duplicate the concerns, vocabularies, and cadences of American Self-Studies" (p. 297), he encourages non-U.S. Americanists to embrace their different epistemological conceptualizations and theoretical groundings.

The second broad theme is interdisciplinarity. An essay by Boris Vormann argues that American Studies needs to be "reinvented as interdisciplinary area studies" (p. 183). A central concern of Vormann is, in light of the literary and cultural studies dominance, that social science research is not sufficiently considered an integral part of the field.

Looking to the future, Vormann calls for American Studies scholars to pursue a “qualitative interdisciplinarity” (p. 189), centered on deep cooperation between humanities and social science scholars in defining research problems, analyzing, and writing. The necessity of scholar collaboration for creating new, cross-disciplinary epistemological and methodological sensibilities is also explored in an essay by Simon Wendt. There is, however, a curious and paradoxical tension between the resounding calls of these essays and the very structure of the volume itself. In terms of its contributing authors and featured essays, the volume overall is noticeably limited in its interdisciplinarity. It is a tension illustrated by the fact that the section on interdisciplinarity (Section V) is being immediately followed by the decidedly disciplinary exposé of “Literary Actions” (Section VI). If there was a projection about the future here, that message becomes very much muddled.

*Projecting American Studies* stimulates thinking about the state of American Studies scholarship. It is, however, somewhat unclear who its intended audience really is. The book is generally too theoretical, and at times jargony, to be directed to students, but it is also too granular and disciplinarily limited to immediately appeal to the broad community of multi-(or inter-)disciplinary Americanists. While it is refreshing that the editors have allowed for a high degree of stylistic individuality in each essay, their variations unfortunately appear as an unevenness that stymies the volume’s impact. This is especially the case when it comes to the volume’s

“forecasting” about the future development of the field. Does the book seek to push a new direction for American Studies, or is it satisfied with reflecting individual thoughts about its future? In lieu of a coherent—or at least articulated—editorial directionality, that question is left unanswered. Bearing these caveats in mind, *Projecting American Studies* contains several insightful and provoking essays, and serves as a call for Americanists beyond Germany to reflect on their own projects and practices—including in the Nordic countries.

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