

WHO OWNS AMERICAN STUDIES?¹
OLD AND NEW APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Knowledge does not keep any better than fish

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ABSTRACT: A long-time subscriber to *The Nation*, I have always felt inspired by the journal's slogan, consistently repeated over the years in every issue: *nobody owns the nation*. The title of my paper could just as well have been *Nobody Owns American Studies*. I start out by reminding us all of four old essays which bravely attempted to define the new field, the discipline, or (non)discipline, that we still call *American studies*, in spite of many misgivings and several recent attempts to change this nomenclature. From each one of these four essays of the 1950s and 1960s, I retain the idea, to which I come back in my conclusion, that the purpose of American studies in its first few decades of existence, during the Cold War, was to investigate and understand American society and culture *as a whole*. I then linger a little on the polemic concerning the so-called new Americanists, to conclude with twenty-first century work by a few Americanists, from both sides of the Atlantic, who (whether explicitly or implicitly) question the wholeness of Americanness, even as they bring along stimulating ways of understanding the United States.

¹ This is an enlarged, revised version of a keynote address to the 32nd Conference of the Portuguese Association of Anglo-American Studies, Coimbra, 12-14 May, 2011 ("Current Debates in English and American Studies").

A long-time subscriber to *The Nation*, I have always felt inspired by the journal's slogan, consistently repeated over the years in every issue: *nobody owns the nation*. First of all, of course, the slogan is meant to highlight the much desired independence of the 150 year-old journal – *The Nation*. But the phrase, stating that nobody owns the nation, also inevitably refers to a multiverse nation, the United States of America, which cannot at all be “owned” by any single individual or group of people, whether in the sense of tranquilly belonging to it or in the sense of eloquently speaking of and for it. What I am suggesting is that Whitman's “I hear America singing” is a gesture of poetic arrogance which, however timely and inspiring, needs to be corrected at least by a pointed question: “who sings the nation state?” From the centenary journal, *The Nation*, to Judith Butler's and Gayatri Spivak's recent exchange on political power, language, and citizenship in *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (2007), this preamble wishes to recognize that my title could just as well have been, *nobody owns American Studies*.²

I start out by evoking four old essays, published more than fifty years ago in the United States. The authors of these four essays were all struggling for a definition of the then budding field of what we still call *American Studies*, in spite of many misgivings and several successive attempts to change this nomenclature.³ The most recent such attempt has evolved, from Janice Radway's 1998 presidential address, entitled “What Is in a Name?,” into what has been characterized as “postnational studies” and even “postamerican studies.” I propose, therefore, to reflect on the evolution of this nondiscipline up to our present time. The aforementioned old, well-known essays are: “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method?” by Henry Nash Smith, first published in 1957; “American Studies as a Discipline” by Roy Harvey Pearce, also first published in 1957; “American Studies: Defense of an Unscientific Method” by Leo Marx, first published in 1969; and “American Studies at the University of Minnesota” by Mary C. Turpie, published in 1970. From Turpie, I would like to retain the idea (borrowed from her mentor Tremain McDowell) that the designation “American Studies” should be embraced because non-committal (unlike, for example, American Civilization, the argument went), and that the purpose of the fast evolving field was “a *full understanding* of a culture” (I underline *full understanding*). From Marx, I wish to keep the insis-

² My title resonates as well with *Who Owns America?*, the collection of essays on anti-monopoly capitalism, edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate in 1936 as a kind of sequel to the Southern, conservative manifesto, *I'll Take my Stand* (1930). *Who Owns America?* was reprinted in 2000 to some acclaim, since some aspects of its scathing critique of corporate capitalism and the erosion of freedom and democracy are even more pertinent today.

³ European Americanists seem to have fewer qualms about the term, “American Studies”. See Paul Giles's response to Kaplan's 2003 Presidential Address (*American Quarterly* 56 [March 2004]: 19-24) and Liam Kennedy's “Spectres of Comparison” (*Comparative American Studies* 4.2 [June 2006]: 135-150).

tence on an “unscientific method.” In Smith, I underscore the concept of an “unprincipled opportunism” and the belief in the possibility of investigating “American culture, past and present, *as a whole*” (and I do stress *as a whole*). From Pearce, I keep his own comment on his title (“American Studies as a Discipline”) as being the other side of the following question, “Is American Studies a Discipline?”, with its facetiously negative reply: “no, not really, not now, not yet.” As we shall see, given the development of the field, Pearce’s “not yet” is still ringing.

Before the 1970s were over, there was a movement in American academe towards referring to American Studies as, precisely, *a movement*. In 1979, the *American Quarterly* (31.3) published an excellent “retrospective of the American Studies movement” in a special section of the journal, prepared by Gene Wise, who also contributed an influential essay, inspired by Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), and entitled “‘Paradigm Dramas’ in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement.” The long-lasting impact of this justly celebrated essay may be measured by the use to which Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman put it more than twenty years later in the introduction to their co-edited *The Futures of American Studies* (2002), of which more below. Gene Wise’s incisive critique of the myth and symbol scholars as trying to make credible the American nation as a seamless whole is a true precursor of the concerns of Americanists in the 1980s and 1990s. Throughout the 1980s, many committed Americanists suggested, in the end with no consequence at all, that “The Study of the United States” would describe the field with more accuracy than “American Studies.” Not long after that, members of the American Studies Association started presenting themselves at the annual convention with tags indicating not only their name and academic institution but also their area of specialization. The gesture amounts to recognizing that American studies is not a proper discipline, let alone a proper area of specialization aiming to grasp *a whole*.⁴ Thus, underneath their personal name and the name of the university of their affiliation, a specific discipline would be mentioned: English, History, Sociology, Anthropology, Geography, Political Science, Cinema, Music or Performing Arts, as well as several other areas of knowledge even potentially broader in focus (hence, non-disciplines themselves) than American Studies, such as Ethnic Studies, Women’s Studies, Cultural Studies, Religious Studies, Popular Culture, or Material Culture. Incidentally, some university publishers, like California, Harvard or Yale, do not have an independent American Studies section or series. Which is not to say that the field (or “movement”) has not been thriving all along. For the vitality of present-day American Studies (I mean roughly

⁴ For an eloquent defense of disciplines, their importance and limitations, see Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Literary in a Time of Cultural Studies.” *Culture and the Problem of the Disciplines*. Ed. John Carlos Rowe. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 69-86.

from the 1990s to 2011), I resort to a variety of Americanists, from both sides of the Atlantic, who (whether explicitly or implicitly) question the wholeness of Americanness, that is to say, the exceptionalist ideology of the liberal consensus which, it can be argued, even Sacvan Bercovitch's "dissensus," understood as "rituals of assent," has contributed to reinforce.⁵ I shall conclude with some examples of relevant studies about the United States today which, while indeed contributing to our understanding of the American nation in the world, go on putting in question the notion of Americanness as a graspable, understandable *wholeness*. *Fragmentariness*, they implicitly argue, may well be a better concept than *wholeness* to begin to understand *America*.

Saying this, I am already engaging with the so-called "new Americanists." This appellation, the "new Americanists," was somewhat derogatorily invented by Frederick Crews in 1988 in a much quoted article published in *The New York Review of Books* under the provocative title of "Whose American Renaissance?" Having F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. (1941) as his absolute paradigm, so to speak, Crews's article was a lengthy review of seven books dealing with American studies and published during the second half of the 1980s: *The American Renaissance Reconsidered: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1982-83*, edited by Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease (1985); *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel*, by Philip Fisher (1985); *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature*, by Russell J. Reising (1986); *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (1986); *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, by Jane Tompkins (1986); *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context*, by Donald E. Pease (1987); and *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, by David S. Reynolds (1988).

Crews attacked these books vehemently, accusing them of undermining the authority of F.O. Matthiessen, whose *American Renaissance*, according to the critic, had definitely established the canon of classical American literature and the right approach to it. In retrospect, it does not seem to me that the authors lambasted by Crews actually discarded Matthiessen's path-breaking reading of "art and expression in the age of Emerson and Whitman." They

⁵ The argument might be better understood if we consider Bercovitch's own recent comment: "'America,' as I understand it, is a powerfully composite, extraordinary flexible cultural system sustained to a remarkable degree by the authority of dissent. Other cultures have relied principally on agencies of affirmation, appeals to order and stability. The United States has insisted on renewal and change – or more precisely, as Barak Obama's 2008 campaign slogan put it (echoing a traditional July Fourth theme), 'change we can believe in': forms of renewal that confirm the basic tenets of the system." (from the Preface to the second edition of *The American Jeremiad*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012, xxiv). Bercovitch does contend that the critics of the "ideology of exceptionalism" are trapped in the very system from which they claim to dissent.

respected it, as is clearly shown by the very attention paid to it in a colloquium, as well as by every article included in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, the collection of essays based on said colloquium. But they did think, forty years later, that it needed some reconsideration, as Michaels and Pease promptly claimed (*knowledge does not keep any better than fish ...*). As Donald Pease lucidly puts it in the Introduction, Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* emerges "as a tutelary presence" in the articles included in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (1985), its "powers" being evoked, "implicitly and on occasion explicitly," to account for "the exclusion of certain works and certain themes from the American canon" (x). A similar stance presides over *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (1986) which actually includes what we might call "reconsidered" essays by Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, and Alan Trachtenberg;⁶ in the Introduction, Myra Jehlen states explicitly that Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* "virtually ushered in a critical renaissance" (3); in his essay, Trachtenberg calls Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* "the establishing text of academic American Studies" (186).

Crews understood it correctly when he suggested that, in the minds of the younger Americanists under his scrutiny, Matthiessen's conception of American literature and his vision of American democracy in 1941 were omisive, discriminatory, out of historical context, and biased. They did not merely point out Matthiessen's exclusion of Poe and Dickinson (for which Matthiessen does give a rather lame explanation); they resented his tacit admission of the ideology of the liberal consensus which encouraged him to silence the conflicts, violence and discrimination of the time of his authors and of his own time, and to disregard the "subversion" that was going on (to put it in David Reynolds's words) "beneath the American renaissance." Crews's charge was that the new Americanists put literature at the service of their leftist ideological interests, making their readings of the canon suspend the values of Americanness (freedom, democracy, individualism, self-reliance, free enterprise) and highlight to excess the admittedly dire consequences of American imperialism and imperialistic wars. Furthermore, Crews accused the new Americanists (who were in fact acutely aware of the significance and consequences of the development of American studies during the Cold War

⁶ In his "Symbol and Idea in *Virgin Land*" (21-35), an essay solicited by the editors, Smith takes up the concept of ideology and discusses the charges of "consensus history" addressed to his *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1951); in "Pastoralism in America" (36-69), Marx wonders if not having engaged with the concept of ideology may account for the "shortcomings" of his "earlier treatment of pastoralism" in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964). Curiously enough, Trachtenberg, acclaimed author of *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (1965), in his "American Studies as a Cultural Program" (172-187), still speaks of "the exceptional character of America," even if to expose its cultural and political ambiguities.

and during McCarthyism)⁷ of letting ideology and politics interfere not only with their readings of American literature and the values which, to his mind, the America nation has always stood for (“tradition,” “aesthetic standards,” “great thoughts”), but also with their assessment of what must or must not be included in the literary canon. In this particular regard, Crews is really aiming at Sacvan Bercovitch’s acknowledgment of ideology in literary and cultural studies in his Afterword to *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (418-42); Bercovitch’s choice of collaborators for the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, then about to be initiated under Bercovitch’s general editorship, is also in Crews’s aim (youth, radicalism, and “ideologized” scholarship, Crews denounces, rather than ideology-free and solid knowledge, prevail in the General Editor’s selection).

In a likewise long and pointed response to Crews’s article, published in *Boundary 2* a couple of years later, Donald Pease ignored the potential insult in the critic’s appellation and boldly claimed it for himself and his like-minded colleagues. As the scholars of New Historicism, Pease argued throughout his essay, the new Americanists knew only too well that politics and ideology do interfere with creativity and epistemology, have always done so, and the canonical masterpieces are no exception. Crews’s problem with the New Americanists, Pease goes on to say, is the latter’s “having questioned the most self-evident (hence least available to critical scrutiny) of beliefs Americanists hold – that American literary imagination transcends the realm of political ideology” (Pease 1990: 4) It does not, and that is why literary masterpieces must be carefully put in context in light of different kinds of interests and alongside whatever occurs in their time. As students of the American nation in the world, I would add, Americanists must decide at all times which side they are on.

What is interesting to me twenty years later is that the argument about old and new Americanists, about who is entitled to own American studies, as it were, seems to concern the literary canon, and nothing else. We remember, of course, that American studies emerged in the 1940s from the fields of English and History. The first major works recognized in the field were penned either by historians or English professors (for example, pioneer, pre-American studies Vernon Parrington; and Perry Miller and F.O. Matthiessen himself). The symbol and myth school of the 1950s and 1960s was composed of English professors and historians, even if by then conceptions of literature among the likes of Leo Marx or Alan Trachtenberg were already changing (*pace* the new Americanists). What is interesting for my purpose here is that as early as

⁷ Particularly relevant in this regard is Pease’s “*Moby Dick* and the Cold War” (113-155). See also Pease’s “Melville and Cultural Persuasion,” a revised version of the previous essay and arguably one of the most insightful appreciations of the accomplishments and limitations of Matthiessen’s book (*Ideology and Classic American Literature*, 384-417).

1963, on the pages of the *American Quarterly* (1949-), the official journal of the American Studies Association (1951-), Richard Sykes, a scholar also in search of a theory and method for American studies, saw the “new discipline” better situated in cultural anthropology, which, he regretted, would never do justice to “high” literature. In the early 1970s, such influential American studies scholars as Robert Sklar and Stuart Levine, though fully aware that literature (perhaps even poetry) should not be excluded from the study of the United States, were far more concerned with offering anthropological and sociological definitions of the “relevant” “realities” of American culture (that is to say, what I like to call the ‘hard core’ version of American studies). This version has prevailed, no doubt for very good reasons, whether scholarly or other. Just leaf through the programs of ASA conventions from the 1980s onwards. In 1985, in San Diego, I gave a rather lonely paper on “Poetry and American Studies,” in which I was exactly trying to make the point that American studies cannot do without what I like to call “soft core” American studies, that is to say, you cannot do American studies without dealing with American poetry as well. But I suspect that the paper got accepted because I slyly subtitled it, drawing heavily on Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Myth of America in American Poetry.” Again, in 1987 and 1989, I got papers on comparative poetics accepted for the ASA conventions. Those presentations involved mainly the poetry of Whitman, Crane, and the Portuguese modernist poet Fernando Pessoa, but they also had suggestive AS-type titles, like, “An Imperialism of Poets” or “Atlantic Poets.” However, not even with such splendidly AS-sounding titles as “Lyric Metahistory in America: Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* and Próspero Saiz’s “Chants of Nezahualcoyotl” or “Hart’s Matrix: Empire and the Nation’s Body in American Poetry” did I manage to get poetry proposals accepted for the 1997 and 1998 conventions. In 1999, the centenary of Hart Crane’s birth, I did succeed in getting a whole panel on Crane accepted. But, then, I was on the Program Committee, and Alan Trachtenberg agreed to be chair. Trachtenberg did let us down at the last minute, but a no less distinguished Americanist, German professor Heinz Ickstadt, graciously stepped in for him. This is not to say that I do not take intellectual pleasure in “hard core” American studies, as witness my having engaged regularly on such consensually *bona fide* American studies topics as American exceptionalism, feminist scholarship, and the internationalization of American studies.

Looking back, we might say, as Crews himself suggested, that the new Americanists were not so new, after all. What they unquestionably did was provide a theoretical grounding for the enlargement of the canon of American studies. I do not mean the literary canon alone, though that seemed to be what most irritated their critics; I mean the proper subject of the field, beyond English and History. You only have to attend a convention of the ASA these days to acknowledge the fact that literature continues to play a relatively modest role, and usually explicitly relating to race, gender, ethnicity and the so-called

minorities, and very seldom engaging in poetry or poetics. There is usually a well-attended panel on “theory” bringing together European and American scholars to reflect on the field’s grounding, but, in general, regular topics include politics and citizenship, media, education and prisons; philosophy, geography, anthropology and the sciences; African American, native American, Latino/Latina, migrant and hemispheric studies; women, working class, sexuality, disability, gender, queer and sexuality; popular culture, material culture, film, art and performance, food, and hyphenation; transnationalism, imperialism, Atlanticism and the Pacific Rim; globalization and Americanization; America here, there, and everywhere. As an amusing aside, let me add that a few years ago I received a call for papers from the Modernist Studies Association, with a view to preparing a selection of American studies essays dealing with – dirt. No piece left behind, we might say. Whether all the pieces make up *a whole with a proper name* remains to be seen. When asked in 1984 to give a talk about “Deconstruction in America,” Derrida was tempted to surmise, “L’Amérique, mais *c’est* la déconstruction!” (Derrida 1988: 41; 1989: 17-18). He soon abandoned his “*hypothèse*” (his italics) both because deconstruction is not a proper name and because America is not the proper name of deconstruction. He chose to speak, rather, about memory and mourning and his recently deceased friend Paul de Man – *Paul-de Man-as-deconstruction-in-America*.

Crews was being prophetic when, at the end of his assessment of the new Americanists in 1988, he anticipated their rise to the top of the profession and their power as legitimate masters to establish what is or is not canonical in American studies. Here is the Humpty Dumpty-like, tongue-in-cheek, conclusion of Crews’s review article: “The truth is that for any works written before the last seventy years or so, the most influential academics get to decide who’s in and who’s out. And the New Americanists themselves seem destined to become the next establishment in their field. They will be right about the most important books and the most fruitful ways of studying them because, as they always knew in their leaner days, those who hold power are right by definition.” Indeed, the multicultural, transnational, post-national, anti-imperialist, post-colonial, anti-discriminatory, comparative, and definitely secular agenda of the new Americanists quickly became hegemonic in the field. The rigorous questioning of the tradition and other givens proposed by Derrida’s deconstruction, as well as the interdisciplinary, critical research derived from the Frankfurt School have been major influences. A new series of the University of Minnesota Press, directed by George Lipsitz, calls itself Critical American Studies.

At the end of the century, another polemic exploded, this time involving, to put it in the simplistic terms of a more recent critic of the new Americanists, Americanists who seem to love America and Americanists who seem to hate America. I am referring to Alan Wolfe’s article “Anti-American Studies: the Difference between Criticism and Hatred,” which came out in *The New Repub-*

lic on 10 February 2003. Wolfe's very engaging, though certainly extremely prejudiced, article could be invoked to justify once again my use of Whitehead's epigraph: *knowledge does not keep any better than fish*. It was prompted by the publication of two books in 2002: the anthology already mentioned, entitled *The Futures of American Studies* and edited by Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman, and David Noble's *The Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism*. Both Noble and Pease and Wiegman, as well as all twenty-three contributors to *The Futures of American Studies*, are assailed by Wolfe for showing no real appreciation for their own country in their research in American studies. Wolfe's thread of argument leaves no doubt that loving the country is hardly distinguishable from giving an idealized view of the American past (and present).⁸

The major point of Wolfe's critique is that whereas the old Americanists ("Leo Marx's generation of scholars," as he puts it) believed in an "exceptional" spatial and temporal "entity called America, that is, an actual society with borders to which one either did or did not belong," a society moreover conceived of as constant progress and having an assured future, therefore in no need of radical reform, the new Americanists called for no less than a revolution to account for and redress what they identified as the evils of American imperial hegemony at home and abroad. During the Cold War, the new Americanists argued, scholars in the field produced an image of monoculture in which gender, class, race, and ethnic differences were downgraded. In spite of his prejudice against Marxist approaches and in spite of his overall conservative stance, Wolfe is eloquent and sharp in demystifying the cluttered jargon of some of the authors included in Pease and Wiegman's anthology as exemplars of new Americanism. He does grant, however, that Noble's book "blessedly lacks the heavy-handed jargon with which younger scholars have afflicted the field, although it shares with them their inane forms of leftist politics." But Wolfe does fail, to my mind, to do justice to the real novelty of the new, post-Vietnam and post-9/11, American studies, such as is to be found e.g. in Noble's book. Noble's leftist inanity, it seems, is no less than his timely obituary of the consensual logic prevailing in the years after WW II and throughout the Cold War which constructed the United States as an exceptional nation in world history. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Noble argues, *that* homogeneous nation and its exceptionalism were dead. As we shall see, the consensual nation may be dead, but not American exceptionalism.

⁸ For a more balanced review of the *Futures of American Studies*, reminding readers of the origins of the volume in "the prestigious Dartmouth Institutes on American Studies," see Hartwig Iserhagen, who nonetheless regrets "a sense of claustrophobia" in the collection and wonders about the "real innovation" emanating from the several essays.

For reasons that will be soon clear, let me single out Woolf's scanty reference to Amy Kaplan's "Manifest Domesticity." First published in *American Literature* in 1998, Kaplan's brilliant essay, focusing on fiction by nineteenth century women writers, juxtaposes the ideology of separate spheres in antebellum America and the discourse of Manifest Destiny, in order to demonstrate that imagining the nation as a bounded home at a time of boundless expansionism actually enlarged gendered domesticity to include racialized notions of the foreign. The rigor and insightfulness of her analysis of the novels, combined with her original articulation of the cult of domesticity with the notion of imperial civilizing, earned her the Forster prize for the best article in the journal that year. Clearly, Wolfe was unwilling, or unable, to capture the relevance of Kaplan's problematization of the stable, consensual, canonical image of the integral nation so highly prized by himself.

He would have been even less impressed by the address Kaplan delivered as President of the American Studies Association on 17 October 2003, a speech she entitled "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today" (Kaplan 2003). Kaplan's presidential address had very mixed reception at the time, even among progressive US Americanists. 9/11 was still too close and Americans were feeling the need to hold together as a *whole-ness*, even if beyond George W. Bush's strident rhetoric of national security. But many in the audience applauded Kaplan's courage in firmly denouncing the destructive consequences of American imperialism, particularly at such a time of fragility and vulnerability. Some were reminded of pacifist Martin Luther King's frustrated acknowledgement, during the Vietnam War, that his own country was the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. Kaplan's point, repeated in her more recent reflections on homeland security and Guantánamo ("that gulag for our times," she writes in a later essay, rhetorically entitled "Where is Guantánamo?" [Kaplan 2005]), is that the imperial violence that grounds the American nation - from conquest and expansion, land appropriation and Indian removal, slavery, racism and exploitation - prevails in the world to this day. The old, self-appointed and self-serving mission of the United States of America - "to save the world for democracy" [that "useful fiction," in Chris Hedges's apt saying] - continues in the Middle East (and elsewhere), with the same old, tragic consequences, President Barack Obama's optimistic 2011 State of the Union address notwithstanding. Echoing, perhaps unwittingly, Whitman's "grand Idea" in the 1855 Preface (revised as "tremendous IDEA" in *Democratic Vistas*), Obama reassured his fellow Americans: "The idea of America endures." Which idea of which America, we might ask, hearkening back to Radway's question 13 years ago, "what is in a name"? Not the America, one hopes, that was once proclaimed, believingly, in the voice of one of her senators, "We are the ruling race of the world. [...] We will not renounce our part in the mission of our race, trustee, under God, of the civilization of the world. [...] God has marked us as his chosen people. [...] He has made us

adepts in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples" (Senator Albert J. Beveridge, 1900). Is it too farfetched to think here of the dominionists of our own time? In any case, we should be heartened by the thought that American studies, particularly the new American studies, have been making sure that *this* "America" is not *whole*, after all. By questioning the name "American" (in the "American Studies Association"), Radway called attention to the pluralization and fragmentation of the field, putting into severe question the exceptionalist consensus. The "we" became, in Donald Pease's words, "an impossibility." I am alluding to an interview in the *Minnesota Review* (2006b) in which Pease contests George W. Bush's use of the plural "we" in the president's pro-war speeches on the "war on terror" by crying out: "not in *our* name" can you make these wars. The resistance to the war, Pease explains elsewhere, at a time when not supporting the war was considered un-American, is a good description of the New Americanists.

This brings me back to Alan Wolfe's "Anti-American Studies." I suspect that the impact of Wolfe's article would have been negligible among the new, and newly preeminent, Americanists were it not for the attention paid to it by the "old Americanist" most quoted, approvingly, by the critics of the new Americanists, and much respected by the new Americanists as well: Leo Marx, the author of the magisterial, definitely nondiscardable *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, first published in 1964. Unlike rotten fish, knowledge, however dated, is not to be easily rashly discarded.

In 2002, Leo Marx was invited by the German professor Winfried Fluck to address an International Conference on "Theories of American Culture" at the JFK Institute in Berlin. Three years later, the journal *American Literary History* published Marx's talk, together with responses from Amy Kaplan and George Lipsitz. The title of Marx's piece is telling: "On Recovering the 'Ur' Theory of American Studies". Marx's apologia for the first generation of American studies scholars (the 'ur' of his title) and their fascination with the idea of America and the nation's culture *as a whole* (his emphasis) is eloquent and inspiring up until the moment he quotes Alan Wolfe's "Anti-American Studies" to identify what he calls the "Great Divide" in American studies (he will go on to speak in terms of BD [before the divide] and AD [after the divide]). If earlier in the essay Marx elaborates coherently on interdisciplinarity, unprincipled opportunism, and belief in America's universalist ideas and values as grounding the "Ur theory of American studies," Alan Wolfe's vituperative critique suggests to him that the new Americanists' disbelief in *America-as-a-whole* (a disbelief perhaps prompted, he surmises, by disillusionment with their country in the aftermath of the Vietnam war) smacks too much of hatred or anti-Americanism. However, as becomes clear from the eloquent responses by George Lipsitz (in a cogent piece titled "Our America") and Amy Kaplan (in her conciliatory "A Call for a Truce"), neither hatred nor anti-Americanism

are fair concepts to bring into the discussion of real, well-founded differences in the evolving field. Lipsitz shows that differences do not preclude a “common ground” and Kaplan observes as well that Marx “ignores important continuities.” I cannot help but being reminded of a crucial line by Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus*: “We are in accord with one another about some of the things we discourse about and in discord about others” (263A). The divide between “old” and “new” Americanists, however, does concern an important issue: whether the status of the subject of American studies is a whole or a fragmented entity. Says Marx: “Whereas the BD Americanists liked to think of the society and culture of the US as a seamless whole, their AD successors argued that the nation already had reached a late stage in an inexorable process of cultural fragmentation.” Clearly, both for Lipsitz and Kaplan there are not just two Americas, as Marx and Wolfe before him imply, but many. Kaplan goes so far as proposing to replace the earlier “sense of the whole” with “the concept of interconnectedness.” Socrates again, now paraphrasing Homer: “If I believe that someone else is capable of discerning a *single thing* that is also by nature capable of encompassing many, I follow straight behind, as if he were a god” (266B, my emphasis). From my vantage point in 2011, as an Americanist, a comparativist, a student of American studies scholarship, and relatively external to these polemics, I clearly read Leo Marx, George Lipsitz, and Amy Kaplan, though in different ways and with different emphases, as being equally concerned with the idea of an American exceptionalism that keeps justifying imperialism, violence, and injustice in the world.

American exceptionalism is the subject of one of some twenty-first century relevant American studies books I will be lingering on briefly in my conclusion. I am referring to Donald Pease’s most recent book, entitled *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009). American exceptionalism has been amply studied from different points of view and with different emphases, ever since Alexis de Tocqueville first identified the supposedly singular characteristics of the new nation. I myself dealt with the topic a few years ago in “American Exceptionalism and the Naturalization of ‘America’,” published in *Prospects* in 1994. Drawing mainly on the work by Seymour Lipset and Byron Shafer, I was then particularly interested in political scientist George Kateb’s Emersonian/Whitmanian a-social identification of America as “nature’s nation,” and its underlying notion that “the laws of nature never apologize.” American exceptionalism, I understood then, meant illusory exemption from the laws of civic existing in the world. In light of Donald Pease’s latest book, I understand it now as a “state fantasy” (2009: *passim*). Pease’s “new” exceptionalism is a timely updating of the concept as prompted by Bush’s war on terror and the Patriot Act. At a time when Bercovitch would like to see the United States of America finally emerge as a mundane nation among nations, “America” appears once again as a nation with unique, connate characteristics that single her out among the other nations to justify her superior influence and right to

intervene in world affairs on behalf of her own interests. On 21 March 2011, Mitt Romney, then a mere former candidate to the presidency of the United States but no doubt already thinking of another opportunity, accused President Barack Obama of “fundamental disbelief in American exceptionalism.” Actually, in his run for the presidency, Obama relied heavily on the appeal of such exceptionalist fantasies as *the promised land*, *the American dream*, and *the indivisible nation under God*. More recently, while delivering the news of the execution of Osama bin Laden, Obama strongly reasserted his faith: “tonight [he said], we are once again reminded that America can do whatever we set our hearts to.” One cannot help but ask, which *America*, whose *hearts*, and what *whatever*? Pease’s brilliant analysis shuns all idealization, is soundly documented and extremely critical of all forms of American self-appointed, exceptionalist hegemony in the world, old and new. However, it remains to be seen if his critique of *America as an exceptionalist whole* is convincing enough seriously to upset deep-seated American belief in America’s moral superiority and overturn the ingrained “fantasy” about the nation’s special role in ruling world affairs. At least, the distinction that Pease has since made between *good* and *bad* American exceptionalism needs to be carefully scrutinized.⁹

As in Pease, in the five very recent works of American studies scholarship with which I conclude, there is no idealization of the American past. Or present. None of them claims to own American studies. Their authors know, whether making it explicit or not, that they grasp only a very small part of just an aspect of American history, society, culture, art, literature. Focusing on prisons, ethnic cleansing, transatlanticism and photography, food banks, or women’s poetry, they make no pretense of providing an integral, homogeneous view of the *wholeness* of America. These themes can no doubt be amplified and interconnected, but the problems that ground them are not susceptible, in themselves alone, of allowing for a credible explanation of *America as a whole*. As would be the case with any other scholarly enterprise concerning any modern nation, we need to consider them all to get at merely a fraction of what the complexity of America as a subject of analysis really means.

Driven Out. The Forgotten War against Chinese Americans, by Jeanne Pfaelzer (2007), deals with ethnic cleansing in California and the Pacific Northwest. From the mid nineteenth century to well into the twentieth, bigoted citizens, assisted by racist and corrupt politicians, tried to get the country rid of the first Chinese Americans by every lawless and ruthless means they could think of. Constantly threatened, expelled from place to place, very often massacred, and for very long denied citizenship, the Chinese immigrants fought back under extreme duress but bravely refused to leave. Pfaelzer’s book is both a solid piece of archival scholarship on Chinese American history and

⁹ See Donald Pease, “Re-thinking ‘American Studies after US Exceptionalism,’” *American Literary History* 21.1 (Spring 2009): 19-27.

an engrossing narrative of violent nation building and troubling and moving individual stories.

Another story of California, which is also a partial, paradigmatic history of the United States of America, is Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2007). Gilmore's well-documented and insightful study of California prisons and racism is a very fine analysis of the political economy of liberal incarceration which clearly exposes the modern prison system as a dehumanizing symptom of the decline of western civilization. Whether the "nightmare" her book describes is just a California, or a world, nightmare, remains for her readers to decide. More recently, by eloquently pairing together such categories as criminal/alien, citizen/innocent, immigrant/guilty, Gilmore continues to reflect on the American paradox of having "one Black man in the White House and about 1,000,000 Black men in the Big House."

My third example of recent American studies scholarship not aiming at *an idealized whole of America* is Doris Friedensohn's *Cooking for Change. Tales from a Food Service Training Academy* (2011). *Cooking for Change* is a radical departure from Friedensohn's previous book, an engaging, cosmopolitan collection of stories about eating in America and abroad (2006). In 2003, the author started doing participant observation at the Community FoodBank of New Jersey to gather firsthand information of what many decades ago Michael Harrington called "the other America." The FoodBank provides meals for poor families while training low income students as cooks. Though a varied lot, the students of the Food Service and Training Academy are predominantly African American and Latinos who were never graced with any fabled promise of American life. Many of them are ex-convicts living in half way houses, some are former drug dealers, others are unemployed and homeless, most of them look earnestly upon job training as a second chance for a decent life. In a series of memorable sketches about the people who give body and life to the Academy and its commendable work, Friedensohn shows (reluctantly, one guesses) how corporate capital perpetuates poverty by controlling it.

My fourth example comes from the other side of the Atlantic. *Photographic Memories. Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History* (2007), by the Dutch scholar Rob Kroes, combines photography and history, personal and public memories, to discuss the trans-cultural implications of immigration, war, the Cold War, trans-Atlantic relations, the impact of American mass culture in Europe, and 9/11. The work of Kroes's latest book is perhaps best understood in the light of the author's more recent revisitation of Atlantism to acknowledge both cultural affinities and distance between The United States and Europe. In a way, *Photographic Memories* is closest to presenting an idealized vision of America, an ideal definitely shattered by 9/11 and after, to Europeans hankering after a European Union increasingly threatened by bankruptcy and conflicts of all kinds.

My fifth and last example is a book by an English professor who would perhaps be surprised to be found in such company. Lynn Keller's *Thinking Poetry. Readings in Contemporary Women's Exploratory Poetics* (2010) discusses seven contemporary American women poets whose complex thinking and sophisticated compositional strategies bend language and the poetic tradition to render problematical the proverbial American preference for simplicity: simple ideas of good and evil, simple belief in simple solutions, simple horror of unpredictability, and simple faith in the nation's rightness. As one of the poets studied by Keller puts it, in their many different ways of exploring the language of poetry, all these women poets eloquently "stretch the [American] boundaries of the sayable" (Cole Swensen).

*

I conclude this paper on "hard core" American studies by speaking about poetry, the quintessentially "soft." In her work on the palimpsests and palimpsests (Michael Davidson) of Joan Retallack and Rosmarie Waldrop, Keller does not comment on Waldrop's striking *A Key into the Language of America* (1994) (beyond a short footnote on p. 199). Waldrop's concept of palimpsest, which the poet associates with Robert Duncan's notion of the "grand collage," works actually as a good replacement in this American studies paper for my Whitehead knowledge-as-fish epigraph (*knowledge does not keep any better than fish*). Waldrop borrows her title – *A Key into the Language of America* – from the title of Roger Williams's famous guide to the Algonquian language of the Narragansett, published in 1643. Not only that. As she explains right at the very beginning of her introduction, her 1994 *Key into the Language of America* "takes its title, chapter sequence, and many quotations from Roger Williams's book of 1643 with the same title" (xiii). Williams's *Key* is not a mere guide to a Native American language or a factual handbook offering practical tools for successful colonization. Rather than just that, it is a sympathetic and imaginative anthropological presentation of Native American life, beliefs, rituals, and morals. Each chapter, made up of "observations," closes with a "more particular" poem/observation which often elaborates on some of the chapter's ironical comments on the supposedly superiority of the Europeans. For example, the first chapter, "Of Salutation," after going over the many forms of native courtesy, closes with a poem contrasting the humane Pagan with the humanity-lacking Christian (99 [chapter I]). Long before *A Key* was published in England in 1643, Williams had become *persona non grata* in the Massachusetts Bay Colony by advocating the separation of state and church and by contesting the "sinful opinion among many that Christians have right to *Heathens Lands*" (167 [chapter XVI]). No wonder he was banished from the Colony in 1635. Williams was soon to found Providence, Rhode Island and play important diplomatic roles in New England, but the order for his banishment was not officially repealed until 1936.

Both the history of the colonization of New England and the history of twentieth-century Europe haunt Waldrop's imagination as she conceives of her book. She was born in Nazi Germany in 1935, 300 hundred years after the heretic Roger Williams was condemned to what ended up being 300 years of banishment. After the defeat of the Nazis, Waldrop, who is not Jewish, immigrated to the United States, the country of the winners, where she could count herself "among the privileged, the conquerors" (xix). But it is not that simple. Rosmarie Waldrop (same initials as Roger Williams) lives in Roger Williams country and re-enacts his ambivalence. She is white and educated, but she is also a poet and a woman. Together, poet and woman bespeak marginality and irrelevance in the culture, which really amounts to a kind of permanent banishment. Structuring her *Key* chapter by chapter after Williams's *Key*, with exactly the same chapter titles, Waldrop offers, like him, though in a much leaner version, word lists and observations and a closing poem, the latter being preceded by an italicized text in a young woman's voice. If read as a poem, as I insist it must be, each brief chapter mirrors the clash of cultures and denounces the destruction of one of them in the Algonquian words borrowed from Williams and scattered in bold in Waldrop's introductory prose and concluding poem. The woman's voice (of course, not in Williams) functions as the critical witness to a destruction that has no end.

I conclude by quoting the first chapter in full, showing how in *A Key into the Language of America*, Rosmarie Waldrop re-enacts the complexity of Roger Williams's fate in an America of superior beings (think conquerors, think male) and inferior beings (think conquered, think female).

SALUTATIONS

Are of two sorts and come immediately before the body. The Pronunciation varies according to the point where the tongue makes contact with pumice found in great quantity. This lends credence, but no hand. Not so entirely Narragansett, the roof of the mouth. Position of hand or weapon conventional or volcanic formation.

Asco wequassunnúmmis. Good morrow.

Sing
Salubrious
Imitation
Intimate

*I was born in a town on the other side which didn't want me in so many. All streets were long and led. In the center, a single person had no house or friends to **allay excessive sorrowe**. I, like other girls, forgot my name in the noise of traffic, opening my arms more to measure their extension than to offer embrace.*

the Courteous Pagan
barefoot and yes
his name laid down
as dead
one openness
one woman door
so slow in otherwise
so close

The poetic work of Waldrop's *Key* upon Williams's *Key* enhances the latter's poeticity even as Williams's work casts a political purpose over Waldrop's *Key*. And thus we cannot but place American poetry right at the center of "hard core American studies."

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