

American Studies Today: New Research Agendas, eds. Winfried Fluck, Erik Redling, Sabine Sielke, and Hubert Zapf. Heidelberg: Winter, 2014. American Studies Monograph Series, no. 230. 475 pp.

In his famous foundational essay of 1957, “Can American Studies Develop a Method,” Henry Nash Smith proposed “the study of American culture, past and present, as a whole.” Though he did not use the word “interdisciplinary” here, he suggested the context of cultural history for the study of his chosen example, the writer Mark Twain, and proposed a research agenda that held more general significance for the whole field: “What is needed is a method of analysis that is at once literary (for one must begin with an analytical reading of the texts that takes into account structure, imagery, diction, and so on) and sociological (for many of the forces at work in the fiction are clearly of social origin).”

Sixty years later, it would appear to be somewhat more difficult to advocate such a clear-cut single research agenda for American Studies, a field that has been, as the editors of the volume at hand put it, “for many years... dominated and decisively shaped by revisionist approaches that emerged in the critique of the myth and symbol school and the liberal tradition” (ix), of which Smith was a prime representative. This critique led to a stronger focus on race, ethnicity, class, and gender and to a better understanding of American culture in international contexts. It is telling that Smith’s essay is quoted in *American Studies Today* as a version of American “exceptionalism” (47), a term that occasionally reappears here and that, as George Blaustein has reminded us, was brought into circulation by Stalin in 1929 when he dismissed as the “heresy of American exceptionalism” the notion that “communism might succeed in the United States without a violent revolution.”

American Studies Today is envisioned as an attempt to go beyond the revisionists and “open up the field to a wider spectrum of questions that can (and should) be asked about America” (x). In this manner, the volume takes stock of new work that extends familiar current trends in American studies (transnationalism, transculturalism, globalization, postcolonialism, ecology, race, media, and visual culture). It also proposes less commonly practiced areas as new research agendas (relational sociology, the concept of recognition, ethics and

aesthetics, “science | culture | aesthetics”) and advocates the expansion of studies in class and poverty. Any scholar interested in one or more of these twelve topics will find helpful guidance in the discussions of various broad fields through their representative scholarship and encounter thought-provoking presentations of some authors’ own research projects as models for future research agendas.

Among the twenty-eight contributors are leading German Americanists of several generations. Most are scholars of literature and culture and all but one teach at a German university. Many know each other well and comment on each other’s work, at times by using first names only. In one case, a jointly written topical essay uses both the first person singular and the first person plural (331n). One might thus expect a uniform manifesto by a cohesive group. Yet *American Studies Today* is anything but that. It is instead a testament to the value of constructive discussion and even vigorous disagreement in an open-ended, pluralist spirit.

The fact that the editors have chosen a lively format contributes to this effect. Each topical essay is accompanied by a substantial critical response so that readers who may have been swayed by an argument are forced to reconsider it from a different point of view. The opening pair of essays on transnationalism (Simon Wendt and Hans-Jürgen Grabbe) serves as model in establishing the point-counterpoint format; whereas Wendt maps out a (cautiously criticized) “transnational turn” in a broad range of exemplary Americanist scholarship, Grabbe stresses that “older generations of scholars have also excelled in transnational history although they were blissfully ignorant of the term” (29). Drawing on Marc Chenetier, Grabbe also adds a crucial distinction between the historians’ scholarship and the practice of literary and cultural critics who were drawn to transnationalism “because of disenchantment with the paradigm of American exceptionalism or even with US society in general” (32). While Wendt concludes that “transnational perspectives will remain one sophisticated methodological approach among others, which, above all, should contribute to a better understanding of both U.S. history and world history” (24), Grabbe feels that transnationalism will not “mark a methodological turn that American Studies and American history should follow *in toto*” (32). The reader is thus forced to weigh two contradictory options

against each other when contemplating transnationalism as a possible research agenda. One gets more fodder for thought from Ruth Mayer's apt observation later on that the very term "transnational" seems to be affected by a "momentum of euphoric inscription" (141).

Such different options are also presented in several of the other research agendas. For example, in "American Studies and Globalization" Ulfried Reichardt develops a thoughtful model of "reading globally" and "decentering the field" by facing "moments of 'untranslatability,'" arguing that "difference" matters not only "on the side of objects of study—people, cultures, identities—but on the side of the concepts and presuppositions of observations as well" (446, 450). When Reichardt places Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" in the context of a traditional Japanese haiku by Matsuo Bashō, Pound's poem reveals the presence of a poetic self and demonstrates that "an individualized perspective remains the precondition of the observation as well as of the proposition" (452). By contrast, Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche, emphasizes respectfully "that the comparative reading offered is a highly mediated one, because, strictly speaking, it is not a Japanese haiku that is interpreted but its English translation and thus a rewriting that necessarily implies a degree of adaptation to a conceptual framework that is not its own. The implicit assumption is that this haiku does translate" (464). This comment, which echoes a concern about languages in the transnational cluster, raises the larger question of how polyglot, or at least oligoglot, Americanists should be—or else how they could best create networks of international cooperation in order to address the new agendas most responsibly.

The volume clearly adheres to the belief that scholarship does translate. Based on a conference held in Berlin in 2011 and published in Germany 2014, the volume's implied reader is English-speaking, perhaps even English-only-speaking. Yet though the book quotes even German philosophers from Heidegger to Sloterdijk in English translation and only one contributor uses any German quotations at all, *American Studies Today* has not received much of a critical reaction in the United States, thus justifying the worry articulated in this volume that scholarship from outside the United States still is not often consulted by U.S.-based Americanists, even when written in English. (Perhaps this sad fact also

explains a certain anxiety in this book that manifests itself in frequent self-citations.)

Winfried Fluck's very carefully constructed and cogently developed essay "Recognition and American Studies" engages and critiques Charles Taylor with a line of argumentation that ranges from Tocqueville's observation of the race for distinction in democratic societies to reader response theory and ultimately argues for an interactive model of reading that would link narrative to recognition, for "from the perspective of cultural and literary studies, we also reconfigure our sense of self in constant interaction with cultural material" (197). His elegant commentator Peter Schneck questions the use of Tocqueville and also finds it "a bit unfortunate" that Fluck ignores Taylor's own thinking about the *social* imaginary (215-16), which makes Fluck's dismissal of Taylor unwarranted.

As these examples suggest, this collection's format intensifies a reader's interactive experience of being swayed by an argument, identifying with it and getting ready to adopt it as new research agenda when a contrary comment generates a reconsideration in the light of that critique. Perhaps one way a reader could create a new reading experience would be to expand Hanjo Berressem's smart suggestion, in response to Hubert Zapf's very helpful survey of ecocriticism that surprisingly regards "literature as cultural ecology" (228-37), and read not just one article but the whole book backwards, that is, read each of the comments before reading the respective main essay.

One agenda cluster goes a step further, as the topical essay writer incorporates the commentator's critique. Thomas Claviez' "Traces of a Metonymic Society in American Literary History" offers a comprehensive and theoretically informed reading of the age-old contrast between metaphor and metonymy and moves toward an argument for metonymic tendencies in American literature with the central example of Melville's "Bartleby"—read against the thicket of recent readings by Agamben, Deleuze, Žižek, and Rancière. Susanne Rohr, in her clear response, questions Claviez' reading of Bartleby as "metonymy proper" (326), yet Claviez has already addressed her critique in his essay to which he added a new footnote, and he now ends by thanking Rohr, viewing "constructive criticism" as "the most valuable thing academia has to offer."

Rohr also raises another question when she points to the "aspect of gender" in "Bartleby"

and writes: “the fact that a person is continuously spoken of but not speaking himself is indeed spectacularly staged in Melville’s story with a male protagonist but would lose all its glamour or excitement were the protagonist female” (325). This may well be the only word on “gender” in this collection, as it is by now perhaps perceived as an “old” agenda (though race and class are apparently not). “New” agenda might, of course, imply that there are other “old” approaches to American Studies and the Humanities that may no longer be agenda-worthy. One of the approaches that seems to have fallen by the wayside is textual editing and authorial revision. It is telling that Claviez’ daunting reading of Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” uses the text of a popular paperback reprint while in her response, Rohr quotes the story from the *Heath Anthology*. Since two critical editions of Melville’s *Piazza Tales* have been available for decades, and an earlier draft of the story has been reprinted and discussed, one wonders whether textual revision—as Hannah Sullivan has recently studied it—should be revived as a research agenda, both old and new, for American Studies.

While the dialogical form keeps the reader alert, *American Studies Today* also contains some provocative impulses for American Studies and the Humanities more generally. Christa Buschendorf and Astrid Franke impressively map out “The Implied Sociology and Politics of Literary Texts,” drawing on Freud, Bergson, Norbert Elias, and Pierre Bourdieu, and show “why literature and art in general can do something sociology cannot: namely to convey to us the subjective experience of processes that can be empirically studied but are otherwise difficult to capture in their impact on the individual psyche” (101). Their commentator Günter Leyppoldt largely agrees that “when cultural sociology attempts a non-reductive analysis of cultural practice, it has a great deal to offer American Studies” (116), though he does quibble that “being enchanted by Jamesian ‘beauty’ can be every bit as real as the social prestige connected with it” (115). Udo Hebel offers a careful serial reading of iconic American images (mostly photography) and the iconographic tradition, the specific sources to which such images allude. Drawing on much new scholarship in history, sociology, and cultural studies, Heike Paul’s interesting work on “‘Race,’ Racism, and Tacit Knowing” offers new departures for the study

of “how ‘race’ becomes powerful and at the same time remains unarticulated and resists full explication” (282), which is why it may be seen as part of “tacit knowledge”—a term, by the way, that connects well with the volume’s recurring focus on “implied” and “implicit” cultural features.

Some comments, too, open up larger vistas. Responding to the excellent paper jointly written by Erik Redling and Sabine Sielke, “Science | Culture | Aesthetics: New Crossroads for American Studies,” Klaus Benesch takes the discussion into a new direction and points out that the prestige of the “hard sciences” has to rest on “style and form of presentation as essential ingredients for the construction of scientific authority,” which is why “a thoroughgoing investigation of the cultural and ideological underpinning of scientific practices, including their descriptive and normative registers, their objectives, and research agendas, and their objects of study is certainly in order” (358). This consideration could, of course, strengthen humanists’ standing in the academic world. And in a superb critique of Digital Humanities and the concern about “accessibility,” Frank Kelleter worries about “the question of what it means for texts to *remain readable*” (389).

In this respect, the essay collection demonstrates, in a series of shorter and more extended close readings, how confrontations, at close range, with texts and images remain essential to the new research agendas. From Buschendorf’s exemplary exegesis of Ralph Ellison’s “Cadillac Flambé” (83-90) to Claviez’ already mentioned reading of “Bartleby” (310-13), this book offers new contextual perspectives on well-known and less well-known texts by Walt Whitman (308-09), Hart Crane (315), Meridel LeSueur (69), Don DeLillo (256-57), Colson Whitehead (94-99), Dave Eggers (145-51), A.R. Ammons (229-30), Adrienne Rich (316), and Elizabeth Bishop (232-33) and on photography from Joe Rosenthal (412-13) to Tom Stone (57-58). Some of these smart close readings are perfect gifts to teachers. Redling and Sielke’s essay, and this constitutes my last example, offer a fascinating reading of “Listening to Sonny Rollins at the Five-Spot” (1964), a poem by Paul Blackburn against the background of Sonny Rollins’ rendition of the song “There Will Never Be Another You.” They show that Blackburn “translated...Rollins’ improvisations...into the medium of writing” (341). They mention the availability

of Rollins' recording, and, with the help of the internet, a whole intermedial or, as Martha Nadell put it, an "interartistic" teaching unit could be created with Blackburn's recorded poem on the *New Jazz Poets* album and Rollins' performance on youtube, to which Nat King Cole's popular 1960 rendition of the song could be added as point of departure for Rollins' improvisations and Blackburn's text.

One can only hope that no literary Americanist will ever address the opening line of that song, "this is our last dance together," to close readings, as they constitute the life blood of new agendas as well as of American Studies work from the age of unquestioned exceptionalism.

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