

PAUL GILES. *Antipodean America: Australasia and the Constitution of U.S. Literature*. (OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013), 575 pp.

In this impressive study of the pervasive yet often neglected literary and cultural relationships between the United States and Australasia, Paul Giles takes readers on a tour beginning with Benjamin Franklin's satires and ending with J.M. Coetzee's novels. Consisting of ten roughly chronologically ordered chapters, this book submits American literary history to a 'topsy-turvy' rereading by looking through an antipodean lens. This results in a reconfiguration of familiar themes and tropes, key texts, literary and cultural movements as well as the works of individual authors. Enlightenment, manifest destiny, modernism, globalization, surrealism, and postmodernism are among the subjects that Giles scrutinizes with regard to their Australasian investments and their potential to unsettle the notion of American exceptionalism. Choosing a "transcontinental comparative perspective," Giles, whose previous monographs have been important contributions to a transatlantic and global remapping of American literary history, aims to "realign the emergence of US culture within an Australasian orbit" in order to show how such an approach "could serve to destabilize assumptions of national identity and, hence, to problematize American projections of utopian values onto the variegated nature of the Pacific scene" (Giles 13).

Thus, his book teems with re-interpretations of canonical texts by British, US-American, Australian or 'hybrid' writers, but also returns to the works of less well-known authors in an attempt to show that "Australasia has profoundly, if indirectly, helped to shape the direction of American literature" (3). As the story he recounts in his book unfolds, Australasia emerges as an "imaginative space" (4), whose presence manifests itself in literary texts belonging to different genres and periods through "figures of hemispheric reversal" (4).

In chapter two, following the introduction, Giles searches works by Benjamin Franklin, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and John Ledyard for stirrings of a planetary consciousness, as well as instances of geographical and perspectival inversions, all of which are meant to reflect a de-centering of America or, more generally, forms of "geographical reorientation" (79). Chapter three looks even

more closely at geographical and astronomical images and themes in the works of Philip Freneau, Richard Alsop, Joel Barlow, and Charles Brockden Brown. Barlow's epic poem *The Columbiad* (1807) serves as an important example of America's positioning within a global context—written at a time that is usually perceived as the peak of nationalist sentiment. Rather than merely reiterating the rules of neo-classical style, *The Columbiad* uses a "style of *bouleversement*" (93; emphasis in the original) that is—it will become clearer throughout the study—symptomatic of the interest that American writers took in Australasia. Australasia was an idea that allowed them to question conventional territorial geographies, to point towards the porosity of geopolitical and geographical borders and to play with aspects of geographical transposition. In these eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century texts, America's fate appears to be "mutually intertwined" with that of the rest of the world (105).

Chapter four investigates maritime writing of the antebellum period, i.e. the burlesque narratives of Washington Irving (e.g. *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*), the sea fictions of Edgar Allan Poe (e.g. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*) and James Fenimore Cooper as well as the impact of Charles Wilke's exploration reports on literature of the period. Its main argument is that the Southern Hemisphere functioned as a "distinctive geographical and metaphorical presence" (115) in America, reminding American citizens of the instability of those geographical equations that had accounted for the idea of a national identity and acted as a foil against which American values could be honed.

Chapter five turns to works by major nineteenth-century voices to show how antipodean thought served as an image for writers such as Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau and helped them to envision an alternative colonial zone. Melville's *Typee* depicts Australasia as a meeting point of Western lifestyles and the kind of primitivism coined by the Victorian imagination. *Moby-Dick* defamiliarizes America by having it rotate on its axis (166), an image that Giles then follows up on in his discussion of the Gold Rush, which enhanced economic and cultural exchange between California and Australasia. Again, America appears as a "crazy mirror" (183), which distorted assumptions about national identity and the constitution, as Giles's

reading of works by Thoreau (e.g. *The Maine Woods*), Whitman and Emerson, shows. Emily Dickinson, Giles argues, similarly uses antipodean images in her writing, but internalizes the discourses of geology and astronomy that were encountered in previous chapters to elaborate “a radically alternative, transhistorical perspective” (192).

Chapter six takes a transatlantic turn by focusing on the dialogue between the United States and Victorian Britain as reflected e.g. in Anthony Trollope’s travel writing which establishes patterns of triangulation between Britain, the United States and Australasia. As in previous chapters, antipodean geography is used as a point of departure to reflect on different kinds of alterity and the malleability of boundaries. Henry Adams worked in a similar fashion, according to Giles, by stressing the transpacific dimension of globalization in his *Education* and correspondence. Mark Twain, Bret Harte and Rudyard Kipling are other writers whose transnationalism is discussed in this chapter. Rather than embodying national values, these writers seemed troubled by feelings of estrangement caused by a perceived de-centering of America. In chapter seven, Giles explores Australasian modernism and its relation to indigenous culture within permeable contact zones. With sub-chapters on hybridity in John Boyle O’Reilly’s works and anthropology and primitivism in Jack London’s travel narratives, this chapter seeks to make a connection between the cosmopolitanism of global modernisms and Australasia’s cultural and social hybridity.

Chapter eight discusses gender issues in terms of cartographic inversion. Charlotte Perkins Gilman plays a central role in *avant-garde* feminism. Other figures with a penchant for inversion are Lola Ridge, born in Ireland in 1873 before emigrating to New Zealand, and Hart Crane. As Giles shows in this chapter, surrealism represents a particularly relevant and tempting movement given its delight in turning things upside down. Christina Stead is an Australian American poet whose modernist prose writings, e.g. her novel *The Man Who Loved Children* and *I’m Dying Laughing* addresses issues of displacement and alienation.

Chapter nine approaches antipodean culture as a ghostly presence that haunted American culture of the post-World War II and Vietnam War periods in the shape of violence. The growing American influence on Australian

popular culture and entertainment falls into this period as well as the specters of warfare in the Pacific realm in the poetry of Karl Shapiro and Frank O’Hara. Disorientation is a major theme in Louis Simpson’s poetic work, a poet who “recalibrate[d] the narratives of American exceptionalism against a wider circumference of colonial conditioning” (389).

The final chapter, chapter ten, investigates Antipodean American postmodernism. At its center stand some major literary figures, such as Salman Rushdie, Peter Carey and J. M. Coetzee, all of whom, either by virtue of their own biographies or in their writing, trace transnational circuits. The rewriting of narratives of Australian and American literature and culture is a subject in Thomas Keneally’s novels; astronomy and displacement play an important role in Shirley Hazzard’s *The Transit of Venus*, where Australasia becomes a “literary method, a way of defamiliarizing encrusted social conventions” (428). For Rushdie, Australasia serves a figure of thought that allows him to experiment with various kinds of multiplicity. In Carey’s works, the experiences of American exile figures are an important topic, and with J. M. Coetzee, a South African who moved to Australia in 2002, parallels become visible between his narrative inversions, his use of antipodean geography and his treatment of US imperialism.

Giles’s extremely readable, knowledgeable and expansive study contributes to ongoing discussions in the field of transnational, transatlantic and hemispheric literary studies in two ways: On the one hand, the example of Australasia allows him to explore and thereby lead to a better understanding of the intersection between post-colonialism and America’s transnationalism, to “trace points of convergence and divergence between these former British colonies” (6). In this regard he expands his own theoretical work on transatlantic American studies (e.g. in *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature*).¹ Analogies and homologies play as much of a role as forms of vilification and escapism (487). It is *qua* Australia as America’s colonial other, its “alter ego” (3) and “specter” (5), that a refined understanding of America’s colonial and post-colonial past can be achieved. This is a past that caused discom-

¹ Paul Giles. *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).

fort many times, Australasia's colonial legacy reminding Americans of their own Anglophilia, "the potentially troubling question of a continuing emotional allegiance to the British crown and customs" (176). As Giles argues: "Australasia has formed a shadow self in US national narratives, with the cultural histories of the two countries having long been imbricated within each other" (5).

The other strength of *Antipodean America* is its impressively balanced compositional method that is implemented on a number of levels. A mixture of famous and less well-known literary voices; theory, context and close reading; central themes that interconnect the vast temporal span—these are the structural features which, along with Giles's eloquence, make this book a pleasurable and instructive read. Furthermore, Giles is concerned with enhancing the reader-friendliness of his monograph (counting more than 500

pages) by inserting concise summaries at the end of each sub-chapter (which makes it easier for readers to scan and read the book in parts only). Here, however, lies its only weakness: the claim that antipodean elements very often find stylistic, thematic and formal expression in the shape of inversion, astronomical images and the play with geography results in an inspired approach to the texts. Yet this idea is, at times, excessively used of and thus loses some of its poignancy. Some interpretations along the lines of a 'bouleversement' come across as labored and invite the question whether such figures of inversion constitute a sufficient indication of a text's 'Australasian' investments. This minor point of criticism notwithstanding, this book is highly recommendable to scholars and students working in the field of transnational American and postcolonial studies.

Bern

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