

LAURA BIEGER, RAMÓN SALDÍVAR and JOHANNES VOELZ, eds., *The Imaginary and its Worlds: American Studies after the Transnational Turn* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College P, 2013), 312 pp.

The collection of papers in *The Imaginary and its Worlds* was developed out of a conference hosted at the John-F-Kennedy-Institut of the Freie Universität Berlin in the summer of 2009 to honor the scholarly career of Winfried Fluck. Fittingly, the contributors here consider ways in which conceptions of the “imaginary” have shaped American studies both during and after the “transnational turn,” as that idea became institutionalized during the first decade of the twenty-first century. About half the contributors here are from Germany and half from elsewhere, and one of the most valuable aspects of this critical anthology involves its illumination of different ways in which the term “social imaginary” has been used and the different intellectual traditions it evokes. As Fluck himself observes, whereas for Cornelius Castoriadis the “radical instituting imaginary” was “the source of the self-creation of society ex nihilo,” for other scholars, such as Charles Taylor, the notion of a social imaginary has tended in the direction of “interpellation and subjection” (259), particularly in its more recent uses. In their introduction, Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldívar and Johannes Voelz observe that whereas the Lacanian imaginary has worked through misrepresentation, the genealogy of the imaginary in Germany has been influenced more by Wolfgang Iser’s reception theory, and indeed it is that exploration of “the imaginary through the lens of reception aesthetics” that constitutes Fluck’s major contribution to this field (xxv). Saldívar’s own essay emphasizes Fluck’s debt to Iser (12), while Fluck himself in his “coda” lays stress on how literary texts are above all “aesthetic objects” (238). The fact that they “continue to provide an aesthetic experience,” even though the “historical situation” framing their conditions of production may have changed, has the effect of ensuring in Fluck’s eyes that the Fredric Jameson maxim “‘always historicize’ [...] cannot solve the problem of interpretive conflict” (238). For Fluck, such “interpretative disagreement and conflict” is not “an irritating problem but, quite the contrary, an indispensable resource” (257), one that locates the value of cultural texts in relation to their transhistorical afterlife.

The German tradition of American studies that Fluck espouses, as we see here, has tended

always to be intertwined with the shifting horizons of reception theory. This has lent it a vestige of philosophical idealism that has served to differentiate it from more popular Marxist approaches, grounded as they are in social and economic contexts. Herwig Friedl’s essay in this collection, “William James versus Charles Taylor,” establishes an opposition between James’s philosophy of religion and Taylor’s understanding of a circumscribed social imaginary, while also drawing on Heidegger’s readings of *Existenziale* to adumbrate a “radical empiricist” understanding of religious phenomena (76). Heinz Ickstadt similarly notes how the “pervasive desire for organic coherence” associated with an older “web of imaginaries” (58) linked to more traditional understandings of American modernism has recently been interrogated by a “deconstructive onslaught” (43), characterized for Ickstadt by Michael North’s *Dialect of Modernism* and Walter Benn Michaels’s *Our America* (43), that has effectively redefined modernism as a field fluctuating between contradictory desires. In another German contribution, Christa Buschendorf describes how W.E.B. Du Bois’s “perspective of figurational sociology on the cultural imaginary” (84) was shaped by his work with “the renowned Professor Gustav Schmoller” in Berlin (104), where, as Du Bois acknowledges in *Dusk of Dawn*, he “began to see the race problem in America, the problem of the peoples of Africa and Asia, and the development of Europe as one” (98). Buschendorf adduces here an intellectual analogy between “genuinely interdisciplinary research based on statistics, economics, (economic) history, and sociology” and Du Bois’s own theoretical development of a “transnational, global perspective” (98). Such connections are interesting, although they seem inevitably to carry the freight of a reflexive national allegory, through which Du Bois’s own crossing of intellectual boundaries becomes a mirror image of the interdisciplinary intellectual enterprise underwriting German versions of American studies. Fluck himself aligns the reading process with “transfer” (242), the creation of “other, more expressive versions of ourselves” (243), and elements of this “transfer process” (246) writ large are evident in this imaginary German model of American studies, which reflects back, as in a crazy mirror, the assumptions and predispositions of its interlocutors.

All of this is different in kind from the relentlessly demystifying perspective pursued here by the U.S. contributors. Walter Benn Michaels

writes compellingly of how neoliberalism over the past thirty years “has played almost no visible role in our cultural imaginary” (177), even though “we have been living in a historical period rather than a state of nature” (178); Donald E. Pease follows “Žižek’s Lacanian reading of state fantasy” to indict Obama’s “failure to realize the transformative change he promised” (232); Mark Seltzer describes how computer games contributed to “an aesthetic of cold war modernism” (146). Lawrence Buell’s essay salutes Fluck for his skepticism about transnationalism and his recognition that an “analysis of the cultural sources of American power [...] continues to be as urgent as ever” (38), while Christopher Newfield has an intriguing piece on how Obama presents to the public an image of “‘nonideological’ maturity grounded in ambivalence” (1989), in a carefully calibrated attempt to appeal to the swing voter. Obama, argues Newfield, “says that compromise is the nature of American democracy and the nature of American politics,” and the third president of the twenty-first century has deliberately held up the icon of Abraham Lincoln to rebut the idea “that the Emancipation ‘compromise’ meant that Lincoln had sold out his antislavery principles” (206).

Is it possible, I wonder, to construct an “imaginary,” a force field of collective projection, based around the idea of compromise? Certainly the tradition of philosophical pragmatism had a long life in twentieth-century United States culture, from John Dewey to John F. Kennedy, and Pease’s observation that “Obama has not displaced but presupposed Bush’s homeland state of exception” (215), though acute enough in its forensic analysis, seems pessimistically to undervalue the points at which Obama is different from (rather than the same as) his predecessor. As we see from key films of the Obama era such as Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln* (2012), the mythology of this presidency was constructed not so much around utopian vision but around the *longueurs* and frustrations of political wheeling and dealing. In fact, one interesting aspect of Obama’s post-exceptionalist persona has been the way he has chosen explicitly to position himself as immersed within the legalistic possibilities of politics, rather than seeking continually to transcend them. There has been a long line of recent U.S. presidents attempting to present themselves as moral agents emerging from outside the Washington beltway to regenerate the American body politic, whether

that has operated symbolically (as for Jimmy Carter), rhetorically (for George H.W. Bush, who tried to pass himself off as a down-home Texan) or as a focal point for the purifications of religious apocalypse (as in the case of George W. Bush). Newfield, however, puts his finger on something that seems qualitatively different about the Obama regime, its willingness to acknowledge how the political system of the United States limits its legislators, like those in any other country, to arts of the possible. In this sense, the Obama presidency has not been readily conducive either to the traditional mythologies of American studies in Europe, where the “land of the free” has been institutionally positioned as a beacon of exemplary regeneration, or to the subject’s condition within the United States, where the grubby deals enacted on political committees necessarily fail to measure up to the lofty ideals of social activism.

This collection of essays is a fine tribute to Fluck’s significant career as a pioneer of international American studies, but it also raises broader questions about ways in which non-U.S. perspectives on American cultural politics can provide an important check and balance system within the field. If the German angle on America tends at times here towards a traditional romanticism, the U.S. approach sometimes lapses into an ascetic *realpolitik*, within which the lapse from a state of grace or promise becomes its own Manichaean reward. Transnationalism, like the imaginary, situates itself methodologically in an in-between state, where categories are neither quite one thing nor the other. Bieger, Saldívar and Voelz point out in their introduction how humanities scholars “have been trained, and compelled, to search for spaces of resistance” (x), but their volume of essays usefully complicates this paradigm by suggesting ways in which resistance and immersion, like the national and the transnational, tend to be symbiotically intertwined. Given that Fluck has long expressed reservations about ways in which transnationalism might seek refuge in an imaginary space outside the circuits of American power, it is especially appropriate that this tribute volume to an *eminence grise* should help to demystify such illusions by opening up new ways of understanding area studies within a twenty-first-century global environment.

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