

Twentieth-Century American Literary Historiography

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Volume 3 Issue 2 (June 2001) Article 7**Marietta Messmer,****"Twentieth-Century American Literary Historiography"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss2/7>>

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Abstract: In her article, "Twentieth-Century American Literary Historiography," Marietta Messmer analyzes the ways in which contemporary histories of American literature -- members of a discursive formation that has traditionally privileged a nationalist paradigm -- position themselves in the context of current debates on constructions of post-national cultural identity. Concentrating on the changing conceptualizations of the term "American" employed in these literary histories, Messmer traces briefly the major shifts in historiographical negotiations of American interliterary and intercultural relations throughout the twentieth century. Messmer discusses the ways in which American histories of literature move from an earlier -- albeit reductionist -- interest in defining American literary identity through difference (manifesting itself in attempts to disaffiliate American literary texts from their transatlantic, and in particular their British, contexts) toward a seemingly more inclusive focus on American literature's intracultural diversity and polyvocality. Ultimately, however, Messmer argues that, to a large degree, the current historiographical emphasis on intra-American pluralism is all too frequently accompanied by new attempts at establishing (a revised version of) historiographical nationalism. In this sense, transatlantic disaffiliative and intra-American pluralist constructions of identity can be interpreted as two versions of American cultural and literary nation building.

Marietta MESSMER

Twentieth-Century American Literary Historiography

Drawing attention to the ways in which Jefferson instrumentalized the Declaration of Independence to construct, out of isolated events happening in isolated colonies, an anti-British national narrative, David Thelen emphasizes in "Making History and Making the United States" (1998) that "from 1776 until sometime in the 1960s or 1970s, it was possible to believe -- indeed, it was hard to question -- that nations were, or even should be, the embodiment of people's destinies -- that nations could express their identities, solve their problems, and be entrusted with their dreams and fates. The modern practice of history was born a couple of centuries ago to serve this process, to invent narratives and persuade peoples to interpret their personal experiences within national terms and narratives" (373). A similar purpose can be identified for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary histories, as Claudio Guillén (6), David Perkins (4), and René Wellek and Austin Warren (51), among others, have reminded us. Beginning with John Neal's *American Writers* (1824-25), American literary historiography has emphatically embraced this nationalist paradigm, striving to identify the specifically "American" qualities in America's newly emergent national literature. Yet in their attempts to define and defend an autonomous American literary identity against British slanders (such as Sydney Smith's "Who reads an American book?"), many nineteenth-century histories of American literature not only foregrounded the specifically "American" elements in American literary texts; they also, in a kind of counter-hegemonic gesture, challenged the perceived British cultural superiority by systematically circumscribing European -- and in particular British -- "influences" on American literature. As I recently demonstrated in "Reading National American Literary Historiography Internationally," "these literary histories tied strategies of American literary and cultural identity formation to strategies of literary and cultural differentiation and dissociation from Great Britain" in an attempt to reconfigure interliterary relationships and redefine concomitant cultural power hierarchies (201, 209).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, this instrumentalization of literary historiography in the service of America's literary and cultural nation building was heightened due to the necessity to justify the establishment of American literature departments in universities across the country. Emphasizing the intensity of this "campaign for American literature study" (Vanderbilt 186) Kermit Vanderbilt quotes Randolph Bourne, who, in 1914, insisted that "we need to cultivate 'a new American nationalism' similar to the 'cultural chauvinism' of the French" (Vanderbilt 207). Literary histories were thus, as Henry Seidel Canby remarks in his review of Norman Foerster's *A Reinterpretation of American Literature* (1928), even more urgently called upon "to discover how far American literature is American, and when so, why" (qtd. in Vanderbilt 58). Richard Ruland has summarized the political significance of these historiographical constructions of America's literary identity thus: "It would seem that the need to define a distinct field [of American literature] to secure its academic acceptability led ultimately to an extreme position, that the insistence on the uniqueness of American literature has been more a political than a literary idea after all, that objective scrutiny of the nation's art has often been displaced by insistence on its relevance to the national identity and destiny" (62).

This challenge to establish the uniqueness of American literature led to the continuation of nineteenth-century historiographical configurations of America's literary identity well into the twentieth century. To justify the existence of American literature as a separate discipline required first and foremost its rhetorical separation from British literature and culture. Christopher Balme confirms that "in the conceptual world of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, clear cultural boundaries were essential for cementing identity, and expressed notions of difference and even superiority vis-à-vis other nations and cultures" (9). In American literary historiography, this particularly manifests itself in an essentialist, homogenizing conceptualization of "American" literature and culture in contradistinction to its European -- and in particular its British -- counterpart. As Ian Tyrrell observes in "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History" (1991), "the exceptionalist tradition assumed an essentialist dichotomy between 'America' and 'Europe'" (1034). For this reason, many early twentieth-century literary histories narrowed down their dis-

cussions of American intercultural and interliterary relations to a Eurocentrically reductionist circumscription of specific transatlantic connections. In this way, America's intracultural heterogeneity was subjected to a rhetorical process of cultural homogenization in order to reinforce external cultural boundaries.

In early twentieth-century histories of American literature, this rhetorical construction of American "difference" manifests itself in two -- complementary -- strategies. First, literary histories project America's political independence onto its cultural and literary identity constructions by employing specifically American politico-historical principles of organization. Although the first *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917), for example, remains moderate in its nationalist goals -- even striving to distance itself from "the full rigour of the demand for an independent national literature" (1, vii) -- it conceives American literature as an expression of America's national political life. This is underlined through its chapter divisions according to American political and historical periods, a principle of organization that Fred Lewis Pattee fully approved of in his "A Call for a Literary Historian" (1924). Specifically, he urges that any survey of American literature "must be written against the background of American history if it is even to seem American" (11). Second, the significance of America's political independence for its cultural and literary identity formation is reinforced by an emphasis on the environment's shaping influence on literary productions. In the wake of Hippolyte Taine, an American text's "national" (and hence un-British) quality is henceforth determined by the American environment it emerged from. In this way, the American milieu can function as cultural homogenizer (with the built-in effect of the notion of the melting pot) by erasing all traces of potential cultural heterogeneity, and in particular by "naturalizing" European "influences" on American literary texts.

Vernon Louis Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-30) is representative of a long line of environmentally determinist literary histories: "I have considered the incoming into America of certain old-world ideals and institutions, and the subjection of those ideals and institutions to the pressure of a new environment, from which resulted the overthrow of the principles of monarchy and aristocracy, and the setting up of the principle of republicanism" (2, vii). Like the first *Cambridge History of American Literature*, Parrington thus views American literature "as more or less encoded reflections of American history" (1, 146), shaped, in particular, by what he identifies as its "main current," namely Jeffersonian liberalism. Exclaiming that "we were free of Anglophilism, of colonialism, of apology at last" (1, 142), Parrington consequently regards all European "influences" as "naturalized" (2, x) by the American soil. This manifests itself, for example, in his insistence on foregrounding the partly *American* origins of international (transatlantic) movements such as Transcendentalism: "Intellectually emancipated ... and with the dynamic principle of freedom of inquiry in their possession, the younger generation of New England intellectuals naturally opened their eyes to discover what winds of new doctrine were blowing in the world" (373); "they took to Germany what they sought there. Nevertheless it was a tremendous experience to come upon *their own* philosophy there" (2, 374; my emphases).

Joseph Warren Beach's *The Outlook for American Prose* (1926) constitutes an even more extreme version of the ways in which American literary histories set out to circumscribe transatlantic interliterary relations: "We have had our classical period in American Literature -- a period largely of cultivated and anemic writers milk fed upon the culture of England. We are at present extremely conscious of the need for a literature more indigenous, more expressive of ourselves, bolder and more original than that of Lowell and Longfellow" (21). This agenda leads him to exclude all colonial authors (due to their perceived imitativeness of European literary models), in addition to Poe, Cooper, and Longfellow (owing to their groundedness in European literary traditions). Whitman, on the other hand, advances to one of the central, because genuinely "American," writers. The culmination point of this nationalist period of literary and cultural disaffiliation from Europe through intra-American homogenization is marked by Robert Spiller's 1948 *Literary History of the United States*. Even though arguing that "it is quite possible, and indeed necessary, to write of American literature in terms of its European, and especially its British, sources" (1, xiv), Spiller emphasizes nevertheless that American literature is based on both a "transported" and a "transformed" European culture (1, xiv-xv). Placing his emphasis on the latter he cites diversity, progress, mobility,

adventure, independence, democracy, aspirations of the individual, and optimism as examples of such "transforming" forces (1, xvi), which ultimately minimize the impact of European "influences" on American writings.

Reminiscent of both the melting pot ideology as well as the *e pluribus unum* exhortation, in the preface to the second edition of his *Literary History of the United States* Spiller highlights his concern with narrative and national unity as well as cultural homogenization: "The relation of what is called the American way of life ... to the national unity is extremely important ... our literature ... has been deeply, often subconsciously, aware of its responsibility in the making of a nation from a complex of peoples in voluntary union" (qtd. in Elliott, "New" 613). And as Alide Cagidemetro has pointed out in "'The Rest of the Story'; or, Multilingual American Literature," it was the American language, in particular, that functioned as "the necessary national glue" (20) to enable this cultural unification. For this reason, according to Cagidemetro, Spiller omitted in his *Literary History* all American literatures written in languages other than English (e.g., the Francophone literature of Louisiana): "While Spiller's *History* gives ample space to the southern regional tradition and its historical context, there is no reference there to the history or to the cultural production of French Louisiana" (21). Also, superimposing the concept of political unity onto cultural and literary identity constructions, Spiller credits America's political independence with a culturally unifying effect: "After the Revolution, American literature was 'fertilized by pioneer experience, dynamized by the sense of a continent in unity, and transformed by the needs and new imagination of a people no longer European. Sectional literature became national literature' (1, xviii). This induces him to criticize colonial literature as "either primitive or imitative" (1, xix) and to celebrate post-Revolutionary authors for their nationalist accomplishments. In his discussion of Cooper, for example, he focuses on the latter's contribution to American democracy while all but negating his transatlantic connections to Scott: "Cooper cherished unconsciously an allegiance to the traditions of English fiction" (1, 256). Echoing Parrington, Spiller also views Transcendentalism as a genuinely New England product: "Transcendentalism emerged as a full-fledged movement of New England thought between 1815 and 1836" (1, 346).

While Spiller's conceptualization of American literary and cultural identity remains representative of the majority of literary histories throughout the first half of the twentieth century, two kinds of early counter trends can be observed: 1) On the one hand, a redefinition of transatlantic literary "influences" as bi-directional (rather than mono-directional) and 2) A challenge to the pervasive Eurocentrism inherent in this transatlantic perspective. The first to identify a "reverse" transatlantic influence is Vernon Loggins, who proudly celebrates Whitman and James as "forerunners" of European writers in his 1937 *I Hear America Sing*: "Now the European author looks also for guidance in special matters to Whitman, Henry James" (8). A fully balanced form of transatlantic intercultural exchange is proposed by Margaret Denny and William H. Gilman in their 1950 *The American Writer and the European Tradition*: "The volume closes with a study of the altered roles of cultural parent and offspring" (vi), focusing specifically on both "our debts to Europe and ... our impact abroad.... America seems called upon to produce a literature which will nourish and refresh European readers; at the same time it needs to perceive more clearly the source and nature of formative influences, both past and present, upon its literature" (v). Under this premise of mutual cultural enrichment, Denny and Gilman trace "the intellectual collapse of Mark Twain," for example, "who is popularly considered the most 'American' of our writers," back to the fact that "the American writer who cuts himself off from the European habit of abstract thinking is courting disaster" (ix-x).

The first to move beyond a definition of America's literary identity solely in contradistinction to its transatlantic / European heritage is Stanley Thomas Williams in his 1926 *The American Spirit in Letters*. Insisting that the exclusive focus on transatlantic relationships in American literary historiography obscures the pervasive cultural homogeneity of Western culture at large, Williams deplores that "the US looks only to Europe and itself for its culture, and shares to the full the gigantic provincialism of that western civilization which has, for the time being, usurped the hegemony of the world" (5). In particular, he criticizes the exclusion of Native American literature and culture from American literary histories. Drawing attention to the "international character" of the new

world situation, Williams regrets that "as yet, American literature of the twentieth century seems to be largely national and, since the World War, iconoclastic. It has been in harmony with a trend toward an intense national consciousness that has been an outstanding characteristic of twentieth-century America ... American writers, in the main, seem content to display the pettiness, the credulities, and the absurdities of Americans. They have declared their intention that American literature shall stand on its own feet. So speaks the nationalist in almost every country of the world" (6). Apart from acknowledging Native American contributions to American literature, Williams is interested in the dismantling of this narrow and nationalist focus.

On a larger scale, however, such challenges to historiographical versions of American literary nationalism / exceptionalism do not emerge until the post-WW II advent of New Criticism. As Spengemann has observed in his 1989 *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature*, American literature programs at universities experienced a temporary, albeit severe setback, and the production of nationalist American literary histories all but ended: "For the next twenty years or so, only histories derived entirely from demonstrable masterpieces could expect a welcome from literary studies ... the merest shadow of extrinsicality cast by the word 'American' in a book title or by the author's predilection for the literature of a single country might evoke from the relentlessly stateless critics anathemas" (154). The post-WW II era at the same time also saw an increased challenge to the concept of nationhood from both transnational and subnational directions, culminating in what Thelen -- based on Benedict Anderson and others -- summarizes thus: "Events around the world now make it possible to see something that was impossible before: how constructed and fragile nations are, to see that they are not self-evidently inevitable or necessary or desirable. We can ask questions that were unthinkable a generation ago" (375). Some of these questions involve a reconceptualization of America's cultural identities (now increasingly pluralized). According to Hartmut Keil in "Rewriting American History," the "prevailing consensus view of American history of the 1950s was challenged and discarded by an awareness of the diversity of American society and of conflicting and suppressed aspirations of minorities and other social groups" (1990, 12). Werner Sollors is more specific in his "A Critique of Pure Pluralism" (1986) when he observes that "the terms pluralism and cultural pluralism came into high fashion in the period during and after World War II" (274).

Based on these changes in conceiving of the American nation and American culture at large, American literary histories no longer defined American "identity" in contradistinction to European (British) alterity. Their earlier Eurocentrically reductionist impulse to draw clear-cut rhetorical boundaries vis-à-vis Europe (accompanied by the establishment of intra-American homogeneity) is replaced by an exploration of America's literary and cultural diversity. This historiographical shift toward American cultural pluralism, however -- while constituting a crucial counterweight to the earlier myopically Eurocentric perspective -- results in the opposite extreme of all but eliminating any interest in America's transatlantic connections.

Two major revisionist literary history projects have dominated the scene in the wake of this pluralist turn: The one-volume *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (CLHUS, 1988), edited by Emory Elliott and Sacvan Bercovitch's multi-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature* (CHAL, 1994-). In coordinating the new CHAL, Sacvan Bercovitch elsewhere articulates a central and recurrent concern in "America as Canon and Context: Literary History in a Time of Dissensus" (1986). The concern converges around the contentiousness of the term "America" for American literary and cultural identity constructions: "the history of our literary histories hitherto has been the conflict over the meaning of America ... the term America has served not just to reveal, but to conceal and exclude: aesthetically, to exclude entire bodies of literature (and by implication entire 'literary communities') from the canon: historically, to conceal the fact that America is not some overarching synthesis, *e pluribus unum*, but a rhetorical battleground -- a symbol that has come to stand ... for a variety of alternative modes of identity and belief" (103-04). Deeply committed to cultural pluralism ("Our *History* is fundamentally pluralist: a federated histories of American literatures. It is also an expression of ongoing debates within the profession about cultural patterns and values, including those of liberal pluralism" [CHAL 1, 3]), Bercovitch is highly critical of earlier historiographical constructions of nationalist cultural unity and homogeneity:

"'America' has been presented ... as a culture that transforms multiplicity into ... harmony and union"; history "has been presented as the objective account of national progress"; and literary heritage "has been presented as a series of 'classic writers' and 'major works' authorized by standards that are timeless, universal, and inherent in the process of literary creation" ("America" 106-07). It is against these notions of "American" "literary" "history" that the new *CHAL* strives to advance a powerful statement, insisting on "making a virtue of dissensus" (*Reconstructing* viii) by privileging "discontinuity, disruption" ("America" 100; 101).

With a similar focus on validating diversity, Emory Elliott in "The Politics of Literary History" (1987) notes that a primary aim of the *CLHUS* was "to incorporate recent developments in scholarship and canon reassessment in order to create a book that will fairly represent the diversity of the literature and the variety of current critical opinion" (269). Fully agreeing with Annette Kolodny's insistence on the necessity to recover voices that have hitherto been marginalized owing to an entrenched Eurocentrism, Elliott earlier remarked in "New Literary History: Past and Present" (1985) that "A contemporary history of our literature must seek to represent the contributions of a full range of writers, including women, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, and artists who work in literary forms that have come to be recognized as literary art only in the last few decades" (614). Hence "pluralism of method and diversity of material [are] the primary goals of a contemporary literary history" (614) since "it can deepen our awareness of the tensions and contradictions in the culture in which our literature and our literary histories participate and which they express" (619).

Interestingly enough, however, although privileging methodological pluralism and content-based diversity and inclusivity, neither the *CLHUS* nor the *CHAL* have ultimately challenged the concept of a unified, coherent American nation as such. In "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History" (1991), Ian Tyrrell observes an analogous situation in the context of American historiography: "In an era of unprecedented internationalization in historiography, the legacies of nationalism and exceptionalism still haunt the study of American history ... nowhere has a nation-centered historical tradition been more resilient than in the United States" (1031). Further, Peter Carafiol confirms in "The New Orthodoxy: Ideology and the Institution of American Literary History" (1987) that "Despite its protestations, [the New Orthodoxy of literary historiography] continues to rely on the word 'America' to provide that locus of implicit coherence" (633). And indeed, despite Elliott's repeated insistence that "there is today no unifying *vision* of a national identity" (*CLHUS* xi; my emphasis), and that "this book will contain much that is subversive to the very notion of a unified *narrative* of national expression" ("New" 621; my emphasis), he eventually maintains: "The *CLHUS* is an examination of the emergence of a national literature, the particular nature of that literature, the extra-literary factors that have been significant in its formation, and the practice of the literary arts in various forms by writers and speakers" (*CLHUS* xv). This nation-centeredness specifically manifests itself in the *CLHUS*'s geographical restriction to the "writing produced in the area of the continent that became the United States" ("New" 615), which for the most part deprivileges American literature's transatlantic and transpacific connections. In "From the Old *Cambridge History of American Literature* to the New *Columbia Literary History of the United States*," Hans-Joachim Lang was amongst the first to criticize the *CLHUS*'s marginalization of "the fact that the American continent has been invaded by Europeans": "The attempt to give Native Americans their due necessarily slights all institutions and beliefs immigrants carried with them when they arrived in the 'New' world" (1990, 116). In other words, the *CLHUS*'s geographically restricted focus on literature produced on the American continent thus obscures what Jola Skulj defines in "Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity" as each literature's "cross-cultural interactions": "Literary works, genres, trends, and periods of artistic orientation in a given nation, as manifested through history, cannot exist as isolated events of the closed national existence of cultural history and cannot be understood without contacts with literary phenomena of other national cultures. No cultural identity can be identified or analysed only on its national ground. Any national culture was given form on the borders of other influential cultures" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss4/5/>>).

It is this geographically limited perspective that both Kolodny and Spengemann have tried to challenge by proposing an American literary history based on the English language (Spengemann, "American" 473; Kolodny 293). According to Spengemann, such a literary history would have the advantage of crossing (often artificially constructed) temporal (e.g., the Revolution), geographical, physical, and political boundaries, ultimately acknowledging the fact that American writings have not developed in isolation: "Printed texts have always circulated far too freely back and forth across the Atlantic for either region to remain untouched by linguistic changes originating abroad. This world cannot even be broken up into separate cultures" ("American" 477). While Spengemann's focus on transatlantic cultures would have to be complemented by a transpacific as well as a Canadian perspective, Elliott's response to Spengemann in "The Politics of Literary History" seems to move in the opposite direction by returning to pre-Spiller "disaffiliative" constructions of American literary identity, replete with nationalist "anxieties" of British "influence": "To the regret of some colleagues in English studies, the people of this country have organized themselves as a nation separate from England for over two hundred years ... The study of literature written in English without regard to national boundaries ... would involve an ingenuine self-effacement and denial of an acknowledged national literary heritage. The English language is not the only determining feature of the literature of the United States ... From an international perspective, one of the values of a new literary history composed mostly by scholars writing from within the United States is the expression the work will give to internal contemporary visions of the national literature ... The subordination of the study of the literature of the United States to become again a sub-branch of English literature would operate to halt the development of this national self-awareness in the writing of literary history" (1987, 275). In this way, as Frank-Olaf Radtke observes, pluralist multiculturalism often becomes nothing more than a postmodern version of nationalism (1994).

Although Sacvan Bercovitch problematizes American nationalism and views "America" as "rhetorical battleground" (*CHAL* 1, 3), he likewise defines "American" literature in both geographically and linguistically restrictive terms: "'America' in these volumes designates the United States, or the territories that were to become part of the United States; and although several of our authors adopt a comparatist framework [such as Eric Sundquist in his discussion of Spanish-language writing in volume two], by and large their concerns center upon the writing in English in this country -- 'American literature' as it is commonly understood here and abroad in its national implications" (*CHAL* 1, 3). Especially in the context of Bercovitch's commitment to intra-American multicultural pluralism, such a strong focus on writings in English is all the more surprising.

Werner Sollors is among the most vocal proponents of America's multilingualism, having repeatedly criticized the extent to which the contemporary United States adhere to "a monolingual ideal" even in their debates on multiculturalism (*Introduction* 2). With a few notable exceptions (Sundquist in *CHAL*, and Sollors's own chapter on "Immigrants" in *CLHUS*), historiographical attempts at integrating the rich production of American literatures in languages other than English still remain sporadic. In fact, comparing the old *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917) to Robert Spiller's *Literary History of the United States* (1948), for example, Sollors even notes a steady decline in the space dedicated to American literatures in non-English languages (*Beyond Multiculturalism* 17). However, Sollors remains optimistic: "As the result of a large collaborative effort, a comprehensive history of multilingual literature of the United States may soon be in the making" (*Introduction* 7). In his own *The Longfellow Anthology of American Literature*, edited in collaboration with Marc Shell, Sollors plans to include a "large sampling of non-English literature of the United States, ranging from Native American and colonial languages to many immigrant tongues and French and Arabic works by African Americans" (*Introduction* 12 n19).

Likewise problematizing "the monolingual origins of literary histories" (17), Alide Cagidemetrio offers in "'The Rest of the Story'; or, Multilingual American Literature" (1998) "a modest proposal for rewriting literary history" (21) by exploring relations among and interactions between literary texts of the same genre written in different languages. Alternately, Lawrence Buell's reflections on a "comprehensive rewriting of American literary history" based on "feminist revisionism" (110) in "Literary History Without Sexism? Feminist Studies and Canonical Reconception" (1987) might

serve a similar purpose of opening up (again) the geographically and linguistically limited focus of contemporary American literary historiography: "Feminist revisionism in American literary studies, by emphasizing the Euro-American scope of women's literary culture, can help us to avoid the Americanist's most persistent and deep-seated disciplinary ethnocentrism: the myth of American literature as a distinctively native growth. The elements of native distinctiveness, naturally stressed by the first generations of American literature scholars as they attempted to justify the new specialization, now need to be counterbalanced by studies -- still lamentably few -- that discuss American writing from a trans-continental perspective" (111). Such a trans-continental approach would then, of course, have to move beyond a merely transatlantic (i.e., Eurocentric) focus to also include America's transpacific literary and cultural relations as well as its hemispheric connections to Canada (for a discussion of the Canadian perspective see Tötösy "Social Discourse," see also Tötösy, "Selected Bibliography" at <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/canadianethnicbibliography>>). The approach would thus have to result, ultimately, in the kind of global contextualization Djelal Kadir advocates in his historiographical projects with the ICLA: International Comparative Literature Association (see below) and in his founding charter of the IASA: International American Studies Association (see <<http://www.iasaweb.org>>).

Two still ongoing literary history projects have set out to address several of these concerns by challenging existing constructions of border(s) and substantially remapping American literary and cultural studies: The *Comparative Literary History* series of the International Comparative Literature Association, launched in 1967, focuses on exploring international movements, genres, and literary periods across national and linguistic borders and the about-to-be-published *Oxford Comparative History of Latin American Literary Cultures* (edited by Valdés and Kadir), together with its companion volume, the *Oxford Comparative History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe* (edited by Cornis-Pope and Neubauer) (both initiated by the University of Toronto in 1995), specifically challenge nation ("the artificiality, not to say fragility, of national borders" [Hutcheon and Valdés 3]) as the basis for cultural and literary identity constructions, privileging "cultural heteroglossia" and "cultural transfer" across national, geographic, temporal, and linguistic borders (see also <<http://www.byu.edu/~icla/publications/index.html>> [inactive]). As Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés have explained their project in *Rethinking Literary History Comparatively*, such a border-crossing literary history "is also, perhaps, the history both made possible by and even demanded of our age of international information access and electronic technology" (4).

To date, however, such radical attempts at dismantling most or even all of the traditional (artificially constructed) historiographical categories and boundaries -- which, in turn, inevitably determine historiographical constructions of American cultural and literary identities -- are still lamentably few. An inclusive notion of pluralism (which also transcends, in particular, geographical and linguistic borders) is a crucial beginning and a necessary interim stage -- albeit fraught with its own problems. As Sollors has outlined in his "A Critique of Pure Pluralism": Cultural pluralism far too frequently runs the danger of presupposing static, quasi-essentialist cultural units (260-73), thus resulting in a reductionist conceptualization of cultural complexity: "In the current cultural debates pluralism often implies purism" (273). Even more importantly, a pluralist juxtaposition of cultural identity categories "also simplif[ies] out of existence the complicating intersections of race, class, and gender" (Kolodny 297). Some of the ensuing problems are highlighted by Elliott's introductory reference to Tichi's essay in *CLHUS*: "Here those features of the works of Chopin, Gilman, Cather, Wharton, Glasgow and others which are related to gender receive special treatment, whereas these same writers appear in Eric Sundquist's essay on 'Realism and Regionalism' in a different context" ("Politics" 272). The *CLHUS* also discusses Margaret Fuller briefly in two different chapters, "The Transcendentalists" and "The Rise of the Woman Author." For this reason, Elliott remarks, "indexing and cross-referencing will be key elements of this work" ("Politics" 272). Bercovitch for the most part follows a similar principle of organization, explaining that "some texts are discussed in several narratives within a volume, because they are important to different realms of cultural experience" (*CHAL* 1, 5). While such a treatment constitutes a significant advance over earlier literary histories, ensuring the acknowledgment of (in particular women)

authors as multi-faceted writers, it at the same time serves to obscure the crucial intersections of different realms of cultural experience. As Christel-Maria Maas is going to demonstrate in the context of the Göttingen Research Center, Fuller's response to German Transcendentalist thought, for example, cannot be separated from her gendered identity.

Apart from merely adding up -- rather than integrating -- the multiple facets of American cultural identities, this presupposition of separable realms of cultural experience, according to Sollors' "Critique", also tends to "obfuscate" literary and cultural connections among and between writers who are classified within different *ethnic* groups: "Taken exclusively, what is often called 'the ethnic perspective' -- which often means, in literary history, the emphasis of a writer's descent -- all but annihilates polyethnic art movements, moments of individual and cultural interaction, and the pervasiveness of cultural syncretism in America ... Yet, if anything, ethnic literary history ought to *increase* our understanding of the cultural interplays and contacts among writers of different backgrounds" (256). Sollors thus advocates "an openly transethnic procedure that aims for conceptual generalizations and historicity" (256) and privileges the analysis of "transethnic contacts" (276).

In several respects, Cyrus R.K. Patell's chapter on "Emergent Literatures" (Bercovitch, *CHAL* vol. 7) is an attempt to come to terms with this problem. Combining a discussion of Native American, Chicano, Asian American, and gay and lesbian literatures in a single chapter, Patell's "comparative approach to emergent American literatures" (*CHAL* 7, 671) is specifically designed to throw into relief trans-minority commonalities: "Whether they [these literatures] are based on ethnicity, race, or sexuality, minority cultures all find themselves in a struggle to avoid being dominated and co-opted ... it is this shared experience that underwrites and even necessitates a comparative approach to minority discourse" (*CHAL* 7, 545-46). Yet while highlighting crucial trans-ethnic and trans-minority discursive structures, such a comparative approach at the same time cannot do full justice to the internal complexity and hybridity of each of these minority communities. Rather than going "Beyond Hybridity," as the chapter's final section suggests, Patell's comparative approach thus ultimately has to leave the answers to his own crucial questions ("what happens when two or more emergent categories are located in a single identity or text," and "what happens when we put all of these variables [ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, class] into play?" [*CHAL* 7, 672]), to the next literary history: "we might expect the next literary history of the United States to reflect both new relationships to the dominant mainstream and new configurations within the field of emergent American literature" (*CHAL* 7, 672).

It is thus the very hybridity and multi-facetedness of American cultural identities that is frequently underemphasized by current pluralist histories of American literatures, although, as Elisabeth Bronfen and Benjamin Marius have argued in "Hybride Kulturen. Einleitung zur anglo-amerikanischen Multikulturalismusdebatte" (1997), every imagined community is, by definition, hybrid (12). Günter Lenz has repeatedly highlighted the problems inherent in notions of "a plurality of 'ethnic groups' characterized by common descent and essentializing interest politics, confined to the borders of the American nation state" and instead argues for "a critical multiculturalism," i.e., an "intercultural approach" that "explicitly addresses the interrelationships among various, often conflicting dimensions of difference (differentiation) in cultures, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, language, region, or age." According to Lenz, "multicultural discourse in this sense also is necessarily *intercultural* and *transnational*, as distinguished from the traditional notion of a 'comparative' study of cultures, often national cultures, seen as more or less independent and stable units" (362). Lenz's approach seems particularly suited to a productive reconceptualization of American literary historiography since his "project of multi- and intercultural critique in the United States defines an understanding of American society and culture alternative to the traditional or common models of a nation of nations, a melting pot, cultural pluralism ... This alternative model reconceives the notions of multiple *identities* as subject-positions or identifications and explores the potential of forms of *community* without stable membership or common territory" (362-63). It is this destabilization of "fixed" cultural and literary groupings, this emphasis on cultural identity as process, dynamic transformation, self-difference, and discontinuity, which becomes increasingly typical of American society at large, as cultural critics as diverse as Hortense Spiller, Alfred Arteaga, Gloria Anzaldúa, José David Saldívar, Mary Louise Pratt, Donald E. Pease, Giles Gunn, and

Stuart Hall, among others, have pointed out. In addition, Hall's 1990 insistence on identity as "positioning" in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (396), as well as David Hollinger's notion of "voluntary affiliations" acquire special significance in the context of a writer's construction of her/his specific literary and cultural identities. It is this form of voluntary cultural affiliation, or in Armin Paul Frank's words, a writer's choice of inscribing herself/himself into specific literary and cultural traditions -- in addition to the fluidity and temporariness of identity categories as such -- that will eventually require large-scale revisions of historiographical conceptualizations of America's literature and culture (see Frank <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol3/iss2/2/>>).

Eventually, we might thus enter a stage that James Clifford has aptly termed "post-culturalism" in his 1988 *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* and the predicament we may find ourselves in can be expressed in Clifford's words: "In a world with too many voices speaking all at once, a world where syncretism and parodic invention are becoming the rule, not the exception, an urban, multinational world of institutional intransigence ... where everyone's roots are in some degree cut -- in such a world it becomes increasingly difficult to attach human identity and meaning to a coherent 'culture' or 'language'" (95). In such a world it becomes increasingly difficult to attach any stable meaning to the term "American." The great challenge, then, is to conceive of ways to write "post-cultural" "histories" of "American" "literatures."

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