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Book review

After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism

Herlihy-Mera, Jeffrey. *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism*. New York: Routledge, 2018. 188 p. ISBN: 9781138054059 – Hardback; 9781315167053 – eBook. \$ 150.00

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After American Studies, by Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera of the Universidad de Puerto Rico, is a critical Cultural-Studies examination of the foundational theses in the Transnational Turn in American Studies. However, it is aimed, at the same time, to rethink and deconstruct some of the key tenets of the field. Indeed, *After American Studies* engages a post-national and post-cultural argument, the core of which provides important nuance to the transnational turn.

The book is comprised of an introduction and nine chapters, parts of which were previously published in academic journals. Herlihy-Mera's purpose is made clear in the Introduction: "After American Studies is a critique of national and transnational approaches to community, their forms of belonging and patriation, and initiates a theoretical gesture toward new considerations of postgeographic and postcultural communities" (p. 1).

The chapters are grouped in three large sections. In the first section are chapters 1 and 2: "The Ontology of Cultural Groups in Modernity" and "Place-Making". In them, the author explains how state-supported (and ostensibly non-state) cultural canons attempt to influence the individuals exposed to them. The analysis uncovers how the US political body has used the physical spaces of the American continent to build myths, symbols and values, and then imposes them somewhat uniformly on the population (on every individual) as a function of the geographical location of their residence.

The second section is comprised of chapters 3 to 7: "Literature as a Device of Cultural Appropriation", "A Coda to Literary Canons", "Art and Power", "Forced Acculturation" and "Transmedia Storytelling"; these chapters are presented as "Case Studies" by Herlihy-Mera. In them, the author illustrates, with examples from different areas (literature, art, media and public policies), the ideas explained in the two initial chapters.

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The third section includes chapters 8 and 9 (“Colonial Problems, Transnational American Studies” and “Imagining New Communities”), that function as a conclusion (chapter 8) and a proposal on new forms of cultural study (chapter 9).

Herlihy-Mera argues that the concepts of “nation” and “national culture” (and other related or derivatives) are based on canons that, in most cases, are little beyond a dominant group’s “common” cultural prescriptions, imposed on a group of people who live in a geographically delimited area, a process which leaves other characteristics or realities aside or subordinates them through hyphenation (p. 20).

In this dynamic, he argues that space itself is used as an element of homogenization and control (p. 21). Once that space is delimited and constructed, and the values that “characterize” the dominant group are created, the difference between “us” (those who inhabit that space and identify with the myths communicated in the physical material) and “them” (everyone else) is established, thus implementing the center of the cultural system. The controlled space is the base, scope and access to certain cultural realities: it is saturated with the same language, the same symbols (pp. 26, 31) and thus foreignizes many cultures and languages that are native to the regions.

In this regard, and in reference to the US, Herlihy-Mera states: “The ‘American’ space is constructed on social and cultural pillars that seize the fundamental blocks of human communication, including language, spirituality, time; and the rituals surrounding birth, death, and betrothal. It is also common for specific elements of the preexisting cultures – sometimes words, imagery, icons, heroes, and so on – to be appropriated into the dominant myth, a syncretization of material that interpellates it as an inferior component of the broader system” (pp. 35-36). The process of building “an American” implies, for example, exposure to unified language system (centered on English), habits and time (the same calendar, the same hours to organize the day) and spaces (the configuration of the public spaces where people live and interact).

In chapters 3 to 7, the author illustrates (with examples from various areas, including literature, art, media and public policies) the ideas explained in the preceding chapters. In chapters 3 and 4, Herlihy-Mera analyzes the role of literature as a means to generate collective identity feelings. He describes literature as a “device of cultural appropriation” (p. 52). The authors considered ‘canonical’ and their works (their characters, language, and landscapes) have buttressed and echoed the political claims of the US government (pp. 53-55). Herlihy-Mera comments, as examples, works by María A. Ruiz de Burton, Jack Kerouac, Ernest Hemingway, Cormac McCarthy, among others, making the case that these works should not be labeled as ‘American literature’ per se. In doing so, the author intends to characterize “American” as an artificial, fantasy construct, even when the authors themselves use that term. For that reason, Herlihy-Mera argues that “the atomization of literary studies and abandonment of ‘American’ and other such prescriptions will open a new set of spaces of inquiry, analyzes that are not dependent on supposition, imagined affiliations, or identities” (p. 69).

In chapter 5, the analyses examine visual art as a means of domination or power over communities and individuals. “Art”, affirms Herlihy-Mera, “is part of the ecosystem of ideology. The ways ideas are given physical form (in paintings, buildings, photography, currency, and so on) and the structure of the environment where these objects are displayed for public review, are a dimension of how the dominant groups use physical and nonverbal entities to promote and legitimize sets of ideas, as well as to inaugurate specific affiliations and cultural norms” (p. 96). To this end, the author analyzes the use of certain colors (red, white, blue) in notable paintings of American art, symmetry in buildings or spaces (such as the White House and the National Mall), the image of the ideal human being and the story that certain representations convey” (pp. 100-102).

In chapter 6, Herlihy-Mera explains how the construction of the “nation” and “culture” of America is manifested in public policies, with particular emphasis on immigration



regulations (detailing the discriminatory process of obtaining a visa). Next, in chapter 7, he analyzes how the values and criteria that the US considers natural and common are transmitted to individuals through unofficial means or instruments, such as advertising, sports, among other commercial material. He comments on the advertising used by brands such as Chevrolet, MacDonald's, and Coca-Cola.

In an argumentative – not merely descriptive – sense, chapters 8 and 9 are the most important in the book. In them, the author not only analyzes a reality but proposes another reality (or series of ways) to improve the existing reality (especially in chapter 9). His work in this section demonstrates how American Studies has not jettisoned the national ballast, or the limits of the concept of nation by engaging a transnational vision: as “the transnational iteration relies on the national frameworks” (p. 149). Therefore, “transnational American Study is an exercise in distortion” (p. 153).

Also, what is an alternative to the concept of a nation? “Age” – responds Herlihy-Mera. The author argues that Age should emerge as a criterion – or the main criterion – to re-center cultural studies relating to behaviors, feelings, expressions and experiences of individuals. “As an alternative to the national and transnational; the religious, linguistic, and ethnic; and the geographic and cultural, the broad-based fraternity of an Age system could elide some of the demographic discriminations of the present and gesture toward a universal community” (p. 171). Cultural studies (and other disciplines) could be organized by age, not by country, culture or movement (ideological, aesthetic, etc.), the author maintains, as such a system would be emancipated to a degree from the rigidities of other forms of cataloguing, including geographic and cultural.

If relationships between individuals were based on age, “the preexistent political territoriality (often based on location) would be modified and / or abandoned. The members would be reorganized democratically (universal voting rights and public representation), have access to the same resources (education, health care, and infrastructure) without consideration of region. Each community would have an internal democratic structure, with delegates (number of representatives based on the population of each Age community) who would participate in a global governing body” (p. 179).

It is certain that *After American Studies* is a critical book. It is so in a tripartite sense. It is “critical” because, in the first place, for the depth and comprehensiveness of the analysis. It aims to uncover the concealed foundation of concepts such as “nation”, “culture”, “trans-national”, “American” (and its derivative terms), as well as “identity”. In a second sense, it is “critical” because, when evaluating those concepts, Herlihy-Mera shows their limitations – their negative character, both socially and academically. So, it is “critical” (third sense) because, in making this analysis and formulating this evaluation, he aims to generate or open a critical break the discipline of American Studies – to separate it from the Transnational and national traditions. (This is appropriate, as, in Greek, “crisis” means “separate”.) The book aims to rupture the limiting parameters and concepts of the status quo, exhausting them to the degree that a new stage of engagement may arise; that is, a proposal of new inquiry parameters and new interrogative concepts (like “Age”).

The book, therefore, moves or has proposals in two different areas: the epistemological / methodological and the ontological. For Herlihy-Mera, American Studies (even when oriented towards a transnational duality), as a knowledge discipline, as a medium or domain of knowledge (epistemological aspect), are unreliable because they are based on a reality that, in effect, does not exist in the ways critics imagine: the concept of “nation” or “culture” as an explanatory reality of the individual (ontological aspect). Thus, that which does not exist (ontology) cannot be the basis of a knowledge discipline (epistemology).

American Studies or Transnational American Studies are based on the assertion that “America” is stable and unified, and that – says the author – does not occur in the ways prescribed by critics (page 6). The “US political body” as an entity has been constructed through diverse means (political, economic, literary, artistic, etc.) that force or “violate”



reality (p. 2). Similarly, as Herlihy-Mera's dialogue with studies in psychology reveal, personal and cultural identity lack the stability necessary to maintain the critical grammars common in American Studies (pp. 9-10). In this way, Herlihy-Mera's book poses many challenges for the transnational base and for scholars who work use those concepts in research (p. 8). As the author pithily makes clear, "When the circumstantial nature of identity and affiliation occupies a more central position in critical interpretation, concepts like patriotism, (trans) nationality and cultural identity in general lose traction" (p.160).

After American Studies is an achievement. The post-national and postcultural stances represent new ground that is yet unresolved in American Studies and in the Transnational Turn; indeed, the book aims to reframe the fundamental core on which the discipline (American Studies) exists, and raises many questions that the American Studies establishment – including scholars like Janet Radway, Winfried Fluck, Rita Felski, Wai Chee Dimmock, and Donald Pease, among others – have yet to consider. As the author states: "It is time to unplug American (and other areas) Studies from geographies, languages, citizenships, collectivities, cultures, and political molds, and their emancipations of already power" (p. 150).

