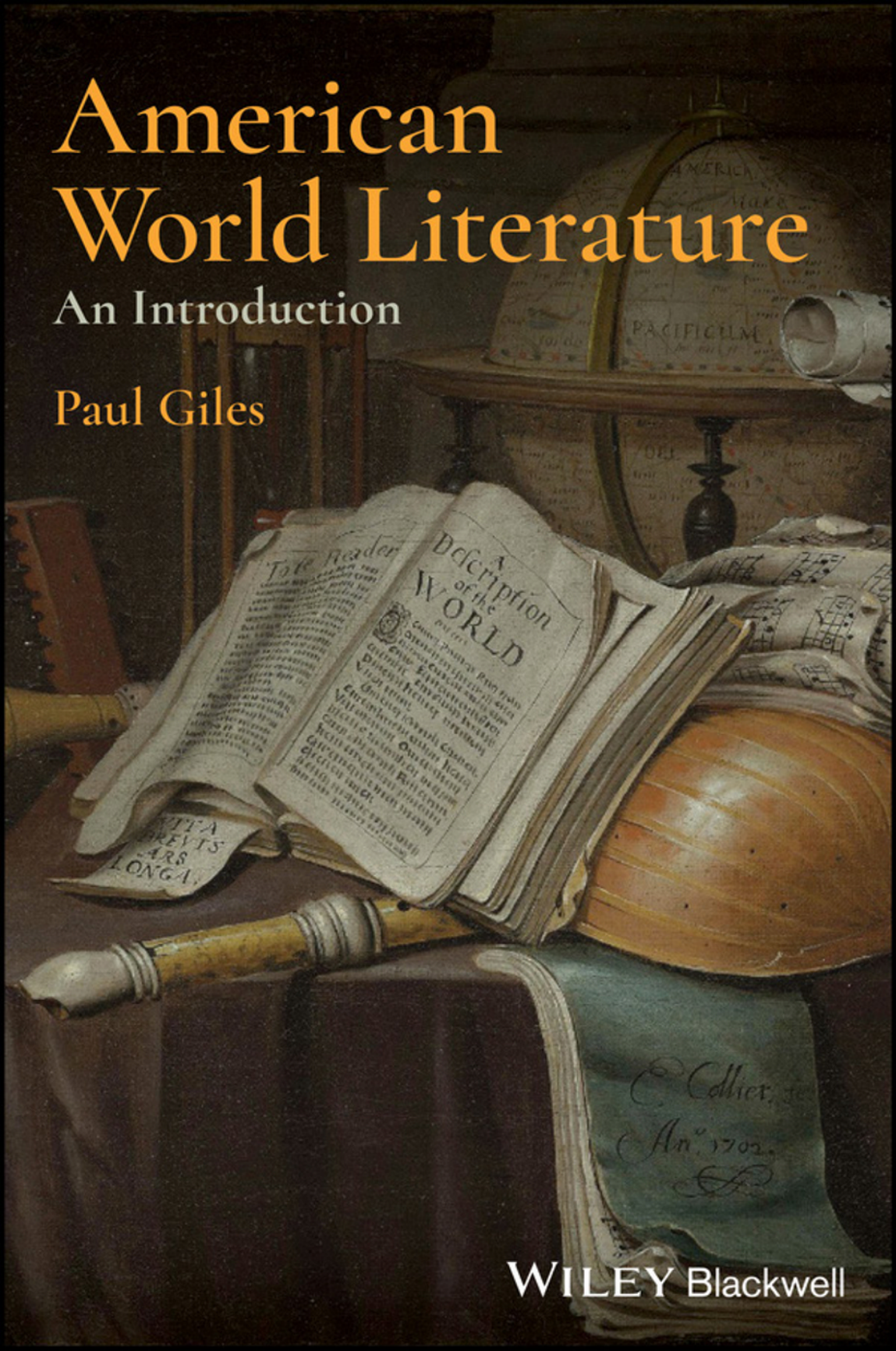
American World Literature

An Introduction

Paul Giles



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In writing this volume, I have adapted material from a variety of sources, including my own books on American literature in its transatlantic context: *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730–1860* (University of Pennsylvania Press); *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary* (Duke University Press); *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (Oxford University Press), as well as the broader treatment of this transnational theme in *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (Princeton University Press) and *Antipodean America: Australasia and the Constitution of American Literature* (Oxford University Press). More specifically, I have drawn with permission on various essays of mine previously published in a range of journals and edited collections: "Dreiser's Style," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dreiser*, ed. Lenny Cassuto and Claire Eby (Cambridge University Press, 2004); "Douglass's Black Atlantic: Britain, Europe, Egypt," in *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass*, ed. Maurice Lee (Cambridge University Press, 2009); "Transatlantic Currents and the Invention of the American Novel," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto, Benjamin Reiss, and Clare Eby (Cambridge University Press, 2011); "Globalization," in *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Caroline F. Levander (Blackwell, 2011); "Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle*," in *Essays in Criticism*, 61.3 (July 2011); "America and Britain during the Civil War," in *The Cambridge Companion to Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Shirley Samuels (Cambridge University Press, 2012); "The Novel after the Great War," in *Oxford History of the Novel in English, VI: The American Novel 1870–1940*, ed. Priscilla Wald and Michael E. Elliott (Oxford University Press, 2014); "Transatlantic Currents and Postcolonial Anxieties," in *Oxford History of the Novel in English, V: American Novels to 1870*, ed. J. Gerald

Kennedy and Leland Person (Oxford University Press, 2014); "Globalization," in *American Literature of the 1990s*, ed. Stephen Burn (Cambridge University Press, 2017). Some of the material on pedagogy was first addressed in "Transposing Pedagogic Boundaries: Global America in an Australian Context," *New Global Studies* 9.3 (2015). I should also like to acknowledge the many stimulating discussions with colleagues on topics related to this subject at the Institute for World Literature convened by David Damrosch at Harvard in July 2017.

1

The Theory of American World Literature

This book is designed to offer an overview of ways in which the subject areas of American literature and world literature have converged (and diverged) over the past 20 or 30 years. American literature is now widely regarded as engaging with global rather than merely local or national phenomena, and *American World Literature: An Introduction* attempts to set these changing conceptions of the subject in both critical and historical context. It also suggests how this perception of American literature as a global or "world" phenomenon has varied significantly across time, so that the intellectual investments of Cotton Mather in ideas of universal forms during the seventeenth century can be productively compared and contrasted to the resurgence of nationalist and transnational templates in the poetry of Walt Whitman 200 years later. In his preface to *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, published in 1983, Terry Eagleton wrote of how he had "tried to popularize rather than vulgarize the subject," and my intention here similarly is to address these complex historical and methodological issues in a way that might enlighten readers with little experience in the academic study of American literature, while still providing a sufficiently rounded view of these multifaceted matters to provoke interest in readers for whom the broad outlines of these debates will be more familiar.[1]

The term "American literature" was first used in the 1780s, in the aftermath of the political separation of the new United States from Great Britain, and it has always carried a nationalistic resonance. In his 1837 lecture "The American Scholar," given as a commencement address at Harvard, Ralph Waldo Emerson pointedly proclaimed how "[w]e have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe," but the fact that he did not say "we have listened too long to the philosophical sages of Asia," still less "we have listened too long to the voices of indigenous peoples," exemplifies the way in which American intellectual culture initially conceived of itself in terms of a principled resistance to the ossified structures of a class-bound, aristocratic Europe.[2] The first university course in

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American literature was not taught until 1875, by Moses Coit Tyler at the University of Michigan, and the subject initially flourished in less prestigious Midwestern universities, where its demotic qualities were thought to carry a broad, popular appeal for a less sophisticated clientele. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, American literature became a popular subject in student classrooms, but it was not then thought of as an appropriate field for intense scholarly research. Just as the study of English literature was generally conceived in British universities of the Victorian era as a soft option compared with more rigorous study of the classics (Latin and Greek), so American literature was long regarded among Ivy League academics as an easy option. The story goes that when F.O. Matthiessen, perhaps the most influential American literary scholar of the twentieth century, first proposed at Harvard in 1926 a PhD on Walt Whitman, he was advised by senior professors there that Whitman was an "exhausted" topic, and that his time would be better spent on the arts of Elizabethan translation. Matthiessen consequently produced a thesis that examined five important Elizabethan prose translations: Sir Thomas Hoby's rendering into English of Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1561), Sir Thomas North's translation of *Plutarch's Lives* (1579), John Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essays* (1603), Philemon Holland's translations of Livy's *Roman History* (1600), and of Suetonius (1606).[3] A revised version of this dissertation was published in 1931 as *Translation: An Elizabethan Art*, and it is not difficult to see how a similar kind of quintuple method underpinned by a critical idiom of transposition also underpins the structure of Matthiessen's most celebrated work, *American Renaissance* (1941). Just as *Translation* focuses on the way in which English scholars converted five European classics into their native tongue, so *American Renaissance* seeks deliberately to prove to Harvard skeptics that Matthiessen's five chosen American writers – Emerson, Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville – are as good as anything produced in the English Renaissance. The critical method again works through analogy, with American writers being set metaphorically within a comparative framework.

Matthiessen's work helped significantly to consolidate a field that had been given institutional momentum by the founding of an American literature group at the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) in 1921, and then by the establishment of the academic journal *American Literature* in 1929. Many of these "Founding Fathers" of American literary studies – there were, of course, no "Founding Mothers" – conceived of the subject in explicitly comparative terms. Norman Foerster, for example, wrote in *The Reinterpretation of American Literature* (1929) of how "[m]ore fully than any other, American culture is derivative, and consequently the study of American literature is essentially a study of

comparative literature, a study in the international history of ideas and their literary expression."[4] In this same volume, Howard Mumford Jones emphasized what he called the "provincialism" of merely stressing "the Americanism of American literature," and he declared that Americanists must put aside their "morbid fear" that "comparisons" with writers such as "Shakespeare, Goethe or Dante" would prove "odious." Instead, wrote Mumford Jones, "we must group Europe and the United States into the homogeneous unity of Western culture; and seek to determine by comparison the differences and likenesses between them."[5] Again, "Western culture" is assumed to be the fulcrum of world civilization, and America is considered to be an interesting and significant variant in relation to this broader picture.

There were, of course, other influential voices at this time that sought to move beyond a narrowly formalist approach to this emerging subject. A.M. Schlesinger specifically criticized the first *Cambridge History of American Literature*, published in 1919, for not taking sufficiently into account the material culture and social context from which American literature had emerged. Citing the importance in US culture of such factors as "the popularization of the telephone, motor car, movie, and radio, and legislative attitudes toward such questions as censorship, international copyright, and a tariff on foreign bonds," Schlesinger argued in 1929 that "the development of literature is constantly affected by the forces which condition the whole course of social growth."[6] He thus anticipated a significant strand in Americanist criticism that sought not to treat letters as a privileged world apart but to relate literature to the social and political conditions that had produced it. This approach was also epitomized by V.L. Parrington's critical trilogy *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927–1930), which sought to align the development of American literature with a socially progressive agenda, driven by a democratic idealism that identified with the rural qualities of Jeffersonian populism and abhorred what Parrington considered the destructive influences of capitalist business and elitist social hierarchies. Parrington's introduction declared explicitly his intention to consider the transmission to 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 overthrows of the principles of monarchy and aristocracy, and the setting up of the principle of republicanism."[7] Such a critical pattern linking literature to society became more widespread during the Great Depression years of the 1930s, as scholars sought increasingly to explicate American literature in terms of its radical cultural politics and its differences from, rather than similarities to, European models. It was this nationalist slant, stressing the differential nature of the American domain, which crucially informed the development of the

American studies movement. This was given institutional shape by the foundation of the American Studies Association (ASA) in 1951 and by the first appearance of what was subsequently to become the ASA's official journal, *American Quarterly*, in 1949.

What is important to note, however, is that a dialectical double strand, involving the question of whether American literature should be seen as belonging specifically to the nation or to the wider world, has been inherent within the formation of this subject since its earliest days. The initial identification of American literature as a field of inquiry was driven as much by public affairs as by academic arguments. William E. Cain has written of how the first half of the twentieth century "was the period when American literature took shape as a subject and scholarly field," and he regards the fact that the case for American literature "was made inside and outside the academy" as representing "one of the most formidable achievements of modernism," bringing American literary culture into dialogue with a wider world.[8]

The visibility of American literature was significantly enhanced by the entry of the United States into World War I in April 1917 – poet Amy Lowell wrote of how the new "native school" in verse represented the "welding together of the whole country which the war has brought about" – and then by the pivotal role played by the USA in World War II. Both of these global conflicts had the effect not only of exposing American servicemen to a wider world, but also alerting this wider world to increasing American power and influence on the international stage.[9] When Conrad Aiken wrote in 1942 of how "for better or worse, American literature is henceforth a part of world literature," he was responding in part to a sense that, given the exigencies of modern military and communications technologies, the United States could no longer remain safely separated from European degradation and corruption by the reliance on what Thomas Jefferson in 1797 referred to as "an ocean of fire between us and the old world."[10] Hence, Donald Trump's notorious proposal of a wall between the United States and Mexico during his presidential campaign of 2016 can be seen as just the latest instantiation of a fantasy of partition that has long exercised the American cultural and political imagination. But the question of whether US cultural narratives should be understood as autochthonous products or as comparatively inflected designs has long been an issue susceptible to debate and disagreement.

Yet it was Jefferson's pastoral republicanism rather than Brown's interest in world geography that became most influential in the way American literature institutionalized itself during the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the subject's most influential critical formulations at this time – in R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), Richard Chase's *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957), or Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the*

American Novel (1960) – promulgated, either explicitly or implicitly, a myth of American exceptionalism through which US conditions were represented as inherently different from those appertaining in the rest of the world. Thus, just to take one example of this, Chase argued for a categorical distinction between an American style of fictional "romance" and the English "novel," the former organized around a style of metaphysical quest, the latter merely around nuances of social class and manners.[11] In evoking such a dichotomy, Chase was effectively endorsing the antipathy of the American Transcendentalists towards British prototypes – Emerson in 1843 referred dismissively to English "novels of costume," saying they were "like the one orthodox sermon, which with slight variation is repeated every Sunday from so many pulpits" – and this also indicates the ways in which, in the wake of Matthiessen's influential work, nineteenth-century New England writers had become canonized as a template for American literature as a whole.[12] Many critics have subsequently pointed out the social hierarchies implicitly informing the fictions of Hawthorne and Melville, but in the way Chase envisaged the subject, the charm of American literature lay in the way it evaded such relative trivialities of social classification and aspired instead towards a more sublime artistic vision.

In any discussion of American world literature, then, it is important to remember how each of these three terms – "American," "world," and "literature" – is a contested rather than a naturalized entity. Apologists for American literary studies have sometimes tried to claim that the subject emerged organically from within the body of the nation, and this doggedly antitheoretical approach has remained an important influence on how the subject has been framed, from the work of Alfred Kazin in the 1940s to that of Greil Marcus at the turn of the twenty-first century. Kazin's emphasis on an unmediated social realism, like Marcus's focus on journalistic authenticity, took as its premise the assumption that a pragmatic American temper would simply put to one side the obfuscations of abstract preconception or rhetorical intertextuality, impediments that would threaten simply to get in the way of an appreciation by the writer or reader of their proximate American world. It is, of course, not difficult to understand the impatience felt by many towards more distant theoretical configurations, with the academic Hispanic Americanist Kirsten Silva Gruesz remarking in 2011 that she would prefer to hear about America from a Californian agricultural worker rather than a German graduate student.[13]

But such nostalgia for transparency always risks overlooking the fact that no subject can ever be approached neutrally, and any student of American world literature needs to recognize the fluctuating condition of all these key terms of classification. Although "America" is often used as

shorthand for the United States, America itself is not a nation but a continent, even though the term "American studies" has traditionally been used to refer specifically to US culture. Attempts around the turn of the twenty-first century to expand the definition of American studies to encompass South America were met with resistance from US government funding agencies, who had played an important role in helping to disseminate "American" values through underwriting overseas educational programs during the second half of the twentieth century. Such hard-nosed political organizations were clearly unwilling to relinquish the impact of this "soft power," in Joseph S. Nye's phrase, simply because of theoretical anxieties about whether America should properly signify an entire continent stretching across both hemispheres rather than merely the territory of the United States.[14] Some scholars today insist scrupulously on referring to "US literature" rather than American literature, but the latter term has long been established in academic libraries and publishing, and there is no indication at this point that the journal *American Literature*, for example, is contemplating a change of title.

The meaning of the term "literature" has also varied considerably across the ages. As Terry Eagleton pointed out, "[i]n eighteenth-century England, the concept of literature was not confined as it sometimes is today to 'creative' or 'imaginative' writing," but instead "meant the whole body of valued writing in society: philosophy, history, essays and letters as well as poems." According to Eagleton, indeed, what we now conceive of as the "creative imagination" arose specifically from a nineteenth-century conception of the literary work embodying "a mysterious organic unity, in contrast to the fragmented individualism of the capitalist marketplace."[15] Even if we do not entirely subscribe to the notion of "literature" being an invention of Romantic ideology that sought to position it as a bulwark against the dehumanizing strain of industrialization, it is not difficult to see that what we now think of as American literature has encompassed many genres other than what we now consider the most standard literary modes: novels, plays, and poems. The definition of American literature conventionally incorporates the theological treatises of John Winthrop in the 1630s, the intellectual history written by Cotton Mather at the turn of the eighteenth century, the sermons of Jonathan Edwards in the 1720s, the polemical lectures of Native American leader William Apess and indeed the essays of Emerson himself written around the same time. All these figures are represented in the widely used *Norton Anthology of American Literature* as well as the competing *Heath Anthology*, and they testify to an understanding of American literature as a broad rubric. If the qualifying adjective *American* in the term "American literature" is conventionally used as a form of nationalistic compression, signifying the geographical circumference of the nation rather than any

hemispheric orbit, then conversely the noun *literature* is employed as a sign of expansion, a way of embracing within its capacious domain many varied styles of writing. Though William C. Spengemann's theoretical work is an exception to this rule, most early Americanist scholars who write on Mather or Edwards do not produce theoretical justifications for treating their subject as "literature," they simply assume that the term "American literature" is large enough, as Whitman famously formulated it in *Song of Myself*, to "contain multitudes."[16]

The same thing holds true of the modifier *world* within the phrase "American world literature." American literature has always related in various ways to a wider world, not only because it is necessarily part of this worldly domain, but also because the very idea of national identity depends upon a bounding and demarcation of space, a separation of "American" as a descriptor from more expansive or inchoate worldly co-ordinates. As R.W.B. Lewis and others noted, American culture has often been associated with a myth of exceptionalism that can be traced back to the days of the early Puritan settlers, as we see in Winthrop's sermon of 1630, "A Model of Christian Charity," where he justified the creation of an exiled colony in Massachusetts Bay on the grounds that it would serve as a "beacon" to the rest of the world: "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." Winthrop rallied his fellow emigrants by declaring that their new community would be "a story and a by-word through the world," and the way in which he posits here a relation of reciprocity, through which the exemplary "city upon a hill" is validated by an external gaze, demonstrates the way in which this exceptionalist thesis is itself dependent on interaction with a world audience.[17]

During the first flourishing of American studies in the 1950s and 1960s, when the US economy was booming while many other countries were recovering only slowly from the austerities of World War II, the American "Beat" writers and others were held up throughout the world as examples of a cutting-edge, radical modernity, with Harry Harootunian subsequently commenting on how Japan and other parts of East Asia were made at this time to feel that their local cultures were always inferior to the shiny new American model of modernity, with US culture seeming to involve by definition a commitment to futurity that left the rest of the world trailing in its wake.[18] Such forms of worldly engagements have fluctuated over time, of course, and America in the pre-Revolutionary eighteenth century, when it was still a collection of British colonies, enjoyed a markedly different relation to global space. The point here is simply that the term *world* in American world literature needs itself to be understood as a shifting signifier, no less than *American* and *literature*, and that to track the variations and interactions of these discrete entities

over time is to bear witness to many different historical constellations. American world literature is a subject that changes its shape over time, and indeed that is the source of much of its interest.

It is also important to remember that this relation between American literature and the world always involves a process of multidirectional exchange, rather than merely the unilateral imposition of American values as a *desideratum* for the entire globe. Although postcolonial theory has emphasized the importance of writing back, the agency of various forms of resistance and the manner in which dominant and subordinate cultures interact in complicated ways, it has not always been the case that the United States has been particularly attuned to what Fredric Jameson described as "the radical difference of other national situations," with Jameson regarding it as "one of our basic political tasks … to remind the American public" of such disparities.[19] Many of the international programs now established at the heart of the American university system do not seem particularly interested in engaging substantively with any overseas culture; their aim, in a more mercenary way, is simply to familiarize US domestic students with international conditions, so as to make them a more attractive employment prospect for US corporations in the global marketplace.

There are, of course, exceptions to this general rule, and Brian T. Edwards's careful work on local languages and cultures of the Middle East, and particularly on ways in which films such as *Argo* are understood quite differently across non-US cultural domains, might be said to epitomize international American studies at its most scrupulous.[20] But many programs driven by university administrators seek simply to appropriate alien cultures so as to further American interests, and there was a particularly egregious example of such insularity in 2014, when the University of California at Berkeley decided that it would establish a "global campus" a mere 10 miles from the main Berkeley site, making it what the Chancellor of the University of California system called "an international campus in the United States, right here in the East Bay … where an exclusive group of some of the world's leading universities and high-tech companies will work side-by-side with us in a campus setting." The Chancellor at this time, Nicholas Dirks, expressed fears about the "limits on academic freedom" in other parts of the world, and he offered such concerns as a rationale for instead establishing the "global" campus in Richmond Bay, which he described as "a safe harbor in a safe harbor."[21] This project eventually fell through for lack of funding, but its "vision" does usefully encapsulate one particular strand of the American academy's engagement with the world, one that involves unabashed cultural and economic hegemony and imperial assimilation, rather than any kind of openness to otherness. There are many instances of American universities and

publishing houses seeking to exploit a global moniker in theory while in practice presenting themselves almost entirely to a US market, and the Berkeley example illuminates the kind of pattern that tends to recur, albeit in less overt ways, on a routine basis. Although many American academics expressed outrage at the ascent of President Trump, his bullish sense of US superiority might be seen simply to express, albeit in a more extreme and indeed caricatured fashion, the assumptions that significant numbers of leaders in the American university world have long held.

International initiatives to expand the geographical remit of American culture across an institutional front have become associated in the early years of the twenty-first century with the resurgence of world literature as a field of scholarly inquiry. World literature as an idea is usually traced back to Goethe's first mention of *Weltliteratur* in 1827, when he suggested that "national literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach."[22] As John Pizer has observed, Goethe's paradigm was impelled in part by "the desire for a productive and peaceful coexistence among the nations of Europe after the divisive and destructive Napoleonic wars," and in that sense it represents an aspiration to rise above the fractious and bellicose nationalism of Goethe's own times.[23] Marx and Engels in their Communist Manifesto of 1848 linked the "exploitation of the world market" by the "bourgeoisie" to a process of international "intercourse in every direction, universal dependence of nations," with Marx and Engels finding a parallel between material and intellectual production: "The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature."[24] However, this emerging dynamic of "world literature" was countered during the second half of the nineteenth century by a general revival of nationalist sentiment, with for example Friedrich Meinecke's *Weltbürgetum und Nationalstaat* (Cosmopolitanism and the National State), first published in 1907, arguing that cosmopolitanism was an outdated principle, and that nationalism was the progressive end to which history itself was tending.[25]

It is not difficult to understand, then, how the emergence of world literature as an idea in the nineteenth century was symbiotically entwined with questions of national identity and the problematic status of internationalism more generally. Transnational connections were impelled both by economic trade and developments in technology (such as the telegraph) that, as Marx and Engels noted, facilitated cross-border communications. On the other hand, an investment in the idea of the nation as what Ernst Renan in 1882 called a "spiritual principle" helped to

underwrite the institutionalization of national literature as a quasi-sacred sphere of study, with Oxford University establishing its Honours School of English Language and Literature in 1893 as an academic correlative of this idealization of nationalist design.[26] Just as the myth of the American frontier was invoked by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, only two years after the US Census had officially declared the frontier closed, so it might be argued that myths of national formation and cultural independence arose specifically in reaction to the pressures being newly exerted on this concept in a more empirical sense. All the anthologies of national literature that flowed from presses in the early years of the twentieth century corroborated an intimation of what Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, in the preface to his *Oxford Book of English Prose* (1925), described as the "sense of wonderful history written silently in books and buildings, all persuading that we are heirs of more spiritual wealth than, may be, we have surmised or hitherto begun to divine."[27] In English universities during this period, the academic study of literature at undergraduate level thus became associated with the inculcation of a set of moral values designed to build personal character and reinforce accepted national values.

Within this kind of pedagogical context, world literature also took on populist dimensions, offering a way of teaching large undergraduate classes with relatively accessible material. Although Columbia University established its Department of Comparative Literature as early as 1898, the focus there on reading works in their original language did not cut much ice with Richard G. Moulton of the University of Chicago, whose *World Literature and its Place in the General Culture* (1911) had no qualms about using works in translation. Moulton extolled the virtues of developing a student's broader qualities of taste and spirit, and he particularly damned the scholarship of philology, which he saw as unduly obsessed with factual minutiae. Moulton's antipathy towards "pure" scholarship was shared by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, sometime friend of Emily Dickinson, with Higginson complaining in his 1890 article "A World-Literature" of how the vast majority of Harvard University's literature classes were "wholly philological, not in any sense literary."[28] A bifurcation was consequently established whereby comparative literature and philology came to be regarded as more specialized subjects, ripe for graduate studies and academic research, whereas world literature was designated as a broader pedagogical category, suitable mainly for the undergraduate curriculum. This division held good through the first half of the twentieth century, with famous Columbia professor Lionel Trilling in 1958 holding his nose at the thought of world literature being "now part of the argot of our collegiate education," and Weldon M. Williams two years later comparing the typical world literature course to an American tourist's trip through the sites of Europe: "It may be that its

quick forays into cathedrals and castles and mosques are too often like the achievement of the American tourist who boasted that he made it through the Louvre in ten minutes flat."[29]

It is important to remember, as Pizer observes, how world literature at this time was "a uniquely American pedagogic domain," with universities in other parts of the world tending to stick with more traditional formulations of national literature.[30] Sarah Lawall similarly commented in 1988 on how "Only in the United States do we find a systematic attempt to encompass the 'world' (however defined) in literature courses," and though this is certainly not the case in the twenty-first century, it nevertheless did hold true for most of the twentieth.[31] Trilling's disdain for world literature as a scholarly category in the 1950s would have been reinforced by the new professional visibility at that time of a distinguished cadre of comparative literature specialists: Erich Auerbach, René Wellek, and others. Many of these scholars had fled to the United States to escape the depredations of World War II in Europe, and Auerbach's ambition to establish comparative literature as an intellectual discipline beyond the claims of any petty nationalism sounds remarkably like Goethe's advocacy of *Weltliteratur* in 1827 as a counterpoint to the Napoleonic Wars. These comparative literature specialists were, as a mark of their professional accreditation, fluent in multiple European languages, and such standards would have enhanced the condescension of Trilling and others to what they took to be the vulgar prospect of world literature in translation.

The International Comparative Literature Association was founded at Oxford in 1954, but in its early years this Association followed the Goethean principle of conflating Europe with the world of knowledge, and nearly all of the language expertise of comparative literature specialists at this time was European in its provenance. The ICLA held regular congresses every three years, though these rotated on an exclusively European and North American axis – Montreal, Budapest, New York, Paris and so on – until 1991, when the ICLA first went to Tokyo, since when it has convened in South Africa, Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong, Seoul, and elsewhere. This opening out of the field to Asian literature and culture, in particular, has raised concerns in North America about the academic coherence and scholarly integrity of the field. As J. Hillis Miller remarked in 2000:

> The old Eurocentric Comparative Literature made sense as a discipline because graduate dissertation committees, for example, could be made up of professors all presumed to be competent in all the languages and literatures covered in the dissertation. The situation is different when as is often the case nowadays, the

> committee is made up, for example, of several professors who know Chinese, plus one specialist in Chinese. The latter is more likely to know European languages and methodologies than the former are likely to know anything about Chinese culture or literature or language, but the old rule that all the committee members have at least minimum competence in all of the work covered in the dissertation is broken in such cases.[32]

It is not difficult, of course, to appreciate the traditionalist bias inherent in Miller's concern, the assumption here that European and North American languages are central and Asian cultures correspondingly peripheral. But his observation does draw attention to the problem of practicality and viability that besets any attempt to encompass the world within an epistemological framework. Henry James was also influenced by a pragmatist cast of mind, not all of it deriving from the philosophical work of his brother William, and in a 1913 letter Henry James criticized his friend Henrik Christian Andersen's plans for a "World Centre" and his pamphlet on a "World Conference," with James writing:

> I simply *loathe* such pretensious [sic] forms of words as 'World' anything – they are to me mere monstrous sound without sense. The World is a prodigious and portentous and immeasurable affair, and I can't for a moment pretend to sit in my little corner here and 'sympathize with' proposals for dealing with it. It is so far vaster in its appalling complexity than you or me, or than anything we can pretend without the imputation of absurdity and insanity to do to it, that I content myself, and inevitably *must* (so far as I can do anything at all now) with living in the realities of things, with 'cultivating my garden' (morally and intellectually speaking) and with referring my questions to a Conscience (my own poor little personal), less inconceivable than that of the globe.[33]

J.M. Coetzee made a similar point in a 2001 interview, when he said that while he "would prefer to think more globally … one can't write a sort of globally set novel. It has to be somewhere."[34] The aspirations of universal spirit, in whatever guise they manifest themselves, find themselves structurally bound to the ironies of terrestrial incarnation, and this, rather than mere academic politics or institutional conflict, is the primary reason why the idea of world literature exists in an uncomfortable space alongside its local or national counterparts. American world literature may be not quite an oxymoron, but it implies an interplay of competing and often contradictory forces that can by definition never achieve a state of stable resolution.

Within an academic context, the most persistent challenges to orthodox formulations of American literature have emerged in recent times from exponents of comparative literature, who have complained of various ways in which the American literary subject has tended to be framed too narrowly. Questions of language are perhaps the most obvious terrain on which these theoretical battles have taken place, with the Longfellow Institute at Harvard, directed by Werner Sollors and Marc Shell, lamenting how American literature has become consolidated in scholarly terms as a monolingual category. Taking their cue from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the multilingual Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard in the 1860s, Sollors and Shell have pointed to the prevalence of publications in many different languages throughout the United States up until the early years of the twentieth century.[35] It is certainly worthy of note how many Scandinavian-language newspapers were published in the immigrant communities of the Pacific Northwest, for example, and it is important for any student of American literature to be aware that Theodore Dreiser's first language – the vernacular he heard at his family home – was German rather than English, just as that of Jack Kerouac was Breton French. But it is also important to acknowledge how the increasing hegemony of the English language within the United States was driven not merely by chance, nor just by academic prejudice against non-Anglophone tongues, but by specific government policies mandating the imposition of a standardized English for the purposes of social and political cohesion. When the first *Cambridge History of American Literature* was published in 1919, it had two chapters devoted to "Non-English Writings," but by the time of Robert Spiller's new edition of the *Cambridge History* in 1948, this explicitly multilingual component had been eliminated.[36] During the First World War, former president Theodore Roosevelt declared: "We must … have but one language. That must be the language of the Declaration of Independence."[37] Hence the suppression around this time of German-language publications, like the legal suppression in 1868 of the teaching of French in Louisiana secondary schools in the aftermath of the Civil War, was designed deliberately to shore up an ideal of national unity around Anglophone co-ordinates, and the identification by Foerster and his collaborators during the 1920s of American literature as a national enterprise carried as its correlative a corresponding diminution in the visibility of languages other than English.

This is not, of course, to deny the value of scholarship that examines American literature's historical relationship to multilingualism, and such scholarship takes many compelling forms, from studies of Puritan encounters with Native American languages in the seventeenth century through to Robert A. Orsi's analysis of the ethnic styles associated with

Italian immigrant communities in New York.[38] This multilingual dimension has been given added impetus in the twenty-first century by the increasing visibility of Spanish within the US national domain, with some forecasts predicting that the Hispanic population will outnumber the Caucasian by 2050, while contemporary fiction writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Cormac McCarthy sometimes use bilingual strands in their narratives, as if to mirror the hybrid nature of the new American world they are invoking. All this needs to be situated, however, against the countercurrent of a framework that is explicitly competing against monolingual, nationalistic paradigms. Foerster in 1929 specifically took issue with regionalist variations, whose focus on "local color" he saw as leading towards an inevitably "provincial" emphasis in American literary study, and he looked instead to Frederick Jackson Turner's conception of the frontier as a paradigm for what Foerster understood to be the dominant mythic tropes informing US culture.[39]

It is of course easy enough from our perspective to see what Foerster's mythic template overlooks: issues of race and gender, for example, as well as questions of multilingualism. But it is important to understand how the contours of this nationalist design have expanded and contracted over the past 400 years, with the focus on multiple languages being very far from a new phenomenon in the broader context of American literary studies, just as the idea of America as a redemptive new nation is an exceptionalist *topos* that can more usefully be analyzed in historical rather than philosophical terms. As an abstract idea, American exceptionalism is altogether nugatory, but as an affective concept it has long been powerful, and it continued to be so even among political leaders such as Obama who were skeptical of its rational justification. Obama's quasi-religious incantation in political rallies, "yes we can," was a fitting example of how the American body politic is beholden to a revivalist spirit of affirmation rather than a more clinical model of sober analysis.

Yet this exceptionalist affect also creates significant blindspots in terms of America's understanding of its relation to a wider cultural world. One of the most stringent recent interrogations of the underlying premises of American literary studies came in 2003 from a professor of comparative literature, Djelal Kadir, whose professional expertise lies primarily in South America rather than US culture as such. In his introduction to a special issue of *PMLA* entitled "America: The Idea, the Literature," Kadir accused American literary scholars of being implicated within the parameters of their own field to such an extent that they were caught up in the "redundancy" that "inexorably renders the knowing subject part of what it seeks to know." Tracing American literary studies back through Trilling, Matthiessen, and Parrington, Kadir argued that the field remains beholden to a "cultural logic of belated liberalism," one that hypostatizes