The Imaginary and Its Worlds
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2 The Necessary Fragmentation of the (U.S.) Literary-Cultural Imaginary

Insofar as the idea—or myth—of distinctive national cultures still maintains any credible explanatory power, to what extent does it reinforce a view of (U.S.) national literary history as distinctive and/or coherent? That is the basic question with which this essay wrestles. I argue that although the explanatory power is not trivial, neither does it guarantee national cultural distinctiveness or internal coherence—and that is just as well.

Two preliminary anecdotes before getting under way. The first relates to an undergraduate course in twentieth-century American fiction taught in the late 1980s that used William Boelhower’s then recent study of “ethnic semiosis in American literature” as one of its critical texts. The choice was admittedly problematic given that book’s allusive density, but the students rose to the challenge with this fascinating result: within a month, every person in our mostly white, middle-class group had found a way to conceive of himself or herself in minoritized terms, with a hyphenated identity: if not ethno-racial, then in terms of religion, sexual preference, regional outback upbringing, working-class roots, etc.—and for many students, multiply.

Anecdote number two relates to the discussion provoked by a lecture given in the summer of 2008 in Suzhou to Chinese professors of American literature, a state-of-the-field reconnaissance centering on different kinds of Americanist transnational inquiry—Atlantic world studies, hemispheric studies, and transpacific studies—with special emphasis on specific paths of critical intervention that I fancied this sophisticated group of bilingual or multilingual Asian-country-of-origin colleagues might especially be equipped to make. Although the audience seemed generally receptive, some of the more senior scholars chided me for not having concentrated on the national cultural “mainstream” rather than the margins thereof, and on literary history as a carrier of paradigmatic
models of national culture (and acculturation) rather than on the diasporic and the interstitial.

Between those two opposite thrusts—of splitting versus lumping, of the longing for heuristic coherence versus the drive to particularize and thereby to fragment—my own thoughts about how best to characterize national cultural imaginaries continue to oscillate. As these anecdotes suggest, the oscillation effect seems ascribable partly to the observer’s distance from or immersion in the thing observed, partly to whether one’s preferred way of thinking about issues of national cultural coherence is old-fashioned or au courant. It may well be—I venture this as speculation rather than as dogma—that in the case of “America” (here meaning the United States specifically), this oscillation is characteristically accentuated by its centuries-old history as a dream space, meaning simultaneously also of course a potential nightmare space, first for Europeans and Euro-Americans, then increasingly for the rest of the world. But already I am getting ahead of myself in broaching this issue of exceptionalism. For it seems clear that the recent predilection among Americanists generally for thinking of the U.S. national cultural imaginary in terms of fissures and/or dispersal arises not merely from the quiddities of U.S. cultural history or Americanist tribalism but, beyond those, and more fundamentally, from the percolation of the concept of the imaginary within cultural theory. I start, then, with the latter and work back to the former.

_Cultural Imaginary/Americanist Field-Imaginary_

Theories of the or “a” “cultural” or “social” “imaginary” seem inherently, designedly unstable on several counts. First, the imputed non-identity between the imagined or the represented and the existent. Beyond this, the expression as a singular of what turns out to be an assemblage of sometimes wildly discrepant elements. Consider the British cultural critic Graham Dawson’s handy thumbnail definition of the cultural imaginary as “those vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions,” furnishing “public forms which both organize knowledge of the social world and give shape to phantasies within the apparently ‘internal’ domain of psychic life” (48). This postulates a culture and a “social world” as well as a certain mechanism for generating collective fantasies; but the vast networks of interlinked discursive fields at the input end guarantee a plethora of incommensurable outputs.
Matters become further complicated with the next step of establishing the primary domain of reference for those master terms *culture* and *social world*. Midway through his *Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975), when Cornelius Castoriadis pauses to ask just what is the society being referred to under the sign of the social imaginary, he grants that in principle, it simply “designates the collectivity in question,” which might be religious (Judaic, Islamic), might be ethnic (Hellene or Slav, for instance), or might be otherwise organized, but which he insists for his purposes must mean national, for that is the form of collective imaginary that “proves more solid than any other reality, as two world wars and the survival of nationalism have shown” (148). Here Castoriadis anticipates Benedict Anderson’s seminal *Imagined Communities* (1983).

Neither author presents himself as having fallen under the spell of the collective imaginary he describes, however. Both books anatomize the imagined fictions of nationness as immensely potent historical forces from which the analyst, however, stands apart, if not immune. By conceiving nations not as organismal growths but as historically contingent artifacts, each provokes more impetus than resistance to next-stage accounts of diasporic and border-blurring cultural imaginaries, such as Homi Bhabha’s “DissemiNation,” which critiques Anderson’s insistence on geographical boundedness, and in American studies the three transnationalisms I tried to summarize for my Chinese colleagues.

These post-Andersonian initiatives have of course profoundly affected what Donald Pease has fruitfully called the Americanist “field-imaginary” (11). Since the early 1990s, nation-centripetal approaches have been losing luster, while postnationalism and transnationalism have been increasingly “in.” Just think of all those books of the 1980s, his and mine among them, that constituted what Michael Colacurcio wittily called “the American Renaissance Renaissance,” from John Irwin’s *American Hieroglyphics* (1980) to David Leverenz’s *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (1989). Several were inflected by recent, ongoing challenges to the received canon and/or limitedly open to transnationalism (almost wholly of a North Atlantic sort); but the main coordinates remained the “major” national authors of the epoch of U.S. literary emergence and the internal narratives of U.S. literary and cultural history seemingly disclosed by the constellations formed by their work. How long ago that seems! Projects like Sean Gowdie’s *Creole America*, which won the MLA first book prize in 2006, or Wai Chee Dimock’s *Through Other Continents*, runner-up for the MLA’s James Russell Lowell Prize the same year, were scarcely yet imaginable.
Yet however much this shift may have challenged the primacy of thinking about cultural imaginaries at the level of the nation, it clearly hasn’t killed off such thinking. As the Caribbeanist Peter Hitchcock reluctantly grants, “the community of Nations still demands obeisance to an idea of a Nation” (10). This might be called the aversive defense of persistent nation-think: you’d like to get rid of it but you can’t. An example of an offsetting supportive defense is Partha Chatterjee’s outrage at fears emanating from the developed world after the implosion of the Soviet Union that the greatest “danger to world peace is now posed by the resurgence of nationalism,” which he takes as a ploy to keep the non-West in its place, as if, “like drugs, terrorism, and illegal immigration, [nationalism were] one more product of the Third World that the West dislikes but is powerless to prohibit” (3–4). Chatterjee proceeds à propos India to make his case by reinstating a considerably more traditional Gemeinschaft-like understanding of imagined community than Anderson’s: that is, “people living in different, contextually defined, communities,” peacefully coexisting “within large political units” (238).

To return now to the Americanist field-imaginary, despite its recent transnational turns, there’s also good reason to expect U.S. literature scholars as a tribe to continue to play the national culture card if only because there is no way to distinguish U.S. literature from any other except in terms of some culturally valenced argument, since the distinctions at the level of language and genre difference are on the whole so feeble except for traditional Native American orature. If only for that reason, David Shumway’s prediction of the mid-1990s may prove more right than wrong: that the New Americanist insurgency would produce not the counter-hegemony it sought but rather an amended extension whereby “the canon established over the course of the century will continue to be part of any new disciplinary object that might be constituted” (352). Winfried Fluck’s “American Literary History and the Romance with America” brilliantly updates and sophisticates this line of thinking by construing “diversity” as a “counter-term to the prison-house of a monolithic national identity” designed in effect if not in intent to save the original project, insofar as “diversity studies continues an approach that stands at the center of American exceptionalism”—and to assess the transnational turn as offering more of the same: “liberation of the extraterritorial” to the end of “reviving [literature’s] adversarial function” (11, 7, 14).

In this account, for the national cultural imaginary to present itself to the humanistic intelligentsia as an assemblage of breakaway fragments is,
up to a point, a wholly logical if not downright predictable new stage of
the original romance plot. Up to a point, this formulation of the way we
Americanists live now may seem a kind of rechanneling of Bercovitchian
cultural consensus theory—what looks like dissent proves consensual at
last (see Bercovitch 1993, 353–376). But it’s an argument that perhaps
only Fluck could have made, as the fruit of previous reflection on the
work of the cultural imaginary in premodern U.S. fiction in providing a
“motor” for a “cultural dehierarchicalization process” that coordinately
scripts new “individual possibilities for self-development” at the textual
level and conduces to a “freeing of the reader from the guardianship [Vo-
rundschaft]” of the text (Fluck 1997, 29). As Fluck’s readings of Twain’s
_Huckleberry Finn_ in _Das kulturelle Imaginäre_ and elsewhere especially
show, relative to (say) Bercovitch on Hawthorne (Bercovitch 1991; 1993,
194–245), this conceptual framework entails a much less normative view
of how literary texts work as refractions of national ideologies and cor-
respondingly greater receptivity to considering fragmentation effects as
part and parcel of the American cultural imaginary. Here Fluck seems
to have been inspired by Wolfgang Iser’s understanding of “play” as an
activator of the (aesthetic) imaginary that will “explode” into “plurivoc-
ity” when “actualized by the potential recipient” (Iser 227), even while
containing the imaginary within the arena of the cultural.

Fluck’s 2009 article entertains, in closing, the further possibility that
the romance with America plot might unravel into nothing more than
“a heterogeneous plurality of narratives” (18) and/or lose its savor if the
special charisma of the United States itself were to fade. Had Toni Mor-
rior’s _A Mercy_ (2009) been available, he might have cited it as an augury
of that scenario of terminal deliquescence, insofar as Morrison’s project
is to reimagine late-seventeenth-century America as a scattered assem-
blage of starkly isolated, embattled communal and individual life worlds
representing disconnected bits of psychosocial space and trajectories of
dislocation separated by barriers of race, class, language, and geography,
pulverizing the whole array of traditional mythic larger-than-life sagas.
The Puritan errand, Quaker communitarianism, planter dynastics, the
dream of really making it big or even just finding a new lease on life in
the new world get disenchanted into squalidly reduced versions of them-
selves. Despite its patches of enticing descriptivism, haunting pathos, and
guarded empathy, _A Mercy_ seems resolved not to be read, as _Beloved_
was in some quarters, as eventuating in a sentimental melodrama of exorcism,
with family values reaffirmed and Denver headed for a brighter future at
Oberlin College. So it may not be too much of a stretch for the field-imag-
inary to correlate this transit in the career of the nation’s most illustrious novelist with Fluck’s futurism, especially considering how sensitively *A Mercy* registers the thrust of recent early Americanist revisionary scholarship since the 1980s toward concentration on the unheroic messiness of cross-national, cross-racial interactions in the contact zone.

But rather than continue with such speculations, I want to make three more specific observations about the fragmentation and dispersal of the Americanist field-imaginary per se inspired by Fluck’s analysis.

1. Its degree of (in)coherence looks different at different levels. Coherence at a macro-level can comport with extreme fissiparousness at the micro-level. That is more or less the way we are living now, professionally speaking. Within American literature studies today there seems to be a fair degree of consensus, though certainly not unanimity, that our historicizizations need to reckon seriously with even if not fully accept what I like to call the new Americanist grand narrative of settler culture history as a transit from genocidal conquest to Manifest Destiny to would-be new imperium—along the lines, in other words, of Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease’s *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*. But that doesn’t by any means imply that the contributors to that collection constitute anything like a tightly coherent school or that all of them have taken a lasting interest in one another’s work. Nor does it even guarantee that more than a very few self-identified “New Americanists” are going to hold themselves responsible for absorbing this or that particular new intervention that directly engages their work. Take, for example, the scrupulous historico-ethnographic analysis of the spiritual narrative of the first Hawaiian Christian convert offered in Rob Wilson’s *Be Always Converting, Be Always Converted* (25–58), published just as I was drafting this essay. This book is a strong example of an illuminating ramification of the regnant paradigm that also presses inventively and revealingly against its limits, and yet no less striking an instance of the dispersal effect that follows from the dividing up of the huge archive of premodern vernacular life-narrative that bears in one degree or another on U.S. cultural history among specialists in black studies, hemispheric American studies, Pacificana, religion and culture studies, history of the book studies, and so forth. To put it crudely, there is simply too much worthy stuff of an intensely specialized nature coming out these days for even the most alertly responsive scholar to keep track even of all the “relevant” contributions, at least if he or she is pursuing a research program of moderately ambitious scope.
2. Centrifugalism within American literature studies is multicausal. It hasn’t been wholly driven by the allure of the marginal position. One needs also, for openers, to reckon with what Fluck (2002) calls “expressive individualism”—the strain within the culture of humanistic professionalism, not limited to Americanists, though perhaps more prevalent within U.S. academe than elsewhere, that would attach preeminent importance to the original critical voice and countenance a highly selective, sometimes even amnesiac, (dis)regard for scholarly precursors. Doubtless related to this factor of pragmatic professionalism, American literature studies has been balkanized by multiple interpretative communities driven more by principled socio-methodological commitments of one sort or another than by investment in exploring any national imaginary. The one I myself know best, ecocriticism, is an instructive case in point, having gathered much of its original force from revisionist work on two different national archives—British romantic poetry on the one hand and American nature writing on the other—but since then increasingly applied to all epochs and genres of literary history from antiquity to the present and increasingly seen as transnational, having to do with such cross-cutting phenomena as place-attachment, aboriginality, toxification, ecological refugeeism, climate change, and so forth. So in Ursula Heise’s *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), for instance, national variations get taken into account but are deemed of secondary importance for the project at hand.

3. The impression of a fragmented or entropic field-imaginary is exaggerated when measured, as it customarily is, by the standard of Americanist work during the half-century from the 1940s through the late 1980s—from Matthiessen and Trilling through the Myth-Symbol era through the Americanist phase of New Historicism, during which time the emphasis was greater than ever before or since on defining and ramifying the internal coordinates of U.S. literary and cultural history in terms of which everything else would be mapped. Taking a longer view of things, during the century and a half between the American Revolution and the co-emergence of American literature and American studies as specialized fields, the conception (or rather the dream) of defining a distinctive literary-historical heritage did certainly exist, but in competition on the one hand with the felt reality of fragmentation—especially, during these years, the solidity of subnational regional culture relative to the federal—and on the other hand with the sense of U.S. culture as a peripheral outpost of the Anglo-European cultural imaginary. So the sense of a fragmented cultural imaginary is hardly unique to our moment. No
doubt that goes a long way toward explaining why there’s never been a first-rate single-authored literary history of the United States, and why all the collaborative histories from the 1917–1921 Cambridge to the 2009 Harvard fission into the sum of their parts.

None of these considerations undermine Fluck’s view that critiques of bad exceptionalism may work more to perpetuate the romance with America than to quash it, as in the British journalist Godfrey Hodgson’s *Myth of American Exceptionalism* (2009), which reads like the lament of a disappointed lover. This, however, is quite a different project from (say) Thomas Bender’s much more even-tempered and far-reaching comparative history, *A Nation among Nations*, which denies anything notably exceptional about U.S. culture whatever among major Europhone cultures since the age of empire began. “On the spectrum of difference,” Bender concludes, the United States is one of many, and there is no single norm from which it deviates—or that it establishes” (296–297). If this were true, then by all rights the romance with America should dissipate. Of course it’s not really true: in many ways the United States is distinctly an outlier in the developed world, or has become so—some of them bad (its percentage of incarcerated people, its reluctance to bind itself to international accords), some good (the invention of the first large-scale post-colonial republican democracy), some good or bad depending on how you see the matter (for example, the percentage of poll respondents who profess to believe in an afterlife or in Satan), some ethically neutral (the range of time zones and latitudes across which its territory stretches). But then again there’s nothing exceptional about exceptionalism either; such lists could be drawn up for Japan, China, India, Indonesia, Germany, and Brazil. So the phenomenon of national exceptionalism is, contra Bender, not so much a chimera as a tossed salad of disparate motifs by no means equally important to the formation of a national cultural imaginary—Confucianism being, for instance, more fundamental to the Chinese cultural imaginary than giant pandas.

With all these considerations in mind, I direct the rest of this essay toward one particular ingredient of U.S. exceptionalism as traditionally imagined that seems incontestably as responsible as any other for producing the schizophrenic effect of the romance with America as luminous holism on the one hand versus fragmentation of the cultural imaginary on the other, and the narrative matrices refracting that: namely, the so-called American dream of individual transformation from modest beginnings and the array of narratives to which this has given rise.
Obviously the “American dream” is precisely that: its imagined sagas don’t “reflect statistical realities as much as they tell of possibilities,” as the sociologist Robert Wuthnow sums up a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century study of “new elites” of non-European immigrant background that dramatizes both the dream’s ongoing vigor and some of the characteristic frustrations and disillusionments that haunt those who are driven by it (108–109). Surely it’s no accident that the phrase itself, “the American dream,” was coined in the depths of the Great Depression, as Gordon Hutner reminds us in his study of middlebrow fiction between 1920 and 1960 (109–110). Also, obviously, this so-called dream, singular, is in practice pluriform, with differing avatars. It may tilt either toward the materialistic or the idealistic, with different weightings attached to character and luck, or to self-generated initiative as against luck and collaboration, to untrammeled individual autonomy as goal as against communal participation as goal. And so on. One could haggle about matters of taxonomic precision for a very long time. Most, though not all, of the relevant ambiguities are already embedded in the first and historically most influential canonical narrative of the prototypical saga, Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*. But I limit concentration only to these specific points: the durability of the land-of-opportunity dream (or fetish) as a crucial driver of America’s perceived charisma despite whatever empirical evidence to the contrary, and the link between that perceived distinctiveness and the fragmentation of the cultural imaginary in U.S. literary history and, especially, in critical practice.

American dream narratives, whether told affirmatively or debunkingly, entail fragmentation of cultural imaginaries in various characteristic ways. One is the “forgetful nation” syndrome defined by Ali Behdad. The immigrant forsakes the culture of origin as the price of Americanization. Crèvecoeur’s Andrew, the Hebridean, emerges from the middle-states melting pot of European ethnics as prosperous farmer, but good-bye, Scottishness (Behdad 32–47). Franklin’s good-bye, Boston, and Gatsby’s good-bye, North Dakota, are “native” counterparts. Another characteristic form of imagined fragmentation is personal isolation as the price of individual fulfillment, entrapment in the dungeon of your own heart, as Tocqueville mordantly wrote (2:106). One among many worst-case scenarios is the fictional saga of Van Harrington in Robert Herrick’s *Memoirs of an American Citizen*, who starts as a fairly decent if wayward lad.
from the provinces and through increasing addiction to success in the marketplace becomes a moral monster.

Such fragmentation effects can also be at least partially offset. An immigration narrative project can trigger reminiscences that reinstate the culture nominally left behind, as with Mary Antin’s autobiography Promised Land, which, even as it attaches supreme importance to being utterly remade by the new world, entangles the reader if not herself in its evocation of her early childhood in the old world shtetl. As to fragmentation type two, against Herrick’s cautionary tale of lone-wolf ruthlessness could be set the two ultimate Gilded Age rags-to-riches stories, Andrew Carnegie’s Autobiography and (in fiction) Lew Wallace’s novel Ben-Hur (the best-selling novel between Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Gone with the Wind), which go to great pains to qualify their stories of vertiginous ascent to fabulous wealth by insistence on the protagonist’s principled turn to philanthropy and communitarian stewardship.

But the fragmentation effects that I want to discuss at greatest length, and that bring me back more closely to the Fluck critique, pertain more to different but related kinds of critical foreshortening when engaging this archive of what I have lumpingly called American dream narrative. On the one hand, American protagonist-centric stories of attempted self-realization might be framed more expansively as part of an expanding modern transnational imaginary, broadly Eurocentric in the first instance, within which the Bildungsroman is the representative fictional genre. On the other hand, the evolution of what is increasingly called the “ethnic Bildungsroman” might be framed more pointedly as one of U.S. literary history’s most distinctive success stories—which is not, of course, to say that the texts themselves are always or even usually upbeat narratives of “making it.” By Bildungsroman I mean here a person-centric narrative, whether or not fictitious, that follows the lifeline of a protagonist seen as more or less socially representative, with special attention to his or her maturation, or “coming of age.” Much obviously depends on the strictness with which one defines Bildungsroman, which in some critical representations shrinks down to a few German novels. But if we accept Bakhtin’s more elastic understanding of Bildungsromane as narratives of protagonist “emergence,” then the field of possibilities becomes much more capacious.

Traditional Americanist opinion, seconded by Franco Moretti’s influential reading of the Anglo-European Bildungsroman, deemed U.S. literary history exceptional for the paucity of the genre in so-called classic American fiction. That is true enough of the dramatis personae on whom D. H. Lawrence and F. O. Matthiessen concentrate. Indeed, among pre-
realist fictions by canonical U.S. novelists, only James Fenimore Cooper’s *Satanstoe* snugly fits the template. Hence Leslie Fiedler, following Lawrence, and also reacting to the intense fascination with protracted adolescence in post–World War II U.S. fiction from J. D. Salinger to Jack Kerouac and Philip Roth, defined “American” literary distinctiveness in terms of willful resistance to maturity, a refusal to grow up—a line of thinking given new life and placed in broader transnational-modernist context by Ross Posnock’s arresting book on Roth. But with the elasticization of the Americanist field-imaginary to include women’s fiction à la Maria Cummins’s novel *The Lamplighter*, African American autobiography from slave narrative onward, other strains of “ethnic” narrative both autobiographical and fictive, as well as writing by white males formerly cordoned off as merely “popular” such as the Horatio Alger novels, the quest for mature social identity and agency looks considerably more central; the supposed national fascination with perpetual immaturity looks suspiciously like a white middle-class male affair; and the now expanded field of what counts as U.S. literary history looks less autonomous, or aberrant, if you will. The transatlantic Richardsonian continuum that Fiedler relentlessly consigned to the aesthetic substrate looms much larger; slave narrative becomes part of a larger Afro-Atlantic field; family resemblances between Dickensian and Melvillian versions of young male naïfs begin to emerge.

The full implications of these and other such shifts still remain to be absorbed fully even though they started to gather momentum several decades ago. I want to pursue some of them here more concretely through what may seem—so I hope!—a somewhat unexpected pairing from the first half of the twentieth century: Willa Cather and Carlos Bulosan. Cather’s novel *The Song of the Lark* (1912) follows the metamorphosis of a second-generation Swedish immigrant girl from a backwater childhood in Moonstone, Colorado, to international opera stardom. Immigrant activist and man of letters Carlos Bulosan’s autobiographical fiction *America Is in the Heart* (1946) follows its protagonist from early boyhood in the Philippines as the child of an impoverished farming family, through his ordeals as an exploited economic refugee in depression America, to his beginnings as a published writer and the onset of World War II. Among countless possible dyads that might be chosen, I select this pair of texts as being in multiple ways analogous yet positioning themselves in notably different ways vis-à-vis the romance with America that, ironically, have conduced to an almost diametrically opposite categorization by the Americanist field-imaginary that now prevails.
Here are some pertinent common threads. Both texts are ethnic *Bildungsromane*, the pivotal parts of which could have happened only in the United States, and what’s more, in an unstably multiethnic American West. Both narratives also migrate about in space to the end of evoking their respective different transnational imaginaries; and both take pains to problematize the identification of the protagonist with America. Synchronously with their peripateia, both protagonists are emotionally driven figures, repeatedly misunderstood, who wrestle throughout their narratives with the challenges of self-understanding and articulacy, owing partly to language of family origin but in the long run more for reasons of culture and class.

These analogies might be offset by a still longer list of disparities, but the particular contrast I would stress here has to do with critical framing. *Song of the Lark* has seemed an unproblematically American text, however problematic its treatment of gender, sexual preference, and aboriginalism—a solid midlevel achievement by a writer always deemed at least borderline canonical, though briefly out of fashion under high modernism. Yet not only does it evince zero interest in thematizing Americanness as such, but also its plotline enacts an almost complete disaffiliation from the national. There’s no romance with America whatever in this text, unless you count the romance of Mesa Verde, this being the first of Cather’s fictions to deploy the vanished Indian motif. Virtually no one in the United States, even those most sympathetic to the heroine Thea Kronberg, more than gropingly understands what makes her tick except for foreigners: her Mexican neighbors in the local *barrio* and various European expatriates of similarly aesthetic bent who also feel like fish out of water in the United States. In respect to genre affiliations, the stakes of *Song of the Lark* are better understood when we divest ourselves of the assumption that it somehow belongs in the first instance to an American imaginary and reposition it within the atlas of modern fiction on the geographical periphery of the *Künstlerroman*, with texts like Mann’s *Tonio Kröger* and Rilke’s *Notebooks of Laurids Malte Brigge* at the center, Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist* on the semi-periphery, and Stella Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* and Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African Farm* fellow denizens of the Anglophone outback. That isn’t to say one can’t identify a cohort of other national narratives that pursue comparable plotlines: Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall*, Dreiser’s *The Genius*, Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, and for that matter (in some critical accounts) *America Is in the Heart* (see Gonzalez). The point is simply the need to disenchant the assumption that *Song of the Lark* strongly attaches itself
to a transnational cultural imaginary however much it seems to enact a
storybook American dream–style rags-to-riches plot.

By contrast, the explicit thematic center of Bulosan’s America Is in the
Heart is precisely the romance with America, and yet those most drawn
toward it seem to want to distance it as far as possible from that
romance. Here I am not thinking simply or even primarily of arguments to
the effect that the appearance of flag-waving patriotism in some of the
most often quoted passages means the opposite of what the casual main-
stream reader might think, i.e., that Bulosan’s actual emphasis is on the
scandal of the country’s failure so far to deliver the equality it promises,
as Ramón Saldívar has shown with subtlety and erudition in his analy-
sis of the ironies (including circumstances of composition) of Bulosan’s
essay for the Saturday Evening Post to accompany the third of Norman
Rockwell’s four wildly popular illustrations of FDR’s four American free-
doms—all four of them iconic images of lily-white communities or fami-
lies (205–214). Still more striking from my standpoint is the extent to
which critical discussion of how to situate Bulosan in literary history has
gravitated toward the resistance of America Is in the Heart to inclusion
within a national cultural imaginary. Is it part of Asian American litera-
ture? Is it a Filipino-diasporic text whose particularity is betrayed by such
agglomeration, as Epifanio San Juan holds (234)? Or is it misrecognized
when coded “ethnic” as against “proletarian,” as Michael Denning con-
tends (238)? Such are the grounds on which the taxonomic discussions
usually take place. Lisa Lowe, who reads the novel as a foundational
Asian American text, shrewdly notes this rabbit/duck paradox: “Taught
as an ethnic bildungsroman, as a tale of the subject’s journey from foreign
estrangement to integrated citizenship,” it “responds to the reconciliatory
and universalizing functions of canonization; taught with attention to
social and historical, as well as formal and thematic, contradictions,” it
“thematize[s] how the demand for canonization simultaneously produces
a critique of canonization itself” (57, 55). Yet this statement stops short
of suggesting, as well it might, that these opposite readings are inherent
to the project of the text itself—that they stand behind its signature pas-
sage, evidently first written during the war in a letter to the wife of a Fili-
pino journalist in the resistance whom Bulosan believed had been killed,
and then rewritten for the novel as a prewar speech by his older brother
Macario: “America is not merely a land or an institution” but “the prophecy
of a new society,” “a system that knows no sorrow or strife or suffer-
ing”; it’s also “the nameless foreigner, the homeless refugee. . . . We are
all that nameless foreigner, that homeless refugee, that hungry boy, that
illiterate immigrant and that lynched black body. . . . from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate—*We are America!*" (Bulosan 1943, 213; 1945,189). Anticipating Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech of the 1960s, the romance with America here seems to stand as a prolepsis of a still unfulfilled promise of a truly inclusive social order that would uplift the marginal and downtrodden without erasing the particularities of remembered suffering. As such, it frames American ethnic *Bildungsromane* as sagas of struggle rather than of clear success, whose protagonists remain accountable to community if, however, sometimes alien to it.

Two-thirds of a century later, after a series of ethnic literary renaissances and the advent of critical whiteness studies—such that for the critical intelligentsia if not the general public no longer is there any such thing as an unmarked ethnicity—Bulosan’s template looks at least as representative of the U.S. cultural imaginary as Cather’s. That is, within the expanded matrix that now counts as the database for the Americanist field-imaginary, the narrative of fraught minoritarian passage toward a social recognition that might promote or augur social change appears a more distinctive carrier of the national cultural imaginary than Franklin’s saga of the transformation of runaway apprentice into founding father; and the success story of the American *Bildungsroman*—the marker that arguably distinguishes it most from its increasingly global look-alikes in the age of Obama—is its incremental proliferation of socially diverse sagas of personal emergence and the complexities thereof. Yet all this hardly guarantees either the sustainability of national cultural distinctiveness or the durability of the romance with America as a distinctively charismatic place. Both Cather’s and Bulosan’s narratives should alert one to the amenability of the *Bildungsroman* form, including the ethnic *Bildungsroman*, to both national and transnational imaginaries. Bruce Robbins has called attention to the attraction of upward mobility narratives for the developing world as well as Euro-America. Pheng Cheah argues for the importance of *Bildungsroman* as a defining postcolonial genre, one of his pivotal actors being also one of Bulosan’s own heroes, the Philippine nationalist martyr José Rigal—Rigal’s life story for Bulosan, his novelistic masterpiece of a young returnee’s political awakening, *Noli Me Tangere*, for Cheah. Joseph Slaughter’s *Human Rights, Inc.* argues, by contrast, in neo-Foucaultian terms for the *Bildungsroman* as the distinctive literary carrier of human rights discourse, namely that it works like the mainstream Victorian novel according to Nancy Armstrong’s *How Novels Think*, as an apparatus of cultural production aimed at producing
individuated liberal subjects who exercise social agency within strictly regulated bounds.

These various accounts of Bildungsroman’s cultural-historical import are obviously somewhat at odds, then. Pheng Cheah would radicalize the genre, whereas Armstrong and Slaughter see it as an engine of bourgeoisification. But the aggregate effect of their combined interventions must be to qualify if not utterly to disenchant the impression of anything intractably exceptional about U.S. narratives of individual emergence, including the ethnic Bildungsromane formerly deemed subcanonical or marginal but now de facto paradigmatic. The same arguably holds even for the more traditional, Lawrentian-Fiedleresque-Posnockian view of narrative distinctiveness resting on refusal of cultural maturity—although some of the critics just named, notably Armstrong and Slaughter, would rule this out. For built into the genre itself, as far back as the most cited seminal text, Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Lehrjahre, has been the counter-theme of resistance to maturity, in the classic touchstone English examples finally repressed but almost always present as an undercurrent and in some cases deliberately not overcome, as with Rilke’s Malte. So Malte surfaces as an important reference point for Maxine Hong Kingston’s perpetual post-1960s Chinese American male adolescent hippie Wittman Ah Sing in Tripmaster Monkey.

If, then, American dream narratives are understood as avatars of individual emergence narratives increasingly distributed worldwide, albeit Eurocentric in the first instance, then there is no reason to expect that this aspect of the romance with America—that is, of supposed American cultural exceptionalism—should persist into the infinite future; indeed, quite the contrary. Yet neither should one expect it to vanish within the lifetimes even of our very youngest students. For one thing, the American dream will surely persist as an imagined field of possibility so long as the impression persists that the country is unusually hospitable to liberal individualism, and thereafter into the indefinite future as a historical memory. That the paradigm case for U.S. emergence narrative has become the minoritarian passage and not the Franklinian passage of white male youth will undoubtedly promote its durability, at least so long as the upper echelons of U.S. society continue to seem increasingly penetrable by minorities and Wuthnow’s new immigrant elites. Meanwhile, however, for the Americanist field-imaginary to continue to question the coherence and distinctiveness of national culture and national literary history and to continue to concentrate more of its energies on the connecting links between national culture and the rest of the world seems
fruitful, pragmatic, proper—and also, one might add, safe. It will make the Americanist field-imaginary increasingly more complex and less amenable to generalization, let alone control, by any one superscholar or camp; but it is certainly not going to put Americanists out of business anytime soon.

The foregoing paragraph doubtless gives the impression of siding with the forces of dispersal that Fluck skeptically anatomizes in “The Romance with America,” not to mention my Boelhower-instigated undergraduate class of yore, rather than with the earnest senior Chinese professors who objected to my exegesis of “trans-” approaches and also with Fluck’s own conviction, stated more pointedly in his 2007 “Theories of American Culture,” that “the original goal of the American Studies movement—the analysis of the cultural sources of American power—continues to be as urgent as ever, and the dissolution of this project in transnational studies would be a major mistake” (73). Fluck’s view of the importance of (American) nationness as frame of examination and historical force clearly lies somewhere between those of Hitchcock and Chatterjee cited earlier. Pragmatic rather than patriotic but certainly not aversive, Fluck calls for continued focus not on some “mythic national identity” but on the “particular set of economic, social or cultural conditions that, for historical and other reasons, are different from those of other countries and nations” (among which he cites “a strong transnational dimension”) (74). The sense of urgency here evidently arises from the conviction that the special “historical constellations that have been developed by the United States” that have produced unique “forms of international dominance” still await adequate explanation (73). The risk of American-Studies-as-Deliquescence-of-America-through-Transnationalism (or runaway multiculturalism) is that it ignores the elephant in the international boardroom. I am actually much more sympathetic to this concern than this essay as a whole probably makes it seem. The extent to which I differ arises chiefly from these two convictions: First, a general conviction as to the potential importance of literary-intellectual work as a fringe activity that more or less systemically questions the ethical legitimacy of whatever forms of social dominance even while usually operating within them (e.g., for openers, the very choice to become a writer or a professor of humanities in the United States has always for the most part been a choice not to pursue a more socially acceptable path). And second, a more particular conviction as to the importance of national literary-cultural history as a barometric indicator of what is ethically legitimate as against what is politically-economically-militarily powerful about the
present, long-standing—though since 1989 also increasingly embattled and endangered—prestige of the United States in the eyes of the world, a legitimacy intimately bound up with its gradual, often maddeningly slow and two-faced groping to make good on the founding promise—cruelly deceptive at the start—of social inclusiveness within and across borders.

** Works Cited **


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