

Frank Kelleter and Alexander Starre, eds., *Projecting American Studies: Essays on Theory, Method, and Practice* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2018), 314 pp.

Projecting American Studies is a collection of short essays arising out of the “Looking Forward, 2014” conference held at Berlin’s John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies in the fall of 2014. Its focus is on what the editors call “emerging agendas and timely conversations in American Studies” (9), particularly in view of the changing social and economic infrastructures currently exerting influence on higher education institutions all over the world. Many contributors to this volume consider ways in which American Studies might seek discursive space for itself in an environment where academic undertakings are needing increasingly to justify themselves in instrumental terms. There is a consistent emphasis throughout this book on questions of impact, on ways in which interdisciplinary forms of collaboration might offer value for money, and also on how academic enterprises might usefully recommend themselves across a broad populist spectrum. Boris Vormann’s essay sums up this agenda most incisively when he writes that “the crisis of German American Studies is not a sudden rupture but the result of a slow decline that, since the turn of the twenty-first century, has been precipitated by three factors: (1) the drying up of its funding sources, (2) changes in the German university system, and (3) the assumed unbundling of the field’s traditional research subject” (184).

The last of these factors is by now an old story, of course, and one of the key concerns of this book turns on how the interrogation of the traditional nationalist paradigms that used to underwrite area studies has interacted with a drive for intellectual collaboration across disciplinary borders. As Ruth Mayer and Alexander Starre note in their contribution, the model of a “humanities researcher as the proverbial ‘lone wolf’ already appears inaccurate in view of the expansions of collaborative work required for grant applications, interdisciplinary research groups, and international networking” (274), and there are clear conceptual analogies adduced here between the supersession of the nation state as a container for analytical work and the movement into transnational research networks of one kind or another. Many of the contributors reference Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory or discuss ways in which cultural ecology in its various forms exceeds the boundaries of national space. Vormann himself argues that “[q]uestioning American exceptionalism,” even if an intellectually “important step,” has been taken “too far,” since “nations and nation-states still do play an important role in structuring and guiding everyday lives” (188). Nevertheless, most of the essays in this collection take at least some facets of the transnational turn as a *fait accompli*, and they proceed to explore ways in which revivals of nationalist sentiment or populist reactions à la Donald Trump comprise in themselves interesting responses to complex cultural situations where the very terms of political agency and representation appear to be under threat of evisceration. Martin Lüthe’s illuminating piece, for example, reconsiders Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* in the light of “recent public awareness” of “the travelling cultures in and around the Mediterranean Sea and its accompanying discourse and apparatus of a permanent ‘refugee crisis’” (111). In this sense, today’s controversies around forced migration can be seen as a dark shadow of the more exuberant impetus that fired Gilroy’s challenge not only to academic conservatism but also to African American nationalism in the early 1990s. The various conflict zones associated with the politics of migration can be seen to

emerge from a similar kind of transnational logic, one in which new kinds of mobility have presented challenges as well as opportunities.

Given the emphasis in this collection on how “managerial forms” intersect with “a national or social totality” (31), it is not a great surprise to see a renewed attention here to ways in which literary styles of realism and naturalism operate as a conduit for representations of the American body politic. James Dorson’s essay, for instance, usefully examines “the complicity of naturalism with managerial control” (35). Dorson develops intellectual parallels between the incorporation of a writer such as Theodore Dreiser into the capitalist economy, as outlined in the influential New Historicist version of naturalism promoted by Walter Benn Michaels and others, and the apparent interpellation of American Studies in the twenty-first century within a managerial spectrum of control that allows for no obviously oppositional perspective. Florian Sedlmeier’s essay turns similarly to the fiction of William Dean Howells to delineate “the Conditions of the Field Imagination” (81), drawing on the critical writings of Pierre Bourdieu and Pascale Casanova to adumbrate ways in which imaginative constructions of any kind are always constrained “by the specific cultural-historical situation of the material at hand” (81). Though such a recognition of how cultural and economic conditions effectively circumscribe intellectual projects is valuable, it also elicits here the disagreeable side-effect of various contributors seeking to spruik (as we say in Australia) their own past and future projects, as though the mechanics of self-advertising have become institutionalized as a *sine qua non* of the academic profession, no less than the marketing of groceries or electronics. Perhaps the world of higher learning has always been this way, more or less overtly. But under its current exigencies of economic management and production, framed by what the editors call “the symbolic shadow economy that connects enterprising research with funding institutions and peer reviewers” (10), these kinds of constraints risk introducing an idiom of “quiet desperation,” as Thoreau said of the lives of his compatriots in *Walden*, where each idea seems to have its allotted price and exchange value.

Reading through these short essays and position papers, I found myself sometimes nostalgic for the kind of cantankerous idiom perfected by Thoreau, one prepared simply to disregard the paymasters, with all of their demands for academic efficiency. When the Dawkins reforms that mandated a greater degree of centralized government control were introduced into Australian higher education in the late 1980s, there were many complaints about the threat they posed to academic freedom; but more recent generations of scholars, perhaps more accustomed to a world in which their choices are always already inscribed by Facebook and Apple, do not seem nearly so exercised about potential threats to their intellectual autonomy. Academic freedom now appears to be merely a twentieth-century concern, the relic of an era guided by what Lionel Trilling called “the liberal imagination,” with the new priority of twenty-first century scholars being academic funding. Many of the contributors here seek explicitly to negotiate in some form or other with the fiscal models preferred by federal agencies. Thus, Simon Wendt advocates studying “heroism from a holistic—that is interdisciplinary—perspective” (200), declaring that the fruits of the “collaborative research center” at the University of Freiburg “can ultimately result in genuine interdisciplinarity, and possibly even transdisciplinarity” (203). But none of these terms is adequately theorized, and too often the promise of “interdisciplinary cross-fertilization [...] in the humanities and social sciences,” as Sabine Sielke puts it (218), seems to resemble the proleptic language of a grant proposal rather than the more considered style of a proper research output. In-

deed, the sense of a deliberate lack of closure, the notion of work being always in process rather than completed, is one of the dominant impressions that a reader takes from this book.

Part of the obvious problem here involves attempts to integrate the short-term sustainability of the subject with its long-term influence. Julia Sattler's determination to locate a research agenda "at the intersection of American Studies and urban planning" (123) is predicated upon making explicit use of topics that always tend to carry an air of urgency to the ears of bureaucrats holding the purse-strings, with Sattler cannily noting how "the language of health and disease is an integral part of the vocabulary commonly used by urban planners" (126). And, despite his avowed attempts to move into "less obvious topics" and wider intellectual questions, Daniel Stein's advocacy here for "the emerging field of Superhero Studies" (268) seems more tied to "the systematic setup of the collaborative DFG grant proposal that launched [his] ongoing encounters with the superhero genre" (262) than would be ideally desirable from a more detached, contemplative perspective. There are many examples across all national universities of superficially attractive research projects catching the eye of funding committees but turning out not to be so useful across an academic time-span that always unfolds according to a slower calendar than its political correlative, and any system of higher education that disperses its largesse according only to immediate priorities is unlikely to be able to sustain either academic or government agendas over the *longue durée*. In terms of its impact upon medicine and law as well as science, probably no piece of academic research has ever been so important as the discovery of DNA by James Watson and Francis Crick in 1953, but it is unlikely they would have received government grant money at the time for experiments whose outcomes were so hypothetical and uncertain. Whatever the challenges, it is always incumbent upon academic researchers worth their salt to rely more on their own professional instincts than on the authorization of their paymasters.

There are, nevertheless, many interesting and thought-provoking pieces to be found here. Tracking the historiography of the U.S. South across a broad compass, Winfried Fluck contributes a characteristically thoughtful piece on how the "South now defines America to a much larger degree than realized before" (74), even though, as Fluck paradoxically acknowledges, the "Southern hemisphere had no significant impact on Southern self-definitions and political actions" (72). Rita Felski, whose work on affect has been one of the prime motors behind the dispersal of literary studies into a wider public sphere, offers a tantalizing theoretical outline arguing that while "critique is another form of identification" (155), such identification is not the same as "empathy," and that it is consequently wrong to treat these critical approaches "interchangeably" or "as synonyms" (159). And in a bravura final overview of this topic, Frank Kelleter provocatively attempts to incorporate feedback loops into the very definition of American Studies itself, considering how the subject might be able to modernize its trajectory more in line with the reflexive language of "critique and post-critique" pioneered by "actor-network theory" (299). By incorporating excerpts from internet chatrooms into his argument, Kelleter evokes a matrix of circulation that seems to be, as he puts it, "outside the unity of the *depth / surface* distinction altogether" (293). From a scholarly point of view, it might perhaps have increased the book's heft if there had been greater editorial selectivity, with a smaller number of essays given more scope to rigorously expand their arguments. However, the fact that four of the twenty-one essays included here are co-authored itself speaks to a more egalitarian academic environment where

collaboration and team-work have become *de rigueur*, although this does come with costs as well as benefits.

Rather than *Projecting American Studies*, perhaps this book would have been more aptly entitled “Protecting American Studies,” since it seeks to find a way of safeguarding distinguished models of area studies in an era when government agencies have moved to other funding priorities. But over the past hundred years, much of the best and most enduring work in American Studies has tended to emerge in heterodox ways—F. O. Matthiessen, always an outsider at Harvard, continues to be an example here—and it is not necessarily the case that academic work ticking all the right bureaucratic boxes will necessarily turn out to be the most enduring. Despite its tiresome lack of an index and the loose ends that permeate some of its contributions, this book usefully elucidates the subject’s overall directions and indicates the various challenges faced by American Studies in the twenty-first century, along with the various strategies being brought together in an attempt to ensure its continuing prosperity and relevance. As both a timely intervention and a contemporary prognosis of the current state of the field, *Projecting American Studies* is invaluable.

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