

Editors' Note

Welcome to another 'Special Edition' of *49th Parallel*. This is the second issue of our e-journal which relates to 'Engaging the New American Studies', the international conference which was hosted by the University of Birmingham's Department of American and Canadian Studies in May 2006.

Where the first Special Edition dealt with the more political and historical strand of the 'new American Studies' question, this edition deals more pertinently with cultural and philosophical approaches to the role, performance, and perception of America. This is negotiated through an impressive array of critical, thematic, and methodological angles, from geographical and demographic concerns, to literary analysis and interrogations of media forms and the economics of the world system.

Aside from a concentration on the cultural relations and configurations thrown up by the interrogation of the New American Studies, there seems to be an unconscious yet appealing thematic link between the papers presented in this collection. All of the papers seem concerned with the idea of refuting or engaging with, to borrow Sheila Hones's term, the 'pre-existing grids' of traditional and normative modes of thinking about and evaluating the cultural concerns of America. This ability to critically examine the basic structures of American cultural forms and assess their worth and perhaps even to bring some form of value judgement to their existence is an exciting proposition. It also provides the crucial radical step in ensuring the critical discourse surrounding America is subjected to vigorous scrutiny at the level of its most fundamental composition.

Sheila Hones achieves an essential examination of what constitutes the New American Studies by highlighting the important need to resist the pull of 'fixed geometries', and to challenge 'pre-existing grids', as mentioned before. Hones very astutely proposes that in making the New American Studies it is necessary to invent a 'new spatial vocabulary' in order to expand our culturally ingrained perceptions of how 'America' is defined.

Ataka and Caballero bring a refreshing International Studies perspective to the contemporary meaning of 'America'. Much like Hones, the authors are concerned with the intersections of political, economic, and cultural sources of power, and how these intersections can be examined in the light of the master discourse of 'benevolent hegemony.' Their argument entails the re-centring of the notion of empire, and hence a new and systematic interrogation of old and established terms can be performed – the 'pre-existing grid' of benevolent hegemony and empire can be challenged.

In the light of this International Studies framework, Ali Fisher asserts in his paper that the New American Studies would benefit from a synthesis of contemporary and historical approaches. Fisher engages with contemporary, prominent writers in the field such as John Carlos Rowe, Amy Kaplan, and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, whilst keeping a firm eye on the Americanist historical scholars of the 1950s. In doing so, Fisher emphasizes the dangers of espousing a doctrine of internationalization when

dealing with American Studies, and that we should resist setting strict definitions of what constitutes 'America'.

Connecting with the thematic concerns of the first Special Edition, J. Terry Rolfe presents a timely analysis of the role of the USA as hyper-power in relation to the pressing contemporary concerns regarding environmental change. Rolfe argues that critical reformulations are necessary in order to reflect the evolving relationship between nation-states and the world's citizenry. She radically concludes with the proposition that states will curtail their international activities, which will directly impact on the construction and maintenance of the hyper-power status of the USA.

N. R. Lawrence uses his discussion of two poetry magazines from the 1960s in order to work through some of the issues surrounding the transnational aspect of the concept of the New American Studies. The tensions inherent in the practice of the 'mimeo' together with the new cultural forms which are articulated through this, demonstrate that there are benefits to focussing on forms of transnational engagement which don't depend on consolidating and reinforcing the 'pre-existing grids' of national identities.

Maybe exploring the flip side of this investment in the dissolution of national identities, however not strictly in a transnational context, we have Zohreh Ramin's exploration of Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, a romantic, gothic, and nourish meditation on identity and deconstruction. The continuous mode of irresolution and ambiguity sustained by the narrative leads to an aesthetic of 'decentring' which produces unresolved and fractured identities, and perhaps highlights the disastrous subjectivity endemic in the contemporary American urban environment.

Continuing in the mode of literary and cultural analysis, Paul Woolf draws parallels between Anglo-US relations in terms of the sentimental fiction of the nineteenth century, and contemporary reality television. In a paper which successfully moves through political, literary and media methodologies, Woolf asserts that in contesting the meanings of womanhood and national identity, Europe (and specifically, England) is established as the 'pre-existing grid' by which American identity is fashioned and constructed. The paper tantalisingly leaves us with the notion that this contestation of identities crucially depends on the subjugation of women.

This focus on women, and in particular, the female body, is complimented in Eimi Ozawa's paper on American remakes of Japanese horror films. This is an intriguing interrogation of the cross-cultural relations inherent in this particular brand of cinema. Ozawa specifically sites the notions of terror inherent in the discourse of horror as being markedly different depending on the culture the film speaks to. In the US, the horror of the female body is the potential for transformation into a cyborg, whereas in Japan, it is the repressed animalistic nature of the female body which induces terror. This startling duality has grave implications for the manner in which cross-cultural forms produce meaning.

Continuing with the focus on women in American culture, Shiori Nomura presents an analysis of the image of Japanese women in the US media in the early part of the twentieth century. This is achieved through focusing on the 'voices of women' and how these voices are constructed in relation to certain central ideas, such as the

concept of home. The effect of this analysis is to show how the US media produced hegemonic discourses of womanhood. However, despite this hegemony, deconstructions of and challenges to traditional patriarchal gender ideologies may be sustained. As a result, cross-cultural discursive relations are shown to be far from simplistic and are instead, actively engaged in producing meaning.

Another paper which deals with cross-cultural relations between Japan and America is Yoko Tsukuda's analysis of the controversy surrounding the renaming of 'Jap Road' in a small town in Jefferson County, Texas. The media coverage of the controversy established two sets of competing ideologies which were structured around the 'local' and the 'national'. Tsukuda's scrutiny of this bifurcated discourse allows us to see that in establishing these oppositions, the media could maintain a hegemonic and normative practice which refused cross-cultural understanding. This implies that cross-cultural concerns are endangered when binary polarities threaten to engulf meaning and identity.

Finally, Tomasz Lebiecki presents us with a paper on the rise of Nuevo Chicanismo in America. Lebiecki uses the radical image of the 'nation' of Aztlán in order to scrutinize the so-called 'sleeping giant' of those with hyphenated Latin American identities in the USA. Aztlán becomes a critical tool in examining the discourses which surround the 'authenticity' and historicity of American identity, and in conducting this examination, Lebiecki proceeds to engage with pertinent questions surrounding the nature of empire and the potential end of the USA's global dominance.

Lebiecki's paper provides a fittingly apocalyptic end to this collection, but as far as we are concerned at *49th Parallel*, the debate has only just begun. All the papers collected here show rigour, boldness, energy, and importantly a desire to engage with new forms of cultural relations and cross-cultural concerns. In tackling what constitutes the New American Studies in a variety of forms, the authors here have covered much ground but also left vast potential for discussion and consolidation.

We as Editors would like to extend our gratitude to all who took part in the 'Engaging the New American Studies' conference in order to make it possible, and to the contributors who have made this second Special Edition of *49th Parallel* such a fascinating and worthwhile exercise.

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