Editors’ Introduction

Beyond Imagined Uniqueness: American Nationalism in Comparative Perspective

Nation, nationalism, national identity—these categories are more than just contested. The concept of nation is notorious for competing interpretations and for the distance separating common sense understandings (statements of what seems obvious, transparent) from intellectual debates that go on in academic contexts (where nothing can be taken for granted). And these are not petty squabbles over definition: conflicting theories are grounded in divergent notions of history, politics, and human identity.

A dictionary, of course, will come to our aid with a ready-made answer: our Oxford English Dictionary tells us, for instance, that a nation is “a large aggregate of people so closely associated with each other by factors such as common descent, language, culture, history, and occupation of the same territory as to be identified as a distinct people, esp. when organized or potentially organizable as a political state.” Such a definition, however, begs more questions than it answers. How large is large enough, and how large would be too large? What counts as common descent and what is the nature of this commonality? Or, more to the point: where are its limits, what sort of descent makes one excluded? Next, who gets to define language, culture and whose version of history counts as national history? As for territory, occupation is an eerily ambiguous word in this context, as territories are often simultaneously or sequentially occupied by more than one “large aggregate of people.”

In his enormously influential study Imagined Communities Benedict Anderson argued that a nation is something more, and something other, than a political entity. It is a culturally produced “imagined political community”—in other words, a state of mind, a process of collective imagining, inherently unstable, with boundaries subject to endless redrawing, a relatively recent cultural artifact capable of producing profound attachments:
It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. . . . The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite if elastic, boundaries beyond which live other nations. No nation imagines itself as coterminous with mankind. . . . It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which the Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely—ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. . . . Finally, it is imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as deep horizontal comradeship. (Anderson 6-7)

Nationalism is inexorably bound up in temporality. Consider the paradox of the apparent “timelessness” of nations, the common assumption of their antiquity, so obviously at odds with their objective modernity (Anderson 5). Nations came into being not in “time immemorial” as most nations’ founding myths insist, but are a product of modernity, the final decades of the 18th century. Ernest Gellner connects the spread of nationalism with the rise of industrialism in Western Europe. Elie Kedourie considers the Enlightenment, and in particular the French Revolution to be the key sources. Anderson links the rise of nationalisms to a complex shift in Western perception of time: the demise of prophetic, sacred time, a conception of temporality that views human time and cosmology as one, and the rise of secular time, linked to a modern sensibility. Nations became possible—perhaps even necessary—thanks to the rise of what he calls “print-capitalism.” People “imagine” themselves as members of this new, secular type of human reality in the communal experience associated with reading a newspaper. The nation is comprised of anonymous strangers, each of whom can see others reading the same paper at the same time and thus be reassured that the anonymity adds up to affiliation, commonality. Tomorrow, significantly, that paper will be dated, irrelevant, trash. Secular time moves on quickly.

Nationalism is linked to time in another way, too: it is entangled in the collective experience and representation of temporality. Nations are narratives, stories that people tell, and endlessly re-tell, about their own origins, boundaries, and their aims. Stories about the past and the future—nationhood itself happens in the meantime. What is up for debate—and often violent debate—is which story gains authority. As postcolonial critics such as Homi K. Bhabha remind us, there is nothing seamless or self-evident about the production of “cultural” meaning that calls itself nation, for the process of boundary drawing is predicated on producing that which is outside, excluded, the other. Cohesiveness is fragile. Hence its aggression, its dependence on exclusion, difference, margins, minorities. In his essay “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation,”
Bhabha writes: “The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference: their claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address” (145). In other words, national identity is not about fact but about the production—often violent production—of meaning, which relies on exclusion at least as much as inclusion. As much as the master narrative will focus on distinctiveness, and parade its claims to cultural mastery, inevitably we will find a competing tale looming in the margins—a tale of hybridity, arbitrariness; we find the “other” threatening the boundary not from without but from within.

Within the frameworks of contemporary American Studies—a field that is notoriously self-reflexive and self-doubting (some would say, narcissistic)—the very idea of studying American national identity, of studying the U.S. as a nation, is frowned upon with suspicion. Historian John Higham introduces his essay “America in Person,” devoted to the evolution of symbols and allegories that expressed American nationalism from the 1770s to the late 1980s, with a disclaimer/challenge that—given our journal’s location and its present topic—is worth quoting here:

For about twenty years, from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, there was relatively little scholarly study of American national consciousness and national identity. Intellectual and cultural historians turned so sharply away from the problem of nationalism that it remained on the agenda only in form of a delusion that still needed debunking. . . . The notion that the only real communities are smaller than a nation, and closer to the self, has never had so strong a grip on European historians or on historians of the Third World. There the “national question” has been inescapable. In American history those who seek to reopen the national question have much to gain from a comparative perspective. (23)

Higham wrote these words in 1992 believing that the scholarly evasion was about to end, but the tendency to dismiss nationhood returned to American Studies with new strength and a new rationale a few years later. In 1996 a number of scholars, including, among others Barbara Bronson Curiel, John Carlos Rowe, George Sanchez, Shelley Streeby, and Henry Yu presented a New Americanist (or post-nationalist) approach to theory and methods in the study of the U.S. The key texts of this movement are collected in two anthologies: Postnationalist American Studies, edited by John Carlos Rowe (2000), and The Futures of American Studies edited by Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman (2002), but it is useful to include retrospectively the groundbreaking collection Cultures of United States Imperialism, edited by Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (1993). In their manifesto-like introduction to The Futures, Pease and Wiegman define their movement
(in part, ironically) as a fulfilment of predictions made by Gene Wise twenty five years earlier, that American Studies would, ideally, involve “a pluralistic rather than a holistic approach to American culture, the rediscovery of the particular, the repudiation of American Exceptionalism, and the rise of comparativist and cross-cultural approaches” (1).

From the New Americanist perspective, scholars who engage in the study of America as a nation are almost by definition guilty of participating in (rather than simply analyzing) the discourse of American exceptionalism, or worse, imperialism and colonialism. To study American national identity, runs the argument, is to take the risk of reproducing—albeit in the guise of scholarly pursuits—the logic of exceptionalism. The task, however, as stated in the quote above, is to repudiate, not examine, America’s nationalism. Thus, synthesis is suspect by definition, because of its institutional and political implications. There are strong arguments to support this claim. As Amy Kaplan convincingly argued in her introduction to *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, disavowal of American imperialism—refusal to acknowledge both the imperial dimension of U.S. history and the interdependence of American and European colonialism—was for many decades a key (perhaps even formative) aspect of the intellectual and institutional adventure known as American Studies. Search for coherence and clarity has all too often led to search for innocence, what Perry Miller saw as America’s capacity for self-renewal. Yet, Kaplan says, we should also be wary of the pluralistic model of diversity, because it “runs the risk of being bound up by the old paradigm of unity if it concentrates its gaze only narrowly on the internal lineaments of American culture and leaves national borders intact instead of interrogating their formation. . . . The critical force of multiculturalism thus may lay itself open to recuperation by a renewed version of ‘consensus’” (15).

The key fact about warnings such as Amy Kaplan’s is that they were made inside the U.S. In *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*, George Lipsitz draws a suggestive chronology of the changing preoccupations and perspectives of American Studies in the U.S., viewing academic pursuits as deeply connected with social movements and struggles over power. Thus, the 1930s myth-image-symbol school, with its question of America’s “essence,” in his view “stemmed directly from the celebratory nationalism of the New Deal coalition.” Next, the 1960s turn towards social science and focus on small groups reflects the social movements of the era (feminism, civil rights, etc.), as well as the crisis in perceptions of America caused by the Vietnam War. Finally, he argues, the 1980s are marked by emphasis on ideological critique and cultural studies “as a direct response to the rise of Balance Budget Conservatism and to the success of Ronald Reagan and other politicians in wielding cultural symbols for political
ends” (see Lipsitz xvi). Might the 1990s turn to ethnic studies and area studies, as well as the New Americanists’ weariness of nation as a concept, be viewed as the field’s anxious response to imperial ambitions of the Reagan/Bush era? And where does this politically overdetermined paradigm leave scholars who are looking in from the outside (e.g. European Americanists)?

Volume XXIII of our journal—The Politics of American Studies—dealt with this debate, presenting a number of perspectives, including Heinz Ickstadt’s guarded defense of efforts to examine America’s cultural cohesion, not as a given, but as a belief or idea with impact on people’s imagination, an idea to be examined rather than embraced. Perhaps, he suggested, the position of outsiders may be fruitful here. The present issue is an effort to follow up on that suggestion: both the interviews and most of the articles seek to examine American nationalism as an ideology, a rhetorical field, a shifting scene of debate. Hopefully, considered as a whole, this volume has managed to avoid both the trap of reproducing exceptionalism and what we see as a weakness of some of the New Americanist scholarship, i.e. the tedium that comes with replacing analysis with apology and detraction.

We believe that the concept of cultural cohesion is worth examining—it cannot be taken for granted as a fact, but neither are we obliged constantly to repudiate it. As Heinz Ickstadt remarked in the interview in vol. XXIII, America “is never quite only a fact. It’s always a concept, an ideal; that is part of its factness” (22). If America is an “imagined community,” then the process of its imagining was perhaps “exceptionally” intense, self-conscious, haunted by rhetorical excesses. Our aim was to revisit some of those intensities and excesses. Familiar founding narratives and tropes known to every student of American culture include the City upon the Hill, The Covenant, Errand into the Wilderness, the Frontier, Manifest Destiny, and the idea of God operating in American history. Then there is the Melting Pot, the idea of opportunity, the promise of individualism. All of these are discussed in the opening interview of this volume. Far from embracing American exceptionalism, Tomasz Żyro (interviewed here by William Glass), is known for comparative work on various nations’—including Poland’s—idea of their own chosenness.

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In our call for papers for this issue we asked prospective contributors to explore, from any number of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, “the evolving nature of U.S. nationalism.” We were hoping for articles that would take us—as the issue’s title stipulates—“beyond imagined uniqueness,” i.e. that authors
would revisit various embodiments of the idea that America is unique but without perpetuating that idea. As elaborated above, the very existence of such an ideological “beyond” is a matter of intellectual (as well as, ultimately, political) controversy—and yet, we believe, the risk was well worth taking.

We begin our consideration of these issues with two interviews. The first—referenced above—is with Tomasz Żyro, a professor of political science at University of Warsaw. Żyro accepts the basic distinction between a civic nationalism centered on a state with political institutions and a cultural nationalism binding people together based on ethnicity. He acknowledges that the former is more of a product of the Enlightenment and French Revolution but also argues that this secular nationalism has some surprising resonances with religion. In particular, he points to the idea of a covenant between God and a people enabling them to “imagine” themselves as a chosen people or nation. In American history the Puritan legacy of being a people covenanted with God to create a city on a hill, though potentially limiting to a narrow sectarian group, became bonded with secular republicanism at the time of the American Revolution. The most concrete expression of this fusion was the American Constitution, a kind of secular covenant that was open to all who subscribed to its ideals. Thus American nationalism was and is more inclusive than exclusive.

In some ways, Żyro is rehearsing the well known story of the origins of American exceptionalism, but his discussion is more nuanced. He recognizes that more exclusivist voices have challenged and continue to challenge the civic ideals of the American creed, seeking to limit—by means of immigration restriction, English only laws, Jim Crow, and the like—who might participate in and contribute to the American experiment. Additionally, he is well aware of the ways American exceptionalism can become American imperial arrogance in foreign affairs. In the end, Żyro is optimistic that the more positive elements of American nationalism will not be lost, that “values like democracy, liberty, law, egalitarianism, and individualism,” though “not unique to America,” will continue to be expressed in “the full passion with which Americans exposed them to the external world.”

The American version of nationhood—in Anderson’s terms: the way it imagines itself as sovereign, limited, and a community—is the object of many controversies. Each of the two interviews can be read as tackling at least one of them. One key question is whether the American idea of the nation is basically secular or religious at its core. This question is not merely a scholarly one, but also an axis of political controversy—a dividing line in the culture wars, an object of lawsuits and editorial debates (e.g. in recent controversies concerning history textbooks). Tomasz Żyro refers to Robert Bellah’s account of the early origins of the republic—

Agnieszka Graff, William Glass
the claim that there were “two strains that fused at the end of the eighteenth
century, . . . the Christian/Biblical and the civic republicanism.” In actual political life,
keeping these traditions intact as parts of one ideology is not quite so simple,
since, as Żyro notes: “the Republican Party is in disarray right now because
there are two opposing camps: I mean the civic Republicans and those who are
members of the Christian Coalition.” He insists that in describing the phenomenon
of American nationalism one has to come to terms with its religious language at
the core of much of what we think of as secular nationalism. The American
creed—or American ideology—is “a very smart fusion of the religious and civic
language.” He insists that “we cannot eschew the biblical roots of American
nationalism. . . . To understand why the Creed has developed messianic tendencies,
which have led to the chauvinistic, aggressive contempt for those who fail to believe
with the same fervor, one needs to read, at least, the revolutionary preachers.”

The second interview is with Eric J. Sundquist, a distinguished scholar of
American literature and culture, whose focus has long been on the discursive
construction of race and ethnicity, perhaps best known for his study of race in
U.S. literature Wake the Nations (1993) and the author, most recently, of King’s
Dream: The Legacy of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” Speech (2009). The
dialogue with Agnieszka Graff took place soon after the 2009 presidential
elections and was primarily devoted to the race question in the campaign: the
ways in which Barack Obama drew on his complex ethnic and racial heritage
(significantly, one that cannot be traced back to American slavery) but also strove
to evade the race question. Sundquist points at the possible advantages but also
the difficulty of being a presidential candidate of racially mixed descent in a cul−
ture whose definition of racial identity had for centuries depended on the idea of
binarism (the color line, the one drop rule) and is now in process of changing: “the
burden of his campaign was to convince the American people that despite the fact
that he was a black man, he could speak for all Americans. . . . But it was no less
true that when speaking to black audiences he had to convince them—without
addressing the fact in crude terms, or in pandering terms—that he would be
a black man as well. . . . His predicament is that he cannot automatically count
on identification with either group.”

The broader issue at stake here, is, of course, that of race in America’s
national ideology. The question can be formulated in terms of history of political
ideas: is the USA inclusive or exclusivist at its core? In a 2002 essay aptly titled
“Who Is an American?” historian Eric Foner argues that throughout its history,
American nationalism has followed two competing traditions, defining the “circle
of we” in one of two basic ways: one model is focused around the concept of
“liberty” (i.e. civic nationalism, based on political allegiance, inclusive), the other is based on the concept of “race” (i.e. ethnic nationalism, marked by a powerful exclusionary dimension). As Foner reminds us, historically, especially in the mid-nineteenth century “the relationship between inclusion and exclusion was symbiotic, not contradictory. Even as Americans’ rhetoric grew ever more egalitarian, a fully developed racist ideology gained broad acceptance as the explanation for the boundaries of nationality” (156).

The opening essay of this volume is a provocative study by Charles E. Gannon, who looks at the conflicting ways in which the concept of “American Exceptionalism” functions in both academic and political contexts. He defines two opposed approaches—one ultrapatriotic, based on enthusiasm for unity, the other one derogatory, an adamant rejection of cohesion—and shows that they have a surprising amount in common: both are absolutist, both rely on polarizing discursive models, both preclude mutual understanding and self-reflection. In effect, “instead of inspiring such visions of cultural synergy and fusion, American Exceptionalism has, in the hands of true believers and dedicated opponents alike, been almost invariably formulated as an absolutist and exclusionary enterprise. The rhetoric of the debates over American Exceptionalism presents this absolutism in high relief: spatial relationships are invoked to emphasize a model of contending polar opposites.”

While Professor Żyro argues that that the origins of nationalism has religious roots in addition to the better known secular ones, Jan Michael Kotowski offers not only a broader context by analyzing the debate among scholars over the meaning of nationalism and its usefulness as a term to denote a particular type of political movement but also a narrower focus by applying that meaning to the specifics of the United States. Acknowledging that scholars do not fall neatly into only one category, Kotowski divides the literature according to the way nationalism is used by researchers in a variety of contexts. These include the distinction between nationalism and patriotism, the historical role of nationalism in creating and sustaining the American state, the utility of nationalism in quantifying aspects of public opinion, the cultural and rhetorical symbols of American nationalism, and its place in contemporary political debates over issues like immigration and foreign affairs. Kotowski concludes that “the enormous differences in scholarly definitions should serve as valuable reminder that the very nature of nations and nationalism lies in their inherent contestability and the continual struggles for discursive hegemony over the national terrain.”

One way to formulate the question of cohesion versus difference is by asking about the relationship between Americanness and whiteness. This can be done
not just in political, legal, and historical terms (e.g. by tracing the evolving relationship between citizenship and race), but also in terms of collective imagination. The black-white color scheme is an important part of how America has historically “imagined” itself. Not surprisingly, those who tackle this issue have often been writers and literary scholars who track the obsession with whiteness, blackness, racial passing, and various forms of black-white masking in the key texts of American culture. Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin followed this path in many of their essays; Eric Sundquist did it in his book *Wake the Nations*, and Toni Morrison did much to set up the terms for present-day discussions of race in literature in her influential essay *Playing in the Dark*, cited in this volume by Heinz Ickstadt. His article examines how racial otherness is imagined in modern American literature, and how this imagining has both reflected and shaped individual and collective self-awareness. The essay traces the development of fictional boundary crossing (in work by both black and white writers) in three moves: from “realistic and naturalistic fictions of the 1880s and 1890s, where boundaries were symbolically explored and redefined in terms of gender and class” to “the twenties, when modernism identified its search for the new with that for a ‘primitive’ Other” and finally to “contemporary fiction when self and ethnic Other are (re)constructed against, yet also in recognition of, their difference in a bitterly contested cultural field of rivaling identities.”

Anna Pochmara’s article is an effort to bring gender and sexuality into thinking about national exclusion and belonging. She does this in her reading of Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* through Gail Bederman’s notion of nineteenth-century manliness and Michael Kimmel’s history of American masculinity. Washington’s text employs various rhetorical strategies of representation in order to make the hero-author appear “manly,” “respectable,” and wholly “American”—a difficult job for a black male in the post-reconstruction South. The strategy is that “he does not feminize his position but rather walks a tightrope to construct a vision of civilized black manliness, which does not openly challenge the white man’s status. This strategy might be also interpreted as a rebuttal of the myth of the black rapist. Throughout the text black men are devoid of aggression or sexual urges. *Up from Slavery* represents black men as protectors rather than aggressors in relation to white womanhood.”

Our next two essays explore the ways American nationalism has been and continues to be challenged by a persistent regionalism, a topic to which *The Americanist* will return in volume XXVII (2012). War is the crucible of nationalism, uniting diverse populations while driving nation against nation in desperate conflict. Susan-Mary Grant’s essay explores this dynamic in the context of the
American Civil War for immigrants and African Americans in both the North and the South. In some ways, this essay represents a case study of the opportunities and limits of civic nationalism as discussed by Żyro and Kotowski. Where they note the potential for a civic nationalism to override ethnic loyalties, Grant finds that while immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans fought in both the Union and Confederate Armies, their contributions on the battlefield did not “oblitrate their original country’s marks” as American society after the war went back to pre-war definitions of insiders and outsiders based on ethnicity and race. But defeat of the Confederate cause did not extinguish Southern regionalism; in fact, as John Adreas Fuchs traces in his essay, the failure to establish an independent southern state contributed to growth of a cultural nationalism nurtured by religion, expressed in literature, and manifested in political battles over the meaning of symbols like the Confederate battle flag. Additionally, he notes how that particular symbol is contested within the U.S. as, on the one hand, reflecting the legacy of the Lost Cause and on the other hand the oppression of slavery. Similarly and ironically, the flag can be appropriated by Munich football fans for their team in the south of Germany and by neo-Nazi skinheads as a substitute for the banned swastika.

The 1960s is one of the more turbulent decades in the second half of the twentieth century. From the civil rights movement reaching its historic climax and then splintering, to the emergence of the women’s movement, to growth of the counterculture, to the escalating violence of the protests against the Vietnam War, to the Stonewall riots and the beginnings of gay liberation, the decade saw the cross currents of a variety of movements for social and political change but also the beginning of a national debate about the nature of America that continues in the twenty-first century. Jacek Romaniuk explores this contested legacy in his essay by focusing on the role that the 1960s played in the 2008 American presidential campaign. Arguing that the 1960s represents a trope for conflicting interpretations of political agendas, Romaniuk suggests that the presidential candidates from both major parties appealed to different parts of the 1960s legacy to rally supporters: the Democrat Barack Obama invoked the image of John Kennedy and generational change while Republican John McCain used his service in the Vietnam war and experience as a prisoner of war to validate his claim to being the right choice to lead America at this moment. Obama’s victory suggests, according to Romaniuk, that “the overall sense of optimism in the power of youth and its potential to change reality” now controls the memory of the 1960s.

The final essay takes us back to literature. In his study of Don DeLillo’s much discussed novel Cosmopolis (2003), Sven Cvek seeks to examine the “connection
between a nation’s sense of identity and the deterritorializing power of global capital.” He states in conclusion that “(i)f Cosmopolis offers a critique of a thoroughly financialized transnational economy, it also variously attempts to territorially ground—and thus bring back to life—what it posits as a deterritorialized national community.” The essay is a careful reading of the novel, but it is also an effort to think more broadly about how nationhood is affected by economics, i.e., by the logic of globalization.

Works Cited