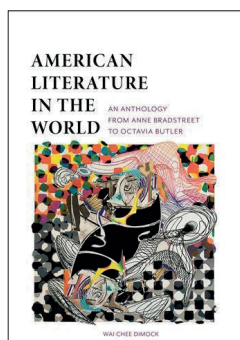




AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE WORLD: AN ANTHOLOGY FROM ANNE BRADSTREET TO OCTAVIA BUTLER

edited by Wai Chee Dimock et al.

(A Book Review)



Together with Jordan Brower, Edgar Garcia, Kyle Hutzler and Nicholas Rinehart, Wai Chee Dimock has edited an innovative anthology that builds upon her previous studies of American literature in a global/planetary perspective. In particular, Dimock's reflections on the nation as a strong hindrance to our grasping of the "deep time" of global events (*Through Other Continents* 3) and on the need

to understand American history and culture not as unique cases in history but as the subsets of global events—as she demonstrates with regard to the history of slavery in America ("Introduction" 6–7)—strongly resonate in the book.

In *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, coedited with Lawrence Buell in 2007, Dimock poses a grandiose question: "What exactly is American literature?" (Introduction 1). In the remainder of the introduction, she chiefly argues against the nation as the privileged category that literary historiography has always made use of in order to collect authors and texts and provide them with a historical, geographic and linguistic frame through a gesture that is undeniably arbitrary but didactically functional. The nation, she maintains, is rather to be understood as "an epiphenomenon, literally a superficial construct, a set

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of erasable lines on the face of the earth” (1). Its usability in literary historiography appears today more disputable than ever in the light of the ethical-political need to address instead the planet and planetarity as the only territorial limits and epistemic frames that could give sense to our understanding of past and present events as well as of literature. The centrality of the nation is all the more controversial when related to American literature, being inevitably tied up with exceptionalism as the category that has always identified the history of the United States as inherently unique in the world and hardly comparable with the history and the cultural and ideological tradition of any other nation.

Dimock’s words do not imply that the nations and nationalities as grids to classify and teach literary texts have to be completely discarded. Rather, she thinks of the nation as one of the many possible subsets or modules that can contribute to our understanding of the planet and of its history and present time. As Dimock had pointed out in the introduction to *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*, whereas the planet is the “never-to-be-realized horizon” of our global episteme (6), the nation functions as one of the multiple “crisscrossing set[s] of pathways” that can help us make sense of our present (3). Among the other subsets she mentions, besides capitalism (the far-reaching category emphasized in Immanuel Wallerstein’s work), there are “world religions [...] the morphology of language [...] categories of experience, such as beauty or death [...] long-lasting genres, such as epic and novel” (5). These epistemic/interpretive subsets can be fruitfully put to use to interrogate literary texts from contrasting perspectives; the planet, on the other hand, functions as the utmost limit of our experience of reality, the constant reminder of its finitude and the only viable master-signifier that can provide it with a sense (an ethic-epistemic move whose strategic purpose sounds not so distant from the Heideggerian “being toward death,” both originating from our need to make sense of our—otherwise incomprehensible—presence on earth).

The complex theoretical implications of Dimock’s approach I have here tentatively summarized resonate in the anthology. The decision to assume planetarity as the ultimate horizon to look at in order to make sense of literary history and texts is implicit

in the book's very title, *American Literature in the World*, which problematizes the scope of the work and the editors' approach and methodology. The anthology collects texts "from Anne Bradstreet to Octavia Butler," as reads its subtitle, grouped within five thematic clusters: "War" (the most extensive one), "Food," "Work, Play, Travel," "Religions," and "Human and Nonhuman Interfaces." Each cluster is in turn divided into a number of sub-headings, each opened by a short introduction, and includes a variable number of texts, preceded by a short presentation of the author. The texts, be they included complete or excerpted from wider works, are arranged chronologically within each section, so as to provide a short overview of the works dealing with the selected topics, diachronically arranged. Among the book's features, its intertextual and intergenerational rationale and genesis are undoubtedly remarkable. The anthology, in fact, "is a web and print anthology, part of an online teaching initiative" and, as the editors proudly remark, is the only anthology "edited by a team of students and faculty" (Dimock et al., *American Literature in the World 2*). The book, thus, is to be read not only as the result of a collective effort but as one of the numerous possible intersections of the "crisscrossing set of pathways" that Dimock referred to in her introduction to *Through Other Continents* being literally the result of a layered combination of voices and contributions initially hosted on a digital project at Yale University, a Facebook page, and an open-source teaching platform (Dimock et al., *American Literature in the World 14*).

The editors' intent is clarified in the introduction, which also remarks on the criteria adopted to assemble the volume and the reasons for the choice of the texts. Dimock's reflections on the inadequacy of the national paradigm as a criterion is remarked at the very start of the book, where the editors express their refusal to identify the United States as the anthology's exclusive frame of reference. A "larger, looser set of coordinates, populated by laboring bodies, migrating faiths, generational sagas, memories of war, and accompanied by the accents of unforgetten tongues, the tastes and smells of beloved foods and spices" should, instead, provide the chosen texts with a rationale, albeit a provisional, unstable, and even contradictory one (1).

The book is intended to be used chiefly in class, which seems quite reasonable, for a number of motives. Plain and essential as for the information provided about authors and historical frames, its thematic clusters could prove precious in the process of designing a syllabus. Instructors, in fact, might either want to include the texts anthologized or use them as a reference in setting up a reading list. Finally, the choice to include excerpts from novels, “featured here as cliffhangers” (10), might hopefully trigger the students’ curiosity and encourage them to read the whole book.

Particularly stimulating is the presence of web resources, whose role in the elaboration of the anthology has for sure been paramount. The use of the website, part of an online teaching project, and of Facebook encourages teachers toward what the editors refer to as “[p]edagogic bi-directionality” (16), a didactic strategy that should stimulate new approaches to literature and literary studies subverting the roles traditionally ascribed to teachers and students. The fact that two of the editors (Jordan Brower and Nicholas Rinehart) are graduate students voices the need for a teaching strategy that, rather than reproducing the academic hierarchy of faculty and students, aims at increasingly getting closer to an intergenerational dialogue, whose multiple or even conflicting voices interrogate the texts collected.

Moving from the assumption that American literature is part of a wider, global network, the anthology presents authors and texts as the expression of questions that cannot exclusively be restricted to the United States but that, on the contrary, fully make sense only if understood as local manifestations of planetary phenomena. This challenge against exceptionalism, however, leaves some doubts as to both its theoretical premises and its chances to be successful.

The “large scale history” she refers to (Dimock, *Shades of the Planet* 7) causes the very category of the nation to dissolve in favor of what, however, sounds like a universal history. Though animated by the meritorious intent of deprovincializing and “de-exceptionalizing” America, the risk of such a move is that of conceiving universal history as a flow of abstract processes, which, materializing, acquire the local specificities of every area

of the planet. The need for universalism has been by now acknowledged as an unavoidable reaction to postmodern fragmentation as Eric Lott, via Ernesto Laclau, argued in a 2000 essay. However, Lott warns against the risk of any universalism that is not “shorn of the dead weight of essentialism” (670). Is there such a risk in the anthology’s theoretical implication? Is there the possibility, I mean, that the dismissal of any fragmented and hyper-diversified narrative of literary history will result in the reinstating of history as itself a universal subject, not devoid of Hegelian overtones? Aloof from any deconstructive questioning of their own *raison d’être* and “caught up in [a] large-scale world history” (Dimock, Introduction 7), the anthologized texts could be read as discrete manifestations of a higher order of events, as epitomized in the headings of each section. For instance, does the “posthuman” really function as a global or planetary paradigm, to which we can accordingly read and categorize American literary artifacts, or could it rather be looked at as the long-run effect of a number of processes that have originated in the twentieth-century United States and acquired, after decades, a transnational or global import? Universalizing historiography—or, even worse, taking American phenomena as unvaryingly universal—is one of the risks that the editors have daringly decided to run. As an anthology, however, the book at least partially prevents its essentialist readings, providing, thanks to its diverse textual choice, a tangible instance of that conflation of global and local that the editors strongly advocate.

The last remark about *American Literature in the World* concerns its usability in the classroom. Whoever teaches in departments of languages and foreign cultures is aware that the nation as a category still plays a significant role in teaching practice. This happens for a number of reasons, related both to established traditions of literary teaching across the globe and to students’ (and also instructors’) degree of knowledge of foreign languages, which limits the number of texts that can be profitably understood and taught. With regard to the latter questions, *American Literature in the World*, on the one hand, poses a stimulating challenge to instructors of American literature on a global scale and, on the other, lays bare some of its most problematic limits. Whereas its choice to group

literary texts according to multilayered and diversified paradigms could be fruitful in teaching activities and serve multiple didactic purposes, as the editors remark by highlighting the “suggestive rather than prescriptive” nature of the “five interconnected nodes, and the clustering of texts throughout” (Dimock et al., *American Literature and the World* 11), the book hardly questions its “Americentric” grounding. The decision to include in the volume only written English texts, in fact, seems to at least partially contradict the anti-nationalist or planetary claims the editors lay in the introduction and repeatedly throughout the volume. Not only are orally transmitted texts and texts in American languages other than English almost entirely absent from the book, but also the chance to include among the editors non-US-based scholars has been missed. Concluding on a bitter note, there is the chance, I am afraid, that instructors and scholars from that substantial part of the planet that lies outside the US will respond to the book by arguing that, as long as the borders of American nationalism and exceptionalism are challenged only by those who are entitled to establish and patrol them, a planetary anthology of American literature still seems far away.

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