



DISPERSING THE FIELD AS “RECIPROCAL HEALING”

A Response to Mena Mitrano’s
“American Studies *as* Italian Theory”

If reflexivity is ‘a foremost manifestation’ of the achieved autonomy of a social field (Bourdieu 101), then the work carried out by the several scholars gathered together for this IASA symposium—together with that of many others—provides definitive evidence that American Studies as a sub-field of study has reached a highly autonomous status with respect to external determinants. Even more, American Studies has become a target of inquiry in itself, sparking a lively debate concerning its goals, methods, critical tools, domain and stakeholders. As Mena Mitrano writes in her contribution to this issue of *RIAS*, American Studies as a discipline has been engaged in constantly re-drawing its own boundaries ever since its foundation. This is not the place to offer yet another version of the genealogy of the discipline; suffice it to notice that while in its emerging phase American Studies had amply borrowed from literary studies (as the Myth and Symbol School did), after the harsh critiques of the paradigm of exceptionalism (propelled by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War), American Studies has become much more aware of the geopolitical complexities its goal and scope entail, starting from its very name.

The New Americanists¹ in particular, have repeatedly deconstructed the logics underpinning the discipline and its ideological

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1. I use this definition in a very broad sense, to indicate the generation of Americanists that emerged in the wake of the crisis of the exceptionalist paradigm.

implications. What is peculiar in the epistemological break they have effected is the fact that they did not present themselves as the bearers of a new critical truth. Nor did they claim that their renewed methodology could finally gain access to any truth at all. By contrast, they started, on the one hand, by acknowledging their indebtedness to the previous generations, and, on the other, by reconstructing the lines of descent of the field, shedding light on the latent and unspoken pre-suppositions and assumptions underlying it. Rather than marking a new start, the New Americanists seem to represent more a post-Americanist, or late-Americanist stage, insofar as they tend to develop the field within a structural tension between the acknowledgment of hitherto ignored, excluded, undervalued, or marginalized subjects, and an unrelenting harking back to the past of American Studies. This tension generates a systematic questioning of the field's own rationale and operating modes—a constant return to the origins that Mena Mitrano rightly emphasizes in her essay.

Rather than through breaks or ruptures *with* the past, New Americanists appear to advance through a series of 'revisionary interventions' *into* the past. Each new turn, at one and the same time, discloses new spaces and perspectives, while also uncovering anew the narrative of its own genealogy. Therefore, the 'Futures of American Studies' (to evoke the title of a landmark study by the New Americanists,) seem to feed on a constant act of recontextualization of its own premises and tenets, together with an endless, somewhat obsessive retelling of its own story. And this re-telling each time debunks many of the categories, master-narratives, and norms undergirding the field imaginary called American Studies, in order to reconstitute it on renewed organizing principles and self-understanding. This process is most evident in the writings of Donald Pease, the founder of the New Americanist school. From his groundbreaking introduction to, and editing of, *Revisionary Interventions into the Americanist Canon* (Pease, "New Americanists"), to the co-authored introduction to *The Futures of American Studies* (Pease and Wiegman), to *The New American Exceptionalism*, to his introductory essay in *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* (Pease, "Introduction"), each time Pease rewrites the genealogy of the field

on the basis of the changes in perspective produced by the latest approach. This double move inevitably brings a risk for the New or Post-Americanists, that of being caught in an endless loop, as we can see in this short, exemplary passage: 'In calling for a wholesale dismantling of American exceptionalism, transnational Americanists have failed to see that transnational American Studies produced the version of American exceptionalism without exceptionalists that the transnational state of exception required' (Pease, "Introduction" 23). They seem to repudiate their origin by a complex act of critical re-enacting of another version of it.

This quote may provide a useful introduction to the role that what goes by the name of Italian Theory seems to play in this scenario. For it is at this juncture that Italian Theory comes into the picture. Pease himself recognizes that first Antonio Gramsci's and then Giorgio Agamben's works helped him to articulate his reconfiguration of the field (Pease, "Gramsci"). Pease has hinged his revisionary efforts on his reinterpretation of the exceptionalist paradigm, and, from 2002 onward, Agamben especially has supplied key concepts, such as that of the 'state of exception' (Agamben, *State*) and that of the 'homo sacer' (Agamben, *Homo*), which Pease has been employing in his successive reformulations of the field. The latter image in particular serves for Pease as the icon of the 'excepted figures' towards which the new transnational Americanists have increasingly directed their critical efforts in order to recover these figures 'from which America had forcibly dis severed itself' (Pease, "Introduction" 30).

Pease's recourse to these Italian intellectuals to redefine from the outside the disciplinary field can be seen as an example of the transactions of cultural and symbolic capital which characterize the transnational literary field in the age of globalization. In this light, through a sort of conceptual outsourcing, Pease has put to use, by incorporating them, theories originated in widely different socio-historical realities and conceived with other ends in view, in order to regenerate and expand the scope of American Studies. Much more importantly, also thanks to this approach American Studies is no longer a nation-based project, but can potentially expand its reach on a virtually global scale.

It is a fact that Agamben's thought has been recognized and become much more productive only after it entered the US cultural debate. One more instance of what Liam Kennedy has named 'the spell of intellectual authority cast by American academia' (Kennedy 4). But it is exactly here that problems arise. American Studies and Italian Theory: how do we cope with two critical and theoretical endeavors defined, in their names, by a national denomination, and yet aiming at transcending it? Roberto Esposito has rather convincingly argued that, given its long history of deterritorialization, the Italian quality of this thought cannot equate to the nation (Esposito 107 ff). And its recent making its way to the US and flourishing there is yet another example of it. But the import of the national name in the case of American Studies, seems to be quite different.

In fact, the name America, as Janice Radway and Djelal Kadir have commented, can indicate one nation, the North American continent, the American hemisphere. Plus two oceans and the countries that border them. One more leap, and the transnational can make America cover the whole globe. Therefore, in a nation of nations, as the stereotype goes, or in a multinational nation, isn't inescapably Italian Theory always already part of American Studies, in the same sense, it can be maintained, that French Theory was also always already there, and the Frankfurt School had always already been there before, and so on? Isn't 'America' in this sense working as the main hub of a transnational flow of cultural capital re-invested through the import and export of various paradigms, tenets, ideas which were originally conceived elsewhere, in totally different historical, social, and cultural contexts, but which can be recognized and made productive mostly when grafted onto this globalized field of American Studies, to be then resold worldwide even to the cultures from which they originally stemmed? And is the recent transnational turn in American Studies a way of disrupting or intensifying this process, in which we, European scholars, are often complicitous, as Liam Kennedy noted in a 2009 article in the first issue of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*? In an essay published in the same year, Donatella Izzo posed the question of the possibility for American Studies to really confront positions outside the field 'in their historical and geo-

graphical difference', rather than just 'appropriating and reducing them to one's own' (Izzo 593). The question, thus, is still open: can the transnational turn in American Studies be read as the sign of an emerging academic field no longer pan-optically centered in the US, but dispersed over a world-wide arena, in which America as a field imaginary functions like a prism refracting lights coming from different directions and producing different hues? If this is the 'reciprocal healing' that Mena Mitrano was suggesting is going on between Italian Theory and American Studies, then it is certainly more than welcome.

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