

REVIEW ARTICLES

CANADA, AMERICA, AND THE AMERICAS:

THE QUEST FOR A CONTINENTAL IDENTITY IN THE NEW WORLD 121

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D'haen, Theo, Paul Giles, Djelal Kadir, and Lois Parkinson Zamora, ed. *How Far Is America from Here?* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.

Chanady, Amaryll, George Handley, and Patrick Imbert, ed. *Americas' Worlds and the World's Americas/ Les mondes des Amériques et les Amériques du monde*. Ottawa: LEGAS, 2006.

The name of the continent now known as America has long been problematic, since it does not refer to any specific characteristic of its landmass or history but to a relatively obscure European mariner. Another complication with the name is that it is commonly associated with a single New World country, the United States, making it extremely cumbersome to refer to the continent without having to explain what one means. Gabriel García Márquez, for one, once confided he is bothered "that the people of the United States have appropriated the word America as if *they* were the only Americans." After noting that the continent "begins at the South Pole and

ends at the North Pole,” the celebrated Colombian author asserted that the people of the United States “are residents of a country without a name” and suggested that they “should find a name, because right now they have none” (67). Despite García Márquez’s considerable influence, however, the people of the United States have not yet ceased to describe themselves as Americans and do not seem about to do so any time soon. Still, it is difficult not to concede that America remains an ambiguous term.

In certain parts of the continent, notably Brazil and Spanish-speaking America, some people have circumvented the problem by referring to the United States as North America, which has resulted in such peculiar verbal constructions as the North American President, the North American Secretary of State, and even the North American dollar. For obvious reasons, this option has not been embraced in Canada (Braz, “North of America” 80-81). Nevertheless, Canada is not impervious to the frequent conflation of America the continent with the country sandwiched
122 between itself and Mexico. Many Canadian writers certainly reveal much confusion about their homeland’s spatial location. In one of her poems about Toronto’s Humber River, for instance, Eirin Moure [Erin Mouré] writes:

You can take the Humber out almost to Niagara Falls;
 Beyond the Humber is America
 Where fortunes are made. (59)

This of course begs the question of whether Moure knows on which continent Toronto, and by extension Canada, is situated. Noah Richler is no less perplexing. While describing the waves of migration to Western Canada starting in the nineteenth century, he states that, in addition to Ontarians, people “came from America, across a border with the United States that was vague until the lawlessness of American whisky-trading posts prompted the expedition of the Northwest Mounted Police to the region.” He then adds, “The frontier with America is senseless even today” (231). Richler’s sentiment is hard to dispute, if one considers that America happens to be the continent where Canada is located.

The slipperiness between the United States of America and what Herbert Bolton termed “Greater America” (1) permeates the two volumes under review. The collections comprise the selected proceedings of the first two world congresses of the International Association of American Studies (IASA), held in Leiden, Holland, in 2003 (D’haen), and in Ottawa, in 2005 (Chanady). Not surprisingly, the two works have much in common. In addition to their focus on International “American” Studies and their considerable bulkiness, at over 600 pages each, they are both introduced by the founding president of IASA, Djelal Kadir. Entitled “Defending America against Its Devotees,” Kadir’s contribution to *How Far Is America from Here?* is particularly combative. After informing his “fellow Americanists” that they “are now an integral part of profound changes in the field of American Studies,” Kadir asserts

that the “challenge of being an Americanist has become more challenging than ever, and a greater necessity now gives our own work greater urgency” (13). The reason for the urgency of the work done by Kadir and his colleagues is that “American Studies is on the precipitous verge of reconfiguration.” The field, writes Kadir, is moving from a paradigm in which “a national US discourse has been educating the world on American Studies” to one in which scholars from around the world may “engage America, and do so from discursive sites and criteria that emanate not from Washington DC or Omaha, Nebraska, but from wherever Americanists happen to be in the world” (17). In other words, we are witnessing nothing less than the “internationalization” of American Studies (21).

In “The President’s Report” with which he opens *Americas’ Worlds*, Kadir notes that “Defending America against Its Devotees” was not warmly received by everyone who first heard it at Leiden, notably U.S.-centred Americanists. In fact, he charges that no sooner had he left the conference than he “received an e-mail, an injunction, really,” sent by the leaders of several associations of American Studies, including the powerful U.S. one, advising him “not to publish my presidential address as delivered in our first Constitutive Assembly, unless I revised and submitted it for their review” (Chanady 13, 14). Kadir obviously rejected the demands by his “distinguished presidential colleagues,” whose attitude he claims reflects their entrenched opposition to the creation of “an epistemological space for the intellectual agenda for our new association” (Chanady 14). However, in her response to Kadir’s talk, also included in *How Far Is America from Here?*, Amy Kaplan proffers a somewhat different list of objections. Kaplan, who had recently been elected president of the U.S. American Studies Association, maintains that, while she approves wholeheartedly of “the project of internationalizing American Studies,” she sees several “blind spots” in Kadir’s approach (35, 37), not the least its parochialism. In particular, she questions why, considering “Professor Kadir’s exhilarating call for a momentous paradigm shift” in the field, “he resuscitates a Euro-American white male canon, even for those he calls upon as critics and outsiders.” As she points out, in his inaugural IASA lecture, “Kadir gestures to alternative visions of America,” yet “he only names traditional authors—Melville, Twain, Williams—and statesmen, Jefferson and Lincoln.” Even more astonishingly, he “does not mention any minorities or women, and or anyone from the Caribbean or Latin America, Africa or Asia” (38). Indeed, concludes Kaplan, one of the paradoxical consequences of Kadir’s intervention, with its focus on mainstream U.S. culture, is that Kadir “implicitly makes the United States the bearer of universal values” (39).

Kadir’s attitude toward the United States, as Kaplan underscores, is quite ambivalent, as he simultaneously questions the country’s politics and sees it as a beacon for the world. This ambivalence is also manifest in his conception of America, which one moment means a continent and the next a country. On the one hand, Kadir says that the shifts in American Studies are significant because they are occurring, “ironically, at a time when the most powerful nation in America, the USA, is exerting the great-

est military and economic influence in the rest of the world” (15). Yet, a paragraph later, he declares that the “most urgent task” facing Americanists today is “to be sure to differentiate between America and the governing regime of the United States of America.” As he expands, “we [Americanists] have a special obligation to make sure that the world is reminded of the difference between the people and the state, between a country and its government” (15). That is, America can go from being a continent to being a country, with no explanation ever being given for the difference.

The conflation of America the continent with the United States, which is evident not only in Kadir’s essay but in most other contributions to the collection, of course merely highlights the centrality of the United States in *How Far Is America from Here?* It seems that, no matter how one may conceptualize Inter-American Studies, the field is likely to be under U.S. hegemony. Still, it is hard to ignore that we have a major problem of nomenclature in this growing area of studies. Actually, the use of the word America can be problematic even when referring to the United States alone, as we can see in the way Janice Reiff, who hails from the U.S. Midwest, resents “the easy equation of America and California” by some Europeans (91). However, it is especially misleading when a single country is taken for a whole continent. When Werner Sollors contends that Henry David Thoreau, Richard Wright, and Norman Mailer constitute “not anti-American but all-American voices” (65), it is obvious that he is alluding solely to the United States. But when Cecilia Enjuto Rangel examines the recuperation of the Baroque by T.S. Eliot and Octavio Paz and states that “Eliot and Paz are American poets” (285), one begins to suspect that her spatial configuration of America is noticeably different from Sollors’s. This suspicion only increases when Rangel proceeds to argue that Eliot privileges certain aspects of European culture and “consider[s] himself more a part of the European tradition than the American canon,” whereas “Paz defines himself as a Mexican poet, in between modernity and antiquity, the Americas and Europe” (286). Whatever else she may be doing, Rangel underscores that there are rather dissimilar ways of being American, and therefore that scholars ought to ensure they specify which one applies in a given context.

There are several essays in the collection that deal with American countries other than the United States. For instance, in “Juan de Velasco’s (S.J.) *Natural History: Differentiating the Kingdom of Quito*,” Silvia Navia Méndez-Bonito examines the articulation of “a pre-nationalist consciousness” by the eighteenth-century Ecuadorian Jesuit, which she contends is triggered by the author’s encounter with “the anti-Americanist ideas held by some European intellectuals” (359, 360). Méndez-Bonito also asserts that works such as Velasco’s reflect the fact that Euro-Americans at the time possessed “a double loyalty,” being torn between their European ancestral lands and their American birthplaces (361). Her thesis is supported by Jerry M. Williams. In his study of “Creole Identity in Eighteenth-Century Peru,” Williams states that the American-born offspring of the Spaniards “reinvented themselves vis-a-vis their peninsular counterparts” and used their writings not merely to challenge “their old-world detractors” but also to plant “the seeds of a distinct intellectual separation”

(371). That is, for Creole intellectuals, literature becomes a means of preparing both the Europeans and their fellow citizens for the coming of new nations, nations which will be culturally and biologically related to the Old World yet separate from it.

Particularly germane, especially from a Canadian perspective, is Helen McClure's "How Far Is the Canadian Border from America? A Case Study in Racial Profiling." As its title suggests, McClure's piece explores the racialization of the Canada-U.S. border after September 11, 2001. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center, the United States became increasingly conscious of the vulnerability of its national space. Interestingly, this awareness led to a strategic geopolitical shift from "the porosity of the Mexican border, primarily in regards to illegal immigration, but also for drugs," to the Canadian border and its "potential for leaking in terrorists" (511). For both U.S. politicians and media pundits, Canada was suddenly transformed into "a 'club Med for terrorists,'" a security-lax land "full of false-asylum-seeker-terrorist-semi-Canadians" (511, 512). The demonization of Canada, as McClure documents, coincides with that of Arabs and Muslims in general, a development that has major consequences for Canada in terms of citizenship. In order to protect their national integrity, U.S. politicians felt compelled not only to control their northern border but also to determine who genuinely constitutes its neighbour, thereby excluding many people of Middle Eastern origin. Or, as McClure puts it, the result is that the current U.S. "racial project" constructs both "who is and is not 'truly' an American" and "who is and is not 'truly' a Canadian" (519). In fact, it could be argued that, contrary to her conclusion, the Bush administration has not pushed "Canada further away, moving the border metaphorically further away from America" (521), but the reverse. By attempting to establish who is and is not a Canadian citizen, the United States has extended its national border, in the form of its jurisdiction, to include Canada. 125

Studies like McClure's clearly suggest that events in a single American country can have profound ramifications for other states in the hemisphere. Still, there is no escaping the imprint of the United States and its culture in *How Far Is America from Here?* While some sections bear such titles as "Space and Place in American Studies" or "The Transitional in the American Cities," one soon discovers that only U.S. texts or places are considered. Moreover, the collection's overwhelming interest in the United States is exacerbated by its general focus on the present and the recent past, which has produced some curious lacunae. For instance, in an otherwise compelling essay on "*Antropofagismo* and the 'Cannibal Logic' of Hemispheric American Studies," Justin Read makes the claim that: "The definitive 'fact' of any American experience is the encounter between migrant groups—whether a violent encounter, a forced encounter, or a disencounter—and the inevitable mixing of cultural practices between those groups" (161). The idea that the central encounter in the Americas is between migrants rather than between Natives and non-Natives will come as a surprise to Indigenous peoples across the continent. Even if one accepts that "America' is an idea constructed by the European imagination," it does not necessarily follow that one should ignore the fact its "landmasses [. . .] were the home of coherent and

permanent native cultures” (Turner 4, 5). Also, it has been some time since historians started to reject Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier myth of Euro-American ethno-genesis because, for them, the “New World was neither new nor uninhabited and what fusion occurred involved far more than the mixing of [. . .] immigrants upon the soil of North and South America” (Peterson and Brown 3). That being said, the privileging of the immigrant or diasporic experience in *How Far Is America from Here?* may elucidate critical elisions in a work that professes to represent a radical shift in Inter-American Studies. After all, even if one is impressed by the general scholarship in the collection, one cannot help but notice that it reflects not only a relatively narrow geographic range but also that it does not evince much interest in history.

Notwithstanding the shadow that the United States projects over the Americas, as over much of the world, it is obvious that it does not constitute the whole of the continent. The particularity of the New World is conspicuously evident in the second volume under review. As befits the proceedings of a conference held in
126 Ottawa, *Americas’ Worlds and the World’s Americas/ Les mondes des Amériques et les Amériques du monde* has a distinctly Canadian flavour to it. To begin with, the volume is Canadian bilingual, with 21 of the 52 essays in French and the remaining ones in English. No less important, it foregrounds the question of continental identity, especially Canada’s place in the Americas, reflecting an awareness among some writers and scholars that the common usage of the word America “strips Canada of its right to Americanism as it is reserved for the United States” (Castillo Durante 73). As Patrick Imbert notes in his introduction to *Americas’ Worlds*, “America has become plural. We now speak of the Americas as the Western Hemisphere that extends from the Arctic to Antarctica.” Yet Imbert immediately complicates matters when he proceeds to quote a statement by Andy Warhol about “this country [. . .] America” (2). This confusion between continent and country is further compounded by the title of the collection. If America were truly plural, as Imbert avers, he and his co-editors would likely not have felt the need to give it the plural form, Americas.

In any case, it does not seem by accident that the collection’s opening essay is called “Americanidad: Towards the Mapping of a Concept.” Written by Márcio Bahia, the piece explores why the idea of a transnational continental cultural identity has been widely embraced in Spanish America, Brazil, and Quebec, as illustrated by the popularity of the terms *Americanidad*, *Americanidade*, and *Américanité*, but not in the United States or English Canada (23). For Bahia, the concept of Americanity is “fundamentally peripheral” (28). This marginality explains why the term has no currency in the United States, which already sees itself as America and thus would have little to gain by adopting the concept. The situation is more complex in English-speaking Canada. As Bahia shows, in the so-called Latin parts of the continent, the concept of Americanity enables people and countries to affirm their continental identity or Americanness. However, because of their geographic and cultural proximity to the United States, English Canadians are extremely reluctant to take that step, since their identity seems to demand that they emphasize their non-Americanness (30-31). To

quote the title of a recent book, *Canadians Are not Americans* (Morrison). In the process of distancing themselves from the United States, of course what English Canadians also cannot help but do is to dissociate themselves psychologically and politically from the continent where they happen to be situated.

The United States actually may play an even more direct role in shaping Canada's place in the Americas. In his essay "Le Canada, les Amériques et la concurrence des blocs régionaux," Carlos Gabriel Argüelles Arredondo argues that, historically, Canada has been "un pays plutôt international que régional" (125). One of the reasons for the country's promotion of international institutions, which paradoxically led it to distance itself from "des pays de son propre continent," had to do with its desire for an international stability which would facilitate world trade. Another reason, however, was that Canada accepted that "les États-Unis considéraient l'Amérique latine comme leur aire d'influence exclusive" (126). According to Argüelles Arredondo, Canada's policy toward the Americas has shifted considerably since the early 1990s. With the creation of trading blocs in Europe and Asia, which often excluded non-area countries, "Les Amériques sont alors devenues une priorité pour le Canada à cause de la coopération potentielle avec les différents pays et groupes de pays de la région" (126). In short, Canada's belated discovery of its Americanness may have as much to do with a newly discovered sense of place as with economics, the desire to trade with its fellow states in the Americas. 127

Numerous essays in *America's Worlds* focus on the relations between the literatures and cultures of the Americas. Amaryll Chanady, who also contributes an essay to the previous collection on "constructions of centres and eccentricity" in Caribbean and Central American texts (D'haen 233), asserts that an "inter-American approach shifts the focus on the Americas as a hemispheric region which should be studied as a whole and sheds light on the way in which forms of community and self-representation have emerged in specific ways in this part of the world" (35). Her thesis seems to be corroborated by Dieter Meindl, who contends that there are such commonalities in the contemporary North American Bildungsroman that it has become distinct from its European model. The traditional European Bildungsroman, writes Meindl, "depicts a convergence of self and society" and "tends to be politically conservative and culturally affirmative" (95). In contrast, the North American version, which is often the work of either immigrant or non-mainstream writers, "somewhat shifts its focus from the individual to the group, assuming a more collective perspective," and gravitating "toward postcolonialism in sympathizing with those that have been colonized, marginalized, and de-individualized" (96, 98). Roland Walter, who also contributes an essay to *How Far Is America from Here?* on "the fractal reality of cultural forms within and across borders" (D'haen 143), too sees many affinities among writers in the Americas. Focusing on authors of African descent, in both the mainland and the Caribbean, he posits that one of their main objectives has been the "rewriting of history," to counter the dominant discourses, "which silence the agency of black people" (115). As Walter affirms, "By drawing new, critical maps of their

diasporic space and places, African [diasporic] writers throughout the Americas supplement current visions and theorizations of nation and nationhood" (121).

Americas' Worlds does not escape the conundrum of the confusion between America the continent and America the country. In fact, for many of the contributors, America remains synonymous with the United States. This is blatantly highlighted in a section called "Transamerican Perspectives/ Perspectives transaméricaines," which, despite its title, is devoted almost exclusively to the United States and its relations to the world. Several of the pieces in the section are substantial, notably those by Christine Bold, João Ferreira Duarte, and Anne Malena. In "Rough Riders of the World: The Frontier Club and the Atlantic Diaspora," Bold maintains that the popular western, rather than being "the United States' most successful international cultural export," was actually "forged by and worked in support of a transatlantic network of threatened class interests" (369). She then proceeds to illustrate her point by tracing how Buffalo Bill's Rough Riders, which early on included an "international array of horsemen," were gradually transformed into a symbol of Caucasian masculinity, for the "more deeply the remade Rough Riders entered into popular culture, the whiter their image became" (370, 374). In "America in Exile: Pessoa Translator of Poe," Duarte performs a masterful study not only of the relation between the two writers but also of the nature and politics of translation, which Pessoa sees as "plagiarism in the author's name" (392). In turn, in "Louisiana: A World of Translations and Translations of the World," Malena explores how Louisiana has been colonized by several nations and, in the process, has "been subjected to acts of violent translation" (402). These acts, adds Malena, have been largely forgotten now that "everyone speaks English," but they clearly demonstrate that "the world indeed has passed through Louisiana although much of Louisiana has yet to pass through [. . .] the world" (402, 408). Still, while these essays are significant, it is evident that, with the possible exception of Malena's piece, the America to which they refer does not include the whole continent, not even its northern half, but a single one of its states.

Americas' Worlds, as I have been arguing, has more of a continental focus than *How Far Is America from Here?* Yet even this orientation is not without its own problems. While I tend to see as salutary the emphasis on the Americanness of American cultures, I must concede that it can also provide a deceptive idea of a culture. Thus a list of the most prominent Canadian writers would likely include names like Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Anne Hébert, Alice Munro, or Michel Tremblay. However, judging by the number of essays either devoted to or which mention an author's work in *Americas' Worlds*, the single most important writer in Canada is none of the above but Sergio Kokis. The reasons for Kokis's primacy in the collection are easy to identify. Kokis was born and raised in Brazil but migrated to Quebec in the late 1960s and, after adopting French, has written extensively about this experience in the two societies. His work is therefore conducive to an Inter-American analysis in a way which the work of most other Canadian writers is not. Nevertheless, even Kokis's

most passionate admirers must admit that, in terms of either readership or literary influence, their author is not (or at least not yet) on the same level as, say, Atwood or Tremblay.

In conclusion, although the renewed interest in Inter-American Studies is a momentous development, the field remains fraught with challenges. The most basic of these is the question of definition: what does one consider America and thus the area to be covered? For instance, the recent collection *Do the Americas Have a Common Literary History?* devotes almost no space to either English Canada or Brazil, two countries which together comprise about half the continent (Buchenau and Paatz; Braz, "Some Americas" 119). In contrast, *How Far Is America from Here?* and *Americas' Worlds* focus heavily on the United States and, to a lesser degree, Canada. Unlike the far north of the continent, Brazil, Spanish America, and the Caribbean are almost never examined in relation to one another but only in comparison with the United States and Canada. If Inter-American Studies are to become truly continental, this situation has to be rectified. Another problem facing the field is also related to its heterogeneity, the number of countries and languages involved and the linguistic prolificacy required of editors. The editing in both *How Far Is America from Here?* and *Americas' Worlds* is, to be generous, uneven. There are simply too many missing footnotes or notes in general. The first volume also has a tendency to place quotation marks below words, instead of above them, whereas the second volume demonstrates a discernible lack of familiarity with Portuguese. Of course, the challenge of having Inter-American Studies expand and become more truly American is that one has to familiarize oneself not only with more American cultures but also with more American languages. This is going to be a prodigious effort since, as Joshua Miller discusses in "Multilingual Narrative and the Refusal of Narration," "the canon of contemporary U.S. literature has grown markedly more multicultural" but "the canon has not become demonstrably more *multilingual*" (D'haen 468). Moreover, this phenomenon is not restricted to the United States. Elsewhere in the continent, one can also see evidence of the desire to examine cultures without studying the languages in which those cultures are experienced, and articulated. If nothing else, the fallacy of that approach is fully illustrated by both *How Far Is America from Here?* and *Americas' Worlds and the World's Americas/ Les mondes des Amériques et les Amériques du monde*.

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