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John Muthyala. *Reworlding America: Myth, History, and Narrative.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. 232 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1675-4.

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American Studies and the Hemisphere

John Muthyala's *Reworlding America* comes as part of an avalanche of recent scholarship that aims to reconceptualize American studies from a transnational perspective. Building on the theoretical vocabulary of Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak and Arif Dirlik, Muthyala defines "reworlding" America and American literature as "a form of discursive contestations that places migration, border crossing, transnational exchange, cultural translation, and colonial modernity at the center of debates and discussions regarding American literature and culture" (p. xiv). In other words, whereas "worlding" had meant (in Spivak's words) "'the reinscription of a cartography that must (re) represent itself as impeccable' on an assumedly 'uninscribed earth,"' "reworlding" entails an examination of the "cultural, political, economic, and social processes that bring the world into America and America into the world," hereby unsettling the nationalistic, religious, and ethnocentric frameworks of traditional (U.S.) American studies from a hemispheric perspective (pp. 39, 2).

The introductory chapter 1 attempts to theorize this idea by synthesizing various critical paradigms in Pan-American, borderland, creole, and postcolonial studies (by José Martí, Herbert Eugene Bolton, Edmundo O'Gorman, Edouard Glissant, Paul Gilroy, and others). Thereafter, Muthyala presents three chapters that aim to illustrate his idea of the "reworlding" of America. Chapter 2 discusses three texts that originated in the sixteenth-century European encounter with and conquest of the Americas: Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (1632); Jean de Léry's *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil, autrement dit Amérique* (1578); and Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* (1542, 1555). Chapter 3 jumps forward to the twentieth century in a discussion of three Caribbean texts–Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992), as well as Russell Banks's *Book of Jamaica* (1996) and *Rule and the BoneBone* (1996). Chapter 4, finally, turns to the U.S. American Southwest with a discussion of Roberta Fernández's *Intaglio* (1990) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1992).

The book is admirable in its expansive historico-cultural scope and in its ambitious attempt to bring together a vast array of theoretical currents in recent transnational and postcolonial scholarship. It hereby provides a useful synthesis for American studies scholars, who tend to be focused more narrowly in the various historical and cultural subdisciplines, due in part to the high degree of specialization of American academia. The advantage of an integrative argumentative frame, such as "reworlding," is hereby that it is broad enough to allow Muthyala to tie together discussions of historically and culturally vastly diverse discursive and linguistic practices. Thus, in chapter 3, Muthyala focuses on the Caribbean archipelago and argues that Chamoiseau's *Texaco* "creoliz[es] Caribbean intellectual and cultural traditions through a gendered representation of Martinique's transition from a plantation-based economy to an urban economy," while Banks's novels can be seen as "confessional narratives" that highlight the interhemispheric commerce of whiteness in the Americas by exposing the "larger transnational socioeconomic processes that … consolidate the United States's historical domination of the Caribbean" (pp. 72, 86, 97). Chapter 4, which is the strongest chapter of the book (at least to my mind), offers rich readings of Fernández's *Intaglio* and Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* that focus on the enduring presence and traversals of Native American peoples and cultural practices in the sociohistorical interface of the Southwestern border, hereby yielding a worthwhile intervention into border theory and criticism.

The disadvantage of a highly abstract and transhistorical concept, such as "reworlding," is that it makes for only very loose argumentative coherence in a book

and exposes its critical project to the risk of compromising on historical and philological rigor. The latter problem is evident mainly in chapter 2, which begins with a critique of Frederick Jackson Turner's well-known frontier thesis by "yok[ing] together Homi Bhabha's idea of the pedagogical and performative dimensions of the nation with Djelal Kadir's notion of the forthgathering and foregathering of New World historiography," as well as with Annette Kolodny's "frontier paradigm" facilitating a transnational Pan-American approach (pp. 32-33). Armed with such a formidable theoretical apparatus, Muthyala next turns to a discussion of three sixteenth-century European narratives of discovery and conquest, arguing that all three narratives are early examples of "worlding" the New World: Bernal Díaz's text in the author's tendency toward naming and renaming America from the point of view of the European center; Léry's in manifesting a "European subject struggling to comprehend the incomprehensibility of the self that America discloses as Europe's unmanageable otherness"; and Cabeza de Vaca's by inverting "the colonial codes in order to affirm a 'soft' cultural and religious colonialism" (p. 35). However, if the value of a theoretical or critical paradigm must ultimately be measured in terms of the insights it yields into the texts or cultural materials under consideration, it is not entirely clear what "worlding" adds to our critical understanding of any one of these three texts, or of the European historiography of the discovery and conquest more generally. In fact, Muthyala's discussions of these three texts follow closely on the coattails of familiar readings only to reformulate earlier arguments (such as Beatriz Pastor's notion of the "mythification" and "demythification" of the New World) in terms of "worlding of the New World" (p. 39).

Moreover, despite its Pan-Americanist critique of Turner's "frontier thesis," Muthyala's notion of "reworlding" ironically seems to reproduce a certain American (or "New World") exceptionalism that thrives on the age-old idea of a redemptive or enlightening transformation in the face of an "American experience." With regard to the sixteenth-century historiography of the discovery and conquest, for example, Muthyala finds that in the trajectory from Bernal Díaz to Léry and to Cabeza de Vaca, the European narratives of "worlding" become less and less "impeccable," meaning that they become increasingly conflicted in terms of their colonialist agenda. Muthyala's argument is not for a historical trajectory (since Cabeza de Vaca's narrative was written long before the other two); rather, if one narrative is less "impeccable" than another one in regard to "worlding," it is due to their authors' varying exposure to what Mutyala calls "the fundamental ambivalence that structures frontier experiences" (p. 44). Thus, if Cabeza de Vaca's is least "impeccable" in "worlding" the New World, it is because his prolonged experience in America made him incapable of "maintain[ing] clear divisions between colonizer and colonized" (p. 57). In fact, however, Cabeza de Vaca's narrative was written only well after he had returned from his New World "experience," and the notion, propagated by his narrative, of the common humanity of the Indians was not "in opposition to dominant Christian worldview" but rather state policy, as well as specifically stipulated in Pope Paul III's papal bull "Sublimis Deus" of 1537 (p. 62). Similarly, it is anachronistic to read Bernal Díaz's *Historia verdadera*, finished not until 1568 (almost fifty years after the conquest) and published not until 1632 (almost fifty years after Bernal Díaz's death), in terms of its "will to power and mastery ... of New World frontiers"–in other words, in the historical context of the time of the conquest that Bernal Díaz describes (p. 43). (Doing so, would be akin to reading James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* [1826] in the context of the Seven Years' War.) In fact, Bernal Díaz wrote this text explicitly to protest what he saw as the injustices done to old conquerors like himself by imperial policy, which had left him, he lamented, "very poor, and burdened with sons and daughters to marry off, and grandchildren to maintain, and little rent to do it with and so we pass our lives, in pain, in labour, and in sorrow."[1] Reading these texts in the context of an American "frontier experience," rather than in the historical context in which they were ideologically inscribed, means falling into the trap of their rhetorical sophistication. Moreover, this sort of reading attributes a kind of redemptive and enlightening potential to an ahistorical frontier that is strangely reminiscent of Turner's "frontier thesis"–albeit now not as a national democratic utopia but rather as a transnational/multiculturalist one: Europeans, benighted by the false consciousness of their colonialist ("worlding") ideologies arrive in America but are gradually transformed and enlightened by their "experience" on the New World frontier.

Possibly, Muthyala foreclosed on the possibility of making a serious intervention into the criticism on these particular texts or into comparative American studies more generally by his apparent refusal to consider any materials in languages except English, as the primary texts are read in English translations and criticism not written in English is being ignored. Despite its profession of a hemispheric critical lens, then, the book runs the risk of being perceived as practicing not an interdisciplinary transnationalism but rather a form of (U.S.)

American academic imperialism that has recently been sharply criticized by Latin Americanists, who have been watching Americanists (i.e., practitioners of "American studies") expand their scope of vision to include Latin American materials without engaging with their extensive critical traditions in Latin Americanist scholarship.

Despite these caveats, Muthyala's book is to be commended for its ambitious project in bringing together cultural materials usually treated separately in the present disciplinary landscape making up American studies. Also, it must be conceded that the emphasis of Muthyala's book really seems to lie on twentieth-century cultural and literary formations, as well as theoretical discourses. It is in its very learned synthesis of these theoretical discourses in transnational American studies where the book's main strength lies.

Note

[1]. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1980), 55

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