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Edward L. Widmer. *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. viii + 290 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-510050-1.

Reviewed by William T. Kerrigan

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The sobriquet "Young America" appeared across the pages of magazines, newspapers, and printed pamphlet speeches throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Its meaning was ambiguous and multidimensional then, and subsequent scholarship on "The Young America movement" have been quite problematic. Efforts to define "Young America" as a movement have always reminded me of the fable of the five blind mice crawling over an elephant. As each mouse explored a different part of the Pachyderm's anatomy, each returned with a radically different conclusion as to what the animal was. References to "Young America" in historical literature seem to be almost as diverse as the blind mice's conclusions.

At base, this is because the phrase "Young America" was associated with a range of different activities in the 1840s and 1850s. The sobriquet "Young America" was occasionally employed by nativists, but more often it identified those sympathetic with the European revolutions of 1848 and the post-revolution refugees. In 1852 "Young America" was attached to Stephen Douglas and a younger generation in the Democratic party; in 1856, the Republicans would use it in John C. Fremont's campaign. George Henry Evans, a champion of workers' rights and free land for the poor adopted the slogan, as did George Francis Train, an ambitious international capitalist. A group of writers and literary critics centered in New York City employed the phrase in their efforts to promote a distinctive American literature; aggressive expansionists who sought the acquisition of Cuba, Canada, and all of Mexico also yoked their campaigns to the Young American ox. Most of the historical writing on "Young America" has focused on these last two manifestations. In *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City*, Edward Widmer focuses primarily on that city's cultural nationalists during the 1840s, but he also discusses their relationship to the expansionist Young America which peaked in the early 1850s.

Edward Widmer has produced the best work on Young America in New York City, a book which supercedes the standard work on the subject, Perry Miller's *The Raven and the Whale*. Both Miller and Widmer focus their works on the small clique of mostly New York-based writers and critics asso-

ciated with Young America in the 1840s. At the core of this group were two men, Evert Duyckinck and John Louis O'Sullivan, and a stable of justifiably forgotten writers, but New York's Young America circle also included for a time notable authors like Poe, Melville and Hawthorne. All worked toward a common goal--to foster a distinctively American literature. Whereas Miller limited his study to New York's Young American writers, Widmer casts a wider net, by linking the activities of New York's literary nationalists to two other movements of the day--the American Art-Union, which sought to bring American art to a wider audience, and the codification movement lead by David Dudley Field, who sought to "Americanize" U.S. law. A final chapter discusses another manifestation of Young America unleashed by the Mexican War: the aggressive campaign for further territorial expansion which included calls for the United States to take "All-Mexico," filibustering campaigns intended to bring about the annexation of Cuba, and even speculation about the destiny of Canada.

Widmer also provides us with the best short biography of John L. O'Sullivan, founder and editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, and the man credited with coining the phrase "manifest destiny." O'Sullivan's life story is a fascinating one, and his influence on the politics, diplomacy, and the literature of this period is generally overlooked. O'Sullivan's disappearance from the historical record is in part a result of the paucity of material on his personal life. There are few personal letters remaining--his most visible legacy is in the pages of the journals and newspapers he edited. Widmer's biography of O'Sullivan is valuable because it fills in many of the details of O'Sullivan's life and career, but also because it challenges a common misconception about the meaning of the phrase "manifest destiny." Widmer convincingly shows that O'Sullivan's faith in the "manifest destiny" of the nation to stretch across the continent was based not on a belief in racial Anglo-Saxonism, but on his belief in the superiority of the American political system. O'Sullivan himself was a Catholic of Irish descent, with personal and family ties to Latin America. Furthermore, New York's Young American expansionists as a group were sympathetic to the revolutions across Europe, and opposed to the nativist movement which sought to limit non-English immigration.

While Widmer is to be commended for persuasively demonstrating previously unrecognized connections between New York's literary nationalists and those behind the American Art-Union and Codification movements, he overlooks a few other important Young America activities in New York. George Henry Evans, who promoted his free land program in a newspaper entitled "Young America" (a paper for which literary Young American Parke Godwin also wrote) gets only two brief mentions. Widmer misreads the significance of another Young American activity centered in New York: the campaign for an international copyright law. He exaggerates the Anglophobia of the New York Young Americans, and interprets the efforts of the Young American-dominated American Copyright Club as a simple manifestation of this Anglo-phobia. In fact, it is something much more complex. On page 99, Widmer implies that Young America was critical of Charles Dickens' American tour, when in fact Young America and Charles Dickens were in perfect agreement on the international copyright issue. The reform that Young America sought was to force American publishers to pay copyright to English authors when they published their books. Dickens was a favorite with America's pirating publishers, who were cranking out cheap editions of all of his works without paying him a dime. Young America sought copyright reform for two reasons. First, they hoped if American publishers were forced to pay royalties to English authors, as they were compelled to do for American works, it would level the playing field and give unknown American authors a fighting chance to get published. Second, Young America was asserting the right of all

authors to survive on the proceeds of their intellectual property. Most of New York's Young Americans firmly believed that an international copyright law would foster a fair and free market for literature, and that this market would bring an explosion of new American works.

This second element of the copyright campaign--an emerging faith in the free market to serve the cause of American literature--highlights another element of the Young America movement that Widmer overlooks. O'Sullivan, Duyckinck and New York's other literary Young Americans were weaned on the loco-foco writings of William Leggett, and their early offerings were filled with an anti-commercial rhetoric. But as economic opportunity soared in the 1840s, Young Americans came increasingly to embrace the market economy. By the 1850s, the phrase "Young America" was being used to describe ambitious young entrepreneurial capitalists. The relationship between the spread of cultural nationalism in the 1840s, and the embrace of a pro-market ideology is unexplored in this book.

Discussion of the territorial expansionists who adopted the sobriquet "Young America" is relegated to a final chapter, and Widmer seems determined to downplay the connections between the expansionists and the cultural nationalists, going so far as to distinguish them as "Young America I" and "Young America II." Certainly there are many important distinctions between the two. Many of New York's cultural nationalists were critical of the war against Mexico, and disassociated themselves from the term as it became a slogan for expansion. But Widmer's distinction also seems to fit too conveniently with our modern values. "Young America I" comes to represent all that we see as good about the movement--the effort to foster a more democratic, distinctive American art, literature and law. "Young America II," on the other hand, serves to hold all those "nationalistic" activities that we now deem bad--using violence to expand the boundaries of the republic and to dispossess Indians, Mexicans, and others. The connections between cultural nationalism and aggressive territorial nationalism are more than superficial, and Widmer's book misleads by suggesting the two have little in common. O'Sullivan played a central role in both manifestations of Young America, a fact Widmer writes off as evidence of his eccentricity and internal contradictions. While it is true that Evert Duyckinck and many of the literary Young Americans distanced themselves from the Mexican War and other calls for expansion, a celebration of the growth and destiny of the American republic was very much a part of this era of literary nationalism. Walt Whitman expressed deep admiration for expansionists James K. Polk and Stephen Douglas, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's political patriotism is evident in his biography of Franklin Pierce. Furthermore, many New York and New England literary figures who opposed expansion were more concerned about the extension of slavery than they were about expansion itself.

Widmer's distinction between Young America's cultural nationalism and territorial expansion would have been harder to maintain if he had extended his treatment of Young America beyond New York, to cities like Charleston, New Orleans, and Cincinnati. Beyond the northeast, he would have found stronger connections between the cultural and territorial manifestations of Young America. In other words, Widmer's decision to distinguish between Young America I and II is in part a result of his narrow geographic scope and also a reflection of modern judgements about mid-nineteenth century nationalism.

Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City is an immensely important contribution to the history of the early American republic. It advances our understanding of the meaning of "Young America," and is the first source historians should read if they seek to understand New York's cultural nationalists in the 1840s. Widmer's description of the New York's

Young Americans is enlightening and engaging, and this book possesses a grace and style all too rare in scholarly works these days. Anyone interested in the cultural history of the early republic, the history of New York, or even the diplomacy of the era will find this book very useful, and difficult to put down.

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