

Introduction

D. H. Lawrence, *Americanos*

In direction I am more than half American.
I always write really towards America.

D. H. Lawrence, letter to Amy Lowell

“Can non-Americans write American literature?”¹ John Muthyala, who asks the question in his study titled *Reworlding America*, answers yes, they can. In *The American Lawrence*, I read D. H. Lawrence as a non-American who, in one period of his career at least, wrote American literature.

There is no American Lawrence in the sense that we speak of the American Auden. Unlike Auden, Lawrence would remain a British subject; during the three years he spent in the New World between 1922 and 1925, Lawrence stayed in the United States on six-month-long visitor’s visas, moving across the border from New Mexico to Mexico as each elapsed. Literary citizenship is another matter, however, and Lawrence himself floated the idea that he was “more than half American” in a letter he sent to Amy Lowell from Sicily, the year before he traveled to the United States for the first time.² Taking him at his word has far-reaching implications, for our understanding of Lawrence and of American literature alike: it means calling in question the still-dominant domestic definition of the English Lawrence and the integrity of nation-based traditions, British and American. Read as “more than half American,” Lawrence sets national canons out of kilter, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Under a globalizing rubric like Muthyala’s, Lawrence’s American oeuvre,

the core of which consists of the poems, essays, and fictions he wrote in and about New Mexico in the early to mid-1920s, may be classified as American literature. Yet Lawrence is left out of the loop, his American writing bypassed in the transnational circuits of contemporary scholarship. His absence is explained not only by the “presentism” with which the transnational paradigm has been charged but also by Lawrence’s own imbrication with American literary criticism in its formative, nation-building phase. The Lawrence who wrote American literature has been occluded by the Lawrence who wrote *about* it, in the set of essays begun in England in 1917 and published in book form in New York in 1923 as *Studies in Classic American Literature*. The case I want to make in what follows for Lawrence’s pertinence to new paradigms in American studies is thus contingent on a reappraisal of his contribution to the old American studies.

Certain Americanists and an Englishman

In an early review of *Studies in Classic American Literature* for the *New York Evening Post Literary Review*, the American critic Stuart Sherman informs his readers that Lawrence “has been visiting us, sojourning physically, I believe, in New Mexico.” With suitably dry humour, Sherman pictures Lawrence there, at the edge of Taos desert, “wearing a sombrero, driving a Ford, drinking iced water qualified perhaps with white mule, reading the Albuquerque *American*, and smoking Camel cigarettes.” Lawrence, Sherman says, is a “good guest,” who observes the customs of the host culture; adopting the peccadilloes of the locals, he even gives a passable imitation of a “genuine *Americano*.”³ What a genuine *Americano* might be is a moot point, and one to which I will return. “Out there in New Mexico under sombrero,” Sherman’s *Americano* Lawrence is, in any case, a straw man: the real target of his review is the English author of *Studies in Classic American Literature*, who imitates American “habits and manners” by phrasing his book about American literature in the American vernacular.

Sherman deciphers the ersatz Americanisms of *Studies in Classic American Literature* as the signature, not of a wannabe American who talks the talk in the belief that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but of a “gifted alien,” a mimic man who flatters to deceive. In Sherman’s judgment, the English Lawrence “has borrowed our language and discussed our classics in order to deliver, in a style intelligible to us and with illustrations suited to our comprehensions, his own message.” *Studies in Classic American Literature*, that is, “has a thesis,”

which, Sherman finds, is the same thesis propounded in Lawrence's novels and in his philosophical writing—the colonization of the passionate instincts of the body and of the “blood” by the idealizing and intellectualizing forces of the mind.⁴ Sherman's point is that the book says more about Lawrence himself than it does about the American classics that it purports to study.

Writing more than seventy years later, however, and with the benefit of the longer view, Lawrence Buell points out that *Studies in Classic American Literature* is “the first thesis book about American literature to endure” [my emphasis].⁵ But if *Studies in Classic American Literature* still endures in American studies, it is as a black book. Lawrence's *Studies*, which tests its thesis on a select group of “classic”—male, white, antebellum—authors, is deemed complicit with the now superannuated and ideologically suspect processes of national canon-formation that defined American literary studies in the post-World War I decade of its inception.

As Paul Giles remarks, Lawrence's *Studies* also “anticipates the epistemology of American studies in its ‘mythic’ phase.” The “widely influential nature” of Lawrence's book in the period of the Cold War is in inverse ratio to its reception by Americanists today, who reject, often in polemical terms, the method and mind-set of their myth and symbol precursors: R.W.B. Lewis, Richard Chase, Charles Feidelson, Henry Nash Smith, and Leslie Fiedler.⁶ According to Donald E. Pease, the myth and symbolists were “soldier-critics” who “produced the patriotic fictions in whose name they could retroactively claim to have fought the war.” In Pease's critique, the myth and symbol school promulgated “the state fantasy of American exceptionalism” by identifying in classic or canonical American literature the “foundational signifiers” of the U.S. national metanarrative—the myth of Virgin Land, for example, and of the American Adam. Thus, during myth and symbol's tenure in the academy, “the field of American Studies collaborated with . . . the cultural apparatus” of the nation state.⁷

In the 1990s, American studies took the transnational turn, and, rebranded as the New American studies, turned its back on the insular notion of a national narrative the legitimacy of which had been contested since the cultural turn of the 1960s and the opening up of the American canon in the following decade. Philip Rahv's argument in *The Myth and the Powerhouse* (1965) that the recourse to myth belies a fear of history (the powerhouse) would now be taken up by a cohort of critics who rejected the “consensus’ history which ignores fundamental conflicts and tensions in American culture.”⁸ The myths of uniqueness and of American Exceptionalism encoded

in the “classic” canon by the myth and symbolists have duly been exploded, and today American literature is understood, not as a world apart, but as part of a wider world. American literary studies now navigates a “world of fluid borders” as scholars embark on the cartographic enterprise defined in Giles’s recent study of that title as *The Global Remapping of American Literature*.⁹

As the spatial coordinates of American criticism shift, and the national scene recedes into the transnational distance, the English Lawrence is caught somewhere between the devil and the deep blue sea. Identified by Sherman as a gifted alien who, in mimicking the native tongue mocks the “national spirit,” Lawrence, in Giles’s more recent assessment, is an essentialist who intuits in the American classics “an alien quality, which belongs to the American continent and to nowhere else” (SCAL 13).¹⁰ There is a curious reversal here: New Americanists consign *Studies in Classic American Literature* to the reactionary rearguard of their discipline, whereas Sherman, who was old-school even by the critical standards of the 1920s, places Lawrence’s book closer to what is now the leading edge of American literary theory. In his review, Sherman locates the English Lawrence in the borderland state of New Mexico in order to position the pro tem “Americano” author of *Studies in Classic American Literature* at a tangent, in a more than geographical sense, to the national narrative his book nominally underwrites.

Clearly, Lawrence did regard “classic” American literature, in its manifest, if not in its latent or symbolic meaning, as a national literature, and *Studies in Classic American Literature* would subsequently be co-opted in institutionalizing it as such. But Lawrence’s book itself is concerned less with the incarnation than with the “post mortem” decomposition of a national narrative in the American classics (SCAL 148). For Lawrence, antebellum American literature augurs what Pease would call a *post*-national imaginary, albeit that Lawrence’s vision of the American future is hardly identical with Pease’s. Lawrence’s spirit of place may be an essentialist notion, but that does not mean that it is a national, still less a nationalist, one: as Jon Thompson argues, “Lawrence uses a fair part of ‘The Spirit of Place’ to clear the field of familiar American myths.”¹¹ The spirit of place as Lawrence defines it in *Studies in Classic American Literature* is a continental quality, anathema to the national spirit so stalwartly defended by Sherman in his review of Lawrence’s book. Far from being “conditioned to an alien nationalism” in America, or in his American writing, Lawrence was himself the alien, even if he was, as Sherman concedes, a gifted one.¹²