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Review of Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary, by Paul Giles

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the New Negroes examines a range of interartistic works that participated in the production of New Negro aesthetics, and the contemporaneous critical responses to them. She traces their affinities to Alain Locke's critical project for guiding representation of the New Negro. The problems emerging from the nature of interartistic attempts at representation in the Harlem Renaissance were foundational, if not simple by comparison, to those evident in the last fifty or so years of electronic and print media and their mass audiences. Nadell's work clearly adds to the study of how African-American aesthetics have developed and diverged in the first half of the twentieth century.

Aside from these content-specific contributions, Nadell provides full descriptions of the primary sources; ample information about resources useful to scholars in related fields; details about critical, intellectual, and professional lineages among prominent Harlem and other New York cultural figures; and nuanced, jargon-free treatments of concepts such as newness, place, representation, ethnicity, and generation. This study, in method and form, is useful to literary and cultural scholars, comparatists, and teachers of academic writing courses, all of whom enjoy adroit exposition, argumentation, and style and seek effective models for their students.

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Cultural Encounters

Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary. By Paul Giles. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002. xiii + 337 pp. $22.95.

In *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary*, Paul Giles defines virtualization as the contingencies of perception in electronic and digital media where the interface between original and replica has been "eliminated" (11). Most telling in Giles's definition is how "virtualization" is associated with culture and capital and how this link is helpful

in analyzing the classic phase of American studies. In reading Las Vegas as the city of virtuality and of abundance, Giles argues how American fictions of abundance connect with philosophical idealism and how American capitalism and transcendentalism function by "'virtualizing' natural phenomena into their shadow or replica" (12).

Giles's overall project is to "virtualize" America and analyze the processes that have helped construct mythologies of nationalism and of American exceptionalism. In reading together works by Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, Henry James, Robert Frost, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon and poets such as Thom Gunn and Sylvia Plath, Giles juxtaposes American cultural narratives with those of Europe and examines the national mythologies framing these narratives. By "virtualizing" America, Giles demonstrates how "indigenous representations of the 'natural'" function as tautologies without "reference to anything outside their own charmed circle" (2). Besides analyzing mythologies of nation formation, an important focus of *Virtual Americas* is to establish an alternative genealogy for American studies, one that is informed by transnational and transcultural forces and by the seemingly homogeneous construction of American studies of the 1950s and 1960s.

Giles's chapter, "Narrative Reversals and Power Exchanges: Frederick Douglass and British Culture," successfully argues how the three autobiographies of Douglass (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1845; *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855; *Life and Times*, 1882, revised 1883) and the work of William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist movement demystify Britain's perception of being an antislavery power. Comparing the plight of the oppressed in both the United States and in Britain shows the "explicit violence" in both American and British societies and the transatlantic plight of the oppressed (46). Giles analyzes the parallel histories of labor in both continents, as exemplified by Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) and its rhetoric of a divided England, and concludes that Douglass's biographies unsettled the myth of England's labor and social unity by mirroring the North/South conflict in postbellum United States.

Especially interesting is chapter 3, "'Bewildering Intertanglement': Melville's Engagement with British Tradition." This chapter provides a welcomed re-reading of Melville's canonical texts and traces alternative genealogies for reading Melville's work, especially in terms of what Giles considers to be Melville's project of comparing "American slavery of race with British slavery of class" (58). Moreover, Giles demonstrates how his parodic writing helps explain the general discomfort of British critics reading Melville after the Second World War. In addition to highlighting the way in which the

composition of *Moby Dick* (1851) was intrinsically connected with British literature (Melville, for example, based his style for *Moby Dick* on Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, a book he borrowed from Evert Duyckinck's library in July 1850), Giles shows how Melville's interaction with British culture and literary models was parodic and intertextual instead of oppositional. *Pierre* (1852), for example, shows how the genealogy of aristocratic England is no less arbitrary than that of demagogical America. Especially useful for scholars is Giles's reading of "masking" in works such as *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). In Melville's last novel, "masking" not only instrumentalizes deception for a confidence-man working the river economy of the Mississippi, but in Giles's reading "masking" also dismantles global rather than regional forms of class and of capital. Throughout *Virtual Americas*, Giles shows the importance of making the canonical seem foreign and estranged. In the case of Melville, American literature works to aestheticize British literature by showing how its literary conventions are an "elaborate masquerade . . . made different by the advent of American culture, which opens up an alternative agenda, a world elsewhere" (73–74).

This "alternative agenda" is also explored within American literature of the cold war. Chapter 5, "From Decadent Aesthetics to Political Fetishism: The 'Oracle Effect' of Frost's Poetry," begins by exploring Frost's American modernist engagement with the Victorian decadent movement. Frost's poetry, traditionally associated with the American canon, needs to be read within the transatlantic circumstances framing its composition. As Giles reminds us, "Birches," a poem about New England contours, was written in the "old country" in Buckinghamshire (136). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of the "oracle effect" (*Language and Symbolic Power*, 1991), Giles then speculates how Robert Frost's "peculiar brand of American modernism" repressed more perverse ghosts of the "homeland" (127). Giles also observes how the canon formation of Frost's utopic and mythic modernist poetry exalted American nationalism. During the cold war such modernist aesthetics became a sign of America's cultural superiority to perceived anachronistic notions of the Soviet Union's socialist realism.

In the concluding chapters, Giles continues to explore the many transatlantic avatars for American studies in works by Nabokov, Gunn, Plath, and Pynchon. Especially polemical is his discussion of the history and criticism of *Lolita* (1955), a text that helped invent and define American studies during the Truman and Eisenhower years (157). In chapter 6, "Virtual Eden: *Lolita*, Pornography, and the Perversions of American Studies," Giles further demonstrates how *Lolita* is unsettling for cold war academics not for its deemed pornography, but for its irreverence to the ideology of American studies. He

characterizes this ideology as trying to reconcile subject and object, fact and symbol into a synthetic and syncretic account of America's fabled promise (171). By analyzing *Lolita*'s literary and moral ambiguity, the confluence of high and low cultures, and the aesthetics of advertisement in the United States, Giles shows how Nabokov critiques the notion of a "pluralistic" America against the "totalitarian" closure of the Soviet Union.

Though *Virtual Americas* is conditioned by Anglophone literary traditions, its critique of disciplines, such as American studies, that have "engendered their own imagined community" (274) will prove useful for Inter-American scholars working in other languages and literatures. Giles's comparative project of "virtualizing" the canonical should serve, for instance, scholars examining the formation of Iberoamerican literary traditions within already established critical communities (for example, Europe and Latin America), and those studying Pacific Rim literary engagements with the Americas. Writing in exile and using borrowed books, Jesuit priest Francisco Clavijero's *Historia antigua de Mexico* (1780) had already demonstrated how the writing of Mexican history needs to be addressed as a transnational and transoceanic endeavor in order to counter the Enlightenment's imperial discipline of natural history. *Virtual Americas* deserves attention especially in times when some consider how the US cultural and technological apparatus helps reconfigure uncritical "'monolithic' national narratives" (256) and when academics are disciplined for examining the production of effects in a virtual culture.

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