

REVIEW ESSAY**After the “Post,” in the Present: New Perspectives on Nationhood**

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We've been fighting for decades to be recognized as a *present-tense people*.

Tommy Orange

Just outside the Illinois State Museum stands a totem pole which, unlike most of its traditional counterparts, features an anthropomorphic figure on the top.¹ The Proud Raven replica—one of the several Tlingit originals of Tongass Island, Alaska—shows an easily identifiable Abraham Lincoln, with his characteristic hat and unmistakable beard. The present location of the pole and its history beginning in the 1880s represent America's multiple and conflicting histories of exceptionalism, and how American exceptionalism has affected the conceptualization of nationhood. Many believe that the iconic president is commemorated in this form to express Alaskan peoples' gratitude for ending slavery in the Last Frontier; this explanation is most congruent with the mainstream narrative of American exceptionalism, at the core of which stands the firm belief in the “right and noble [cause]” and “moral duty” to secure order, within and outside US territories (Sirvent and Haiphong 17). Nevertheless, since totem poles also served the social function of shaming and ridiculing, some hold that when the traditionally slave-holding tribal communities were promised compensation for their economic loss upon Alaska being purchased by the United States in 1867, and as the payments are long pending, the metonymic great emancipator is abashed for speaking with forked tongue. Somewhere between the two is the belief that when First Nation people intended to commemorate the decisive moment of contact with Europeans, the only model of the white man readily available

was Lincoln's image on a stamp at the local post office, thus, he signifies the settler nation. The three narrative sets and their intersection illuminate how social imagination is determined by cultural engineering, how historical perspectives are formulated by both the settler nation and the colonized, and whose story is to be perpetuated on a larger scale.

The location of the Proud Raven pole, its past, and its role as a marker of several phases in US history and culture—conquest, slavery, Indigenous and white relations, to name but the most conspicuous implications in the artifact—might seem insignificant at a time when notions of American exceptionalism, nationhood, and democracy are continuously being challenged, as the year 2020 and the early days of 2021 prove; when reports on “America in Crisis” outnumber any other news, including those on the Covid-19 pandemic. The inherent racial, imperial, and colonial subtexts, however, testify to the depth and scope of the root of the crisis and, by addressing them, call for new paths, both academic and communal, to be struck.

In an American Studies, ethnic studies, and, especially, Native American Studies reading, current issues emanate from the (mis)interpretations of the concepts of nation, nationhood, and (trans)nationalism, all deeply engrained in American exceptionalism. Transnationalism has been a contested notion ever since its inception, partly due to being imbued with several ambiguous contents.² More recently, it has been critiqued by an emerging critical ethnic studies trend, which argues that “while settler colonialism may appear to be contained within settler states, its actions are inherently transnational: settler states and societies define and lead the economics and laws that articulate a globalized world with ongoing, naturalized colonization” (Morgensen 189). With the help of two recent publications, this essay offers a Native American Studies perspective of the racial, colonial, and imperial rootedness of US exceptionalism, with a view of how it affects the concept of “nation,” and what—sometimes radical, if not utopian—structural changes are recommended in order to see “a future America,

on which all can unite, which pulls us irresistibly toward it, as we understand each other more warmly,” to quote Randolph Bourne’s 1916 essay.

As self-evident as it may appear that discussions on American Studies and American (trans)national exceptionalism incorporate the more than 500-year-old Indigenous experience, cultural studies courses and volumes rarely do so. As Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera contends,

it is true that public schooling, monuments, and other governmental imaging are not devoid of Native American themes, expulsion and eradication are portrayed as sentimental and nostalgic national rites of passage, firmly planted in the *providential rights* of the affiliates of the US political body—a myth reiterated through cultural, political, and economic spheres. (47; emphasis added)

The two recent studies published but one year apart—*Unsettling Truths: the Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (2019) by Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah and *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism* (2018) by Herlihy-Mera—both, as if foreshadowing academic responsibilities emerging from the tumultuous days of 2020 and 2021, offer a critique of American exceptionalism and (trans)nationalism. These studies move beyond the most widely-held explanations disregarding the American Indian experience: numeric underrepresentation in the US population, and the special relationship tribes acquired by signing treaties with the United States. *After American Studies* follows a more academic, curricular course to reveal and, by extension, trigger changes in academia as to its viewpoints in imagined community formations; *Unsettling Truths* takes a more “grassroots” approach in the hope of restructuring the American social imagination that would begin by reforming American Christianity. The examples cited to substantiate how the settler-American dominance indoctrinates and perpetuates inequalities for hyphenated

identities, including Native Americans, range from soft-colonial devices—language, literature, rituals, visual arts, architecture, sports, and media in *After American Studies*—to the immanent racism of the US Declaration of Independence and Constitution as argued in *Unsettling Truths*. According to Charles and Rah, the “merciless Indian Savages” phrase in the Declaration of Independence and the revolutionary yet exclusive “We the People” still codify the privileges of “the superior white Christian body” arising from exceptionalism and probe the concept of “nation” as well as community formation mechanisms in a post-national United States. From the Indigenous perspective, “democracy has been wielded with impunity as the first and most virulent weapon of mass destruction” (Grande qtd. in Smith, “American Studies” 311) and, as Herlihy-Mera and Charles and Rah argue, it continues to function so.

Native American aspects of recent social and political events, which have received wide media coverage, have been disregarded even though their scope ranges from “riots,” through election polls, to Covid statistics, which only reinforces the contention that America’s Indigenous demographic is relegated into a position in US social reality that grants its presence a “hyphenated” validation, yet it does not regard Indigenous entities as “present-tense people” (Orange 141).³ Beginning in May 2020, Minneapolis saw one of the longest and most violent phases of Black Lives Matter protests, alternatively referred to as the “Minneapolis uprising” and the “Minneapolis riots.” From the outset, Native American organizations joined BLM in support and to demonstrate shared historical experience, stating that “standing in solidarity and supporting Black Lives Matter, addresses the root causes of . . . brutality—systemic racism and white supremacy. . . . Dismantling these systems is the work we need to do together” (Belfi). Such cooperation may be perceived as “border crossing” (Clavin 423)—one possible view of transnationalism—where borders are the products of the settler colonial indoctrination, and they also illustrate the understanding of transnationalism as “contracts, coalitions and interactions across . . . boundaries that were not directly controlled by the central policy organs of

government” (Nye and Keohane qtd. in Clavin 425). Emphasis falls on *interaction* and *not directly controlled* to signify that indoctrination does not spring from the institutionalization of a national agenda. Andrea Smith underlines the same idea when calling for new Native Studies, in which the (trans)national moves beyond the discussions of individual privileges onto a plane where “the creation of collective structures” becomes possible so that “the systems that enable these privileges” are replaced by new systems (“Native Studies” 216).

In a similar vein, the 2020 CNN exit poll chart according to race cites respondent categories as White, Black, Latino, Asian, and Other Racial/Ethnic Groups (“Exit Polls”), partly corresponding with categories of race and ethnicity on the US Census form. The channel’s real-time news coverage in November, however, replaced the last category by “Something Else,” which citizens of Indian Country—as well as many others—found a rather inherent incident for the Indigenous demographic of the US. “Something Else” and its somewhat more refined yet patronizing counterpart, “Other Races/Ethnic Groups” echo Mark Rifkin’s explication of Agamben’s “inclusive exclusion” and his assessment of the politics of distinction when he states:

“The People” stands less for the actual assemblage of persons within the state than for the set of those who fit the ideal “body,” and who consequently will be recognized as “citizens,” with the rest of the resident population consigned to the realm of “bare life”—the people who are not the People and thus are excluded from meaningful participation while remaining the objects of state control. (82)

Although scholarship has started to devote the attention the American Indian populace had so long lacked in history, politics, academia and, within that, American Studies, ignorance, negligence, and “something else” still validate the claim raised in both *Unsettling Truths* and

After American Studies that transnationalism has failed to delineate an American social imagination which readily integrates the American Indian component. As long as the transnationalist trend draws on the “physical and symbolic manifestation of cultural myth” as an instrument of “social engineering,” its original meaning of exchanging ideas is forfeited, and the American Indian experience remains one of the arbitrarily hyphenated, concomitantly subordinated categories, viewed and treated as “‘other’ or ‘foreign’ or, sometimes ‘heritage’—despite their dominance (in democratic and representative senses) in many communities” (Herlihy-Mera 22, 20). The foundations and perpetuation of the constructed national peoplehood have been increasingly challenged, but the criticisms targeting it are still deeply anchored in the “centrality of the nation-state and thus reinforce the nation-centered traditions of historical practice” (Thelen 966). Confrontation of the imposed structure has recently gained momentum and, in view of the special relationship Native American communities hold with the United States, it requires a whole new understanding of nation.

Since American Studies “enjoys the sustaining power of an agenda-setting entity; [and] it has supported Exceptionalism and the Frontier Thesis, the approaching conclusion of both theories, as well as the rise and ongoing promotion of the Transnational,” it directly follows that expectations will arise for “the discipline [to offer] a structural perspective on how the cultures of the residents of the continent may be studied (categorized and delimited) and [to institutionalize] those ideas (Herlihy-Mera 5). Herlihy-Mera, and Charles and Rah offer two intertwining courses to “Make America Great” again—to quote a widely-circulated contemporary slogan ringing very conflicting tones in the world.

Charles and Rah point out that in its recent usage in US political discourse, “Make America Great” demands a return to that phase in history when the country was primarily defined by “a white Protestant identity” (78). The ostensibly “inclusive and representational” nature of the transnational approach, however, “on close inspection . . . only rehashes the

hierarchy and inequality of the capitalist neoliberal nation-state, with modified and hyphenated or hybridized elements” (Herlihy-Mera 149), and only reinforces the fallacies American Studies has been repeatedly attempting to illuminate. In order to devise an inclusive American social imagination, institutional and structural changes must be implemented, which, first and foremost, have to address, then de- and reconstruct the concept of American exceptionalism.

After American Studies delineates three stages of cultural conquest that construct the historical timeline of American exceptionalism. In the first phase, merchants/explorers map—both literally and figuratively—the geographical and cultural space, primarily for resources, to strengthen the economic potential, primarily, of the settler nation. At this stage, the Indigenous cultural space is not recognized as existent, at least not by the settler nation’s criteria. *Unsettling Truths* completes the first phase of cultural conquest by marking the Doctrine of Discovery as the foundation of not only American religious history, but also both the dominant theological imagination and American exceptionalism stemming from it. Charles and Rah explore how the Doctrine emerged from a “series of fifteenth-century papal bulls which are official decrees . . . that carry the full weight of the [pope’s] ecclesial office” (15), and how the theological imagination originating in the Doctrine has shaped American social imagination through its political content “that provided political boundaries and mediation between colonial settler powers” (Charles and Rah 22). The 1452 *Dum Diversas* allowed Portugal and subsequent nations to

invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and *pagans whatsoever*, and other enemies of Christ *wheresoever placed*, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to *reduce their persons* to perpetual slavery

. . . and to convert them to his and their use and profit. (Charles and Rah 15; emphasis added)

Within half a century, *Inter Caetera* ordained “the Catholic faith and the Christian religion that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself” (Charles and Rah 19). The latter ordinance corresponds with Herlihy-Mera’s second stage of cultural conquest, executed by the military to “implement martial law so that the metropolitan may exploit resources” (24). It is here where the Doctrine of Discovery takes shape as “a set of legal principles that governed the European colonizing powers, particularly regarding the administration of indigenous land” strengthened by “a dysfunctional theological imagination” that continues to define American exceptionalism and informs the exclusivity of nationhood (Charles and Rah 15).

By the third—and final—phase of cultural engineering, Indigenous land is transformed into the domain of politicians who, through “saturation of symbol, legend, and myth” and by “[e]stablish[ing] laws and norms that promote the metropolitan (invading system) as dominant culture and prohibit or criminalize other systems; offer *citizenship* to conquered peoples in exchange for submission to metropolitan cultural norms” (Herlihy-Mera 24; emphasis added).

In the American Indian historical context, while the Indigenous populace faced the exact same episodes, the methods and extent of administering varied, largely determined by the geopolitical circumstances of the colonizers. Citizenship is essential in formulating communities, with the privileges and responsibilities it entails for residents of any given political body. The issue of American Indian citizenship had been on the agenda of the young republic, but geopolitics construed the extent of inclusivity for the Indigenous demographic. Many American Indian individuals became US subjects through the 1887 General Allotment

Act and the 1919 Veteran Citizenship Act, but the first universal law to grant citizenship rights to all Native Americans born in the US was the 1924 Snyder Act (Prucha 224).

Although Maine, a state that due to its location was among the first to complete all three stages—merchants, military, and politicians—enfranchised tax-paying Native Americans in the 1819 state constitution, it was still the last to comply with the 1924 Snyder Act. Similarly, the Arizona Supreme Court lifted the ban on Native voting only in 1948, and literacy tests were still in practice until the 1970s (“Voting Rights”). The sizeable Indigenous presence and the extensive cultural/political/geographical Native places in the four-corner states area framed the timeline of cultural conquest differently, but the anatomy of the process was the same as in Maine, or anywhere else in the US: Herlihy-Mera’s merchant-military-politician chronology corresponded with “externalization, institutionalization, and internalization,” (Berger and Luckmann qtd. in Charles and Rah 24) to validate nationhood.

After American Studies examines how the US political body suffuses the idea of the nation, initially “through the threat of violence” and subsequent, more physical manifestations, such as “incarceration, taxation, deportation, capital punishment” (Herlihy-Mera 24). The social devices complementing these, at first glance and in comparison with the former list, may seem less menacing, but language, history, rituals, the calendar, visual arts, architecture, literature, health, and sports are equally formative of the wrongful social imagination, especially due to their role and presence in everyday life, since “the formation of the imagination emerges from the way individuals and communities process social reality and how they are shaped by social reality” (Charles and Rah 27).

Both *After American Studies* and *Unsettling Truths* discuss the superiority of the English language and illustrate the legitimacy of the linguistic Other. *Unsettling Truths* aptly opens in Charles’s native Navajo, while Herlihy-Mera inserts several Spanish passages in the primarily English study; both suggesting that even though English is not codified as the official language

of the United States, its use is to be trusted as “natural,” thus hierarchically superior, in the US political body. A more political manifestation of the same principle is the fact that in Charles’s Navajo community, tribal presidential candidates’ fluency in both English and Navajo is to be determined by the voters when casting ballot (Navajo Election Administration), yet no such requirements are included in the US Constitution, assuming that the territorial and temporal provisions as defined in Article II Section 1 in 1789 are still viable. In a re-colonizing manner, the front cover of *Unsettling Truths* elicits associations with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the font type mimicking the calligraphy of the two founding documents. Charles and Rah this way legitimize the challenge of the Doctrine of Discovery and imply that the forthcoming unsettling truths are to be accepted as organic parts of the structure as the two founding documents are. Herlihy-Mera also points out that contemporary social engineering operates along the same principles: numerous records issued by the United States are printed in Helvetica to express the commanding content of such documents and reinforce the hierarchy inherent in the system (112).

After long centuries of cultural engineering, the task now is to implement changes in communities that are not solely based on a nation-state model. Herlihy-Mera sees the potential to develop in a novel formation of identities. Beyond existing and inherently deficient categorizations, such as those along geographical, racial, ethnic, and class distinctions, *After American Studies* proposes that “Age could and perhaps should replace conventional axes of affiliation and identity as it offers a more universal, common experience as a register” (Herlihy-Mera 171). Age-based communities would obliterate the inequalities arising from the rigid epistemic categories of the past and point towards after-(trans)national ones whose fabric is defined by groups of the same birth year. Refraining from using “post” since “post-realities tend to coexist with the previous circumstances” (175), *After American Studies* envisions a future in which age-based societies would remap identity categorization and restructure the

still-existing practice rooted in exceptionalism. Charles and Rah, who perceive the remedies of shortcomings arising from exceptionalism in theology, call for “the healing power of lament . . . [as] lament removes any pretense of exceptionalism . . . that is used to cover up trauma” (188). With age as a restructuring principle and lament as a passage for healing of past trauma, the future might see a United States where the perception of the nation as “a whole political body” will not “[require] narrating it as ‘a unitary subject’” but instead “a collection of separate, unsubordinated, self-governing polities” (Rifkin 82). The restructuring of communities, and, by extension, identities will then not be confined to the binaries of margin and center, but allow for a social imagination in which stratification is not confined to the vertical dimension but embraces the “above, below, through, and around, as well as within” (Thelen 967). The sum total of above, below, through, around, and within will, ideally, bring about a more inclusive transnational America. The newly emerging collective entities will still have to overcome the legacy of the nation-state spanning more than half a millennium, but instead of being organized along the lines of “nation,” they would be founded on “interrelatedness, mutuality, and global responsibility” (Smith, “Native Studies” 221-22) rather than hierarchy and control. They would open new potential paths for American Studies and ethnic studies to engage with J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s 1782 question “What is an American?” beyond national/transnational/hybridity/hyphenation-laden discussions.

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Notes

¹ A fourth interpretation indicates that Lincoln is paid tribute to by First Nation slaves held in bondage by Indigenous people. The image of the Proud Raven Pole is available at <https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/loc/id/2082/>, the original

Lincoln carving is on display at the Alaska State Museum at Juneau. Ironically, both artifacts are physically part of the colonial place-making system.

² As early as 1916, Randolph Bourne envisioned that “America is coming to be, not a nationality but a *trans-nationality*, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors. Any movement which attempts to thwart this weaving, or to dye the fabric any one color, or disentangle the threads of the strands, is false to this cosmopolitan vision. . . . *What shall we do with our America?*” (emphasis added).

³ William Orange’s 2018 novel has been critically appraised for its groundbreaking insights on identity. The narrator describes the powwow shoot-out analogous with centuries of genocide: “The bullets have been coming from miles. Years. Their sound will break the water in our bodies, tear sound itself, rip our lives in half. The tragedy of it all will be unspeakable: the fact we’ve been fighting for decades to be recognized as a present-tense people, modern and relevant, alive, only to die in the grass wearing feathers” (141).

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