From:

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The Myths That Made America

An Introduction to American Studies

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This essential introduction to American studies examines the core foundational myths upon which the nation is based and which still determine discussions of US-American identities today. These myths include the myth of »discovery,« the Pocahontas myth, the myth of the Promised Land, the myth of the Founding Fathers, the melting pot myth, the myth of the West, and the myth of the self-made man.
The chapters provide extended analyses of each of these myths, using examples from popular culture, literature, memorial culture, school books, and every-day life. Including visual material as well as study questions, this book will be of interest to any student of American studies and will foster an understanding of the United States of America as an imagined community by analyzing the foundational role of myths in the process of nation building.

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Introduction

1. INTRODUCTION

This book offers an introduction to American studies by examining 'the myths that made America,' i.e., popular and powerful narratives of US-American national beginnings which have turned out to be anchors and key references in discourses of 'Americanness,' past and present. Even if America obviously is "a continent, not a country" (Gómez-Peña, "New World Border" 750), in this study I will follow the convention of using the signifier 'America/n' to refer to the United States, and treat US-American myths only. The following chapters analyze the core foundational myths upon which constructions of the American nation have been based and which still determine contemporary discussions of US-American identities. These myths include the myth of Columbus and the 'discovery' of America, the Pocahontas myth, the myth of the Promised Land, the myth of the Founding Fathers, the myth of the melting pot, the myth of the American West, and the myth of the self-made man. Each of these foundational myths allows us to access American culture(s) from a specific angle; each of them provides and contains a particular narrative of meaningful and foundational 'new world' beginnings and developments in the history of the United States of America as well as iconic visual images and ritualistic cultural practices that accompany and enhance their impact and effect. Yet, these myths are not fixtures in the American national cultural imaginary: The explanation for their longevity and endurance lies in their adaptability, flexibility, and considerable narrative variation over time and across a broad social and cultural spectrum.

My discussion of these myths will trace their complex histories and multivoiced appropriations as well as various semiotic/semantic changes and discursive shifts that are part of these histories. The material of each chapter consists of the manifold representations and usages of the myths in different functional areas of American society over time. In the first part of each chapter, I will outline the relevance of the particular myth, reconstruct its formation in its specific

historical moment and context, and show how its 'making' is intricately connected to the project of US-American nation-building and to the (discursive) production and affirmation of a coherent and unified US-American *national* identity: The United States as an "imagined community" (cf. Anderson) is constructed and affirmed by way of this repertoire of a foundational mythology that entails the creation of a "usable past" (cf. Commager, *Search*; Brooks, "On Creating") and the "invention" of a "tradition" (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger) for the new American nation complete with a national genealogy of past and present heroes. This "imagined communal mythology" (Campbell and Kean, *American Cultural Studies* 22) provides national narratives of individual and collective heroism and excellence (when referring to historical individuals and groups, such as Columbus, Pocahontas, the Pilgrims and Puritans, and the Founding Fathers) as well as narratives of collective belonging and progress (when referring to abstract concepts such as the melting pot, the West, and the self-made man). Taken together, they make up a powerful set of self-representations that an American collectivity has claimed and at times appropriated from an early, pre-national utopian imaginary of the Americas and that it has converted into powerful ways of talking about itself as a "consciously constructed new world utopia" (Ostendorf, "Why Is" 340). Rather than as the product of a series of more or less contingent historical events and developments, the USA appears in these myths as a predestined entity and (still) unfinished utopian project, i.e., it is endowed with a specific teleology. At the same time, these myths do not simply 'add up' to a coherent and consistent national mythology free of contradictions neither in a diachronic nor in a synchronic perspective, since the foundational national discourse has always been marked by struggles for hegemony (e.g. between the North and the South or the West and the East), as established regimes of representation are always being contested.

In the second part of each chapter, I will work through the many reconfigurations and reinterpretations that the respective myths have undergone from *subnational* perspectives. Often, various immigrant and/or minority groups as well as individual writers and artists have contested the authority of (pre)dominant versions and interpretations of these myths to prescribe a "unified national monoculture" (Pease, "Exceptionalism" 111), and thereby questioned the seeming homogeneity and coherence of US national identity. Subnational perspectives on these myths have challenged and intervened in the national regime of representation by pointing to the voices that have been silenced, rejected, and excluded from the American foundational mythology through acts of epistemic violence. Yet, subnational revisionists' call for more inclusive and democratic articulations of these myths has often left their iconic status intact; in this sense,

marginalized groups (Native Americans, women, African Americans, immigrant groups, and the working class, to name only a few) have pursued a strategy of appropriation and empowerment rather than of radical dismissal in order to articulate their experiences and claim their Americanness.

In the third and final part of each chapter, I will point to more recent (often contemporary) critiques of and commentaries on the myths under scrutiny, which at times are more radically revisionist and debunk a myth entirely. In many instances, the earlier national and subnational versions of a myth assume a *transnational* or *postnational* dimension in light of new postcolonial interpretations and critiques of empire that transcend the US national context and US exceptionalism as interpretive frameworks. Yet, a myth does not necessarily become obsolete by becoming more controversial and contested, as popular beliefs and forms of commemoration that privilege the national perspective on the one hand, and an academic, perhaps somewhat elitist revisionism articulated from subnational and transnational perspectives on the other often coexist side by side (cf. Schuman, Schwartz, and D'Arcy, "Elite Revisionists"). The resulting tension, which can be described as a kind of cognitive dissonance, produces an "internally divided cultural symbology" (Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb* 41) or a "Balkanization of the symbolic field" (Veyne, *Did the Greeks* 56) that allows for balancing different and at times overtly contradictory ways of world-making within the same discourse.

When assessing the role and relevance of the foundational US-American myths in the age of globalization, we can also discern new forms of mass-commodification and large-scale cultural export of American mythic narratives across the globe; whether this will lead to a reinvigoration of the mythic material and its often utopian appeal or to an emptying out of cultural specificity in the process of circulation, translation, and indigenization (or to both) remains to be seen, but the processing of the 'myths that made America' in any case is ongoing and unfinished.

Although I am pursuing a rough, somewhat schematic chronology in each of the chapters, a purely linear narrative often falls short of the complex adaptations and interpretations of each myth, as different versions and narratives compete with each other for dominance and hegemony. In order to reveal the biases of the myths' dominant versions and the political and economic interests of those who promote them, the discussion of the *national*, *subnational*, and *transnational* dimension of each myth is informed by a framework of ideology critique, within which opposition to the American consensus appears as challenging the validity of the US foundational ideology. The dominant ideological paradigm that is established, critiqued, reaffirmed or debunked is that of *American exceptionalism*:

All of the myths appear under the arc of this single most dominant paradigm in the history and practice of American studies, because the discipline has for a long time been organized around it either by way of affirmation or critique.

2. AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM – SOME DEFINITIONS

When the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville remarked in his seminal work *Democracy in America* (1835/1840), a piece of American studies scholarship *avant la lettre* which records his 1831/32 journey through the United States, that "the position of Americans was quite *exceptional*" (*Democracy* Vol. 2, 36; my emphasis), he did not imply that Americans were exceptional or special as a people or culture, but referred to the uniqueness of the American political system. American democracy for him contrasted sharply with the situation in his native France, which for the past decades had been characterized by violent revolutions and counter-revolutions and the restoration of monarchical rule. Tocqueville saw the democratic system that he studied in the United States as God-willed and thought that it was only a matter of time before it would spread to other countries; he felt that in the US this system had taken root in 'exceptional' ways only in so far as that it had been able to do so in the absence of feudal structures and aristocratic opposition.

The passage quoted above is often taken as a foundational scholarly reference to American exceptionalism, yet, American exceptionality was soon decontextualized from this particular instance and used to describe the genesis of the American nation in much more comprehensive and sweeping terms; political scientist Byron E. Shafer for example flatly states that "American exceptionalism […] is the notion that the United States was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be *understood* differently – essentially on its own terms and within its own context" (Preface v). Differently from what, we may ask, and in what ways in particular? And what does this difference imply? Often, the phrase 'exceptionalism' has been used in very unspecific ways to claim American superiority vis-à-vis non-Americans and to legitimate American hegemony outside of the US; it also conveys notions of uniqueness and predestination.

American exceptionalism is an ideology that we find throughout US-American history in various forms and discourses of self-representation. It gains renewed relevance and even normativity with the formation of American studies as a discipline in the first half of the 20th century, and becomes the blueprint and guiding principle for many scholarly publications on the United States. While

American studies scholarship analyzes American exceptionalism, it may at the same time also produce new exceptionalist narratives. Even though the ideology of American exceptionalism is a fuzzy conglomerate of very different ingredients, three types can be identified that recur time and again in political, artistic, and popular discourses, past and present: a *religious* exceptionalism, a *political* exceptionalism, and an *economic* exceptionalism.

Regarding the religious dimension of American exceptionalism, Deborah Madsen reminds us that the concept of American exceptionalism "is used frequently to describe the development of American cultural identity from Puritan origins to the present" (*American Exceptionalism* 2). The Puritan rhetoric of the Promised Land can be considered to be the origin of American exceptionalism. According to Madsen, "the mythology of the redeemer nation" can be "explained with reference to seventeenth-century Puritan sermons, poetry and prose" (ibid. 16). It is in John Winthrop's image of the City upon a Hill, in William Bradford's history of Plymouth Colony as well as in Puritan journals that we find the belief of the first generation of New England settlers in their special destiny as 'God's chosen people' expressed (cf. chapter 3). This belief has been surprisingly persistent in the course of US-American history and has been modified into secular and semi-secular variations.

The political dimension of American exceptionalism comes closer to what Tocqueville may have had in mind when he used the adjective 'exceptional' in reference to the founding and development of the US-American nation. The writings of, for example, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine reflect the exceptionalist discourse surrounding the political founding of the American republic. When Paine declares that "[w]e have it in our power to begin the world over again" (*Common Sense* 45), he is establishing a creation mythology of the American nation that has been reaffirmed by numerous authors, for example by Seymour Martin Lipset, who calls the US "the first new nation" (cf. his book of the same title). References to founding documents and founding figures (to be addressed in chapter 4 of this study) affirm the shared sense of a secularized doctrine of US-American predestination. The particular (and to cultural outsiders often quite overbearing) type of American patriotism already considered to be somewhat annoying by Alexis de Tocqueville needs to be placed in the context of a self-image that is built on the notion of the exceptionality of American democratic republicanism.

The economic dimension of American exceptionalism is often connected to notions of a new kind of individualism that corresponds to but at the same time also exceeds the realm of the political, and valorizes self-interest as legitimate and necessary for the well-being of the body politic. American individualism is

often seen as a precondition for individual success, which is mostly understood in economic terms. The notion of social mobility epitomized in the cultural figure of the self-made man – from rags to riches, "from a servant to the rank of a master" (Crèvecoeur, *Letters* 60) – prototypically illustrates the promise of economic success in America as a direct consequence of the conditions of freedom and equality, which in this context is understood as equality of opportunity. The myth of the self-made man and the idea of expressive individualism (to be addressed in more detail in chapter 7 of this book) are part of a utopian narrative that promises a better life to all those who come to the US, and thus also is very much an immigrant myth. Within the typology of the present study, this myth is identified as the secularized version of the religiously and politically informed mythic narratives of American exceptionalism. In a broader sense, it (along with the other myths) is part of the civil religious vision of the American dream, which figures as a kind of 'umbrella myth' that encompasses all others (cf. Fluck, "Kultur").

Clustered around these three strands of the ideology of American exceptionalism that champion religiosity, patriotism, and individualism, we find mythic narratives of historical figures (Columbus and Pocahontas) and models (the melting pot, the West) with which they are interrelated. Yet, one could even more broadly claim that exceptionalism is "a form of interpretation with its own language and logic" (Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* 2). American exceptionalism thus is not only about *what* is represented (historical figures, incidents, interactions, and achievements) but also about *how* American matters are depicted and emplotted – i.e., about the semiotics and politics of representation. The "language and logic" of American exceptionalism are modes of narrative framing, iconic visualization, and ritualistic enactment. Often, these modes have been identified as articulating American civil religion; the concept of civil religion (which was first used by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, cf. *Social Contract* 249-50) suggests not merely a utilitarian relation to religion, but one that borrows selectively from religious traditions of various denominations in order to create "powerful symbols of national solidarity" (Bellah, "Civil Religion" 239). American civil religion presents an institutionalized collection of sacred or quasi-sacred beliefs about the American nation that is distinct from denominational religions, yet shares with them a belief in the existence of a transcendent being (God); it centers on the idea that the American nation is subject to God's laws and that the United States will be guided and protected by God. Symbolically, this civil religion is expressed in America's founding documents and made concrete in phrases such as 'In God We Trust' (ibid. 228). The American exceptionalist logic conceptualized as American civil religion by

Robert Bellah and others had earlier also been called the American Creed: "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence" (Chesterton, *What I Saw* 7). Gunnar Myrdal refers to the "American Creed" as "a social *ethos*" and as a "political creed" which functions as "the cement" in the structure of the nation and is identified with "America's peculiar brand of nationalism" (*American Dilemma* 1, 5). Both Gilbert K. Chesterton and Gunnar Myrdal, cultural outsiders (from England and Sweden, respectively) for who the US was an object of scholarly interest, developed influential interpretations of American patriotism's ideals as well as its deficits.

Whereas we can clearly see the symbolic languages of politics and religion coming together in the notion of a civil religion and an American creed, the economic aspect also plays an important role as the genuine "promise of American life" (cf. Croly's study of the same title), which entails the promise of economic self-improvement and gain, just as, in turn, the proverbial "gospel of wealth" (cf. Carnegie, "Wealth") connects economic success to communal obligation in the framework of national solidarity and belonging. In its dominant and recurring themes as well as in its overall rhetorical structure, American exceptionalism informs and structures American *self-representations*. It has been important in fashioning internal coherence and has also often been used as an ideological tool to project American hegemony outside the US. American myths thus play a crucial role in the symbolization and affirmation of the US nation; it is their cultural work, so to speak, to make discursive constructions of the nation plausible and self-evident, to create internal solidarity and commitment to the nation state and its policies, and to represent the US to outsiders. Myth in general, as it operates on the level of (often tacit) belief rather than rationality, can be seen as the prime discursive form of ideology; the myths discussed in this book can then be assumed more specifically to reinforce the basic tenets of American exceptionalism also and maybe even mainly below the level of awareness whenever they are evoked.

American studies and American exceptionalism have been connected in precarious ways from the beginning. During the emergence and consolidation of American studies as a discipline around the beginning of the 'Cold War' era, American exceptionalism was a powerful hegemonic construct that proliferated in the form of "an academic discourse, a political doctrine, and a regulatory ideal assigned responsibility for defining, supporting, and developing the U.S. national identity" (Pease, "Exceptionalism" 109). For the practitioners of American studies, this meant that

[h]istorians and political theorists [as well as scholars from other disciplines, HP] approached the past in search of historical confirmations of the nation's unique mission and destiny. Examining the past became for scholars who were steeped in exceptionalist convictions a personal quest whereby they would understand the meaning of their "American" identity by uncovering the special significance of the nation's institutions. (ibid. 110)

Historically, American studies in part have thus been complicit in establishing and maintaining discourses which sought to justify US imperial policies in the 'Cold War' – and beyond.

3. AMERICAN STUDIES SCHOLARSHIP – AN OVERVIEW

American exceptionalism and American myths can be examined more specifically in regard to their national, subnational, and transnational contexts and frames of reference, which correspond with the three major phases in the history of the discipline of American studies and the concomitant transformations of its research practices and modes of thought.

Whereas various early individual works from Alexis de Tocqueville's aforementioned *Democracy in America* to Vernon Parrington's three-volume *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-30) have been discussed as the first pieces of American studies scholarship, the discipline really only took institutional shape and developed in more formalized ways from the late 1930s onwards. During its inception period from the late 1930s to the 1950s, scholars of the so-called Myth and Symbol School looked for and identified myths and symbols that allegedly attested to the specificity or even uniqueness of the US, and thus sought to affirm American exceptionality. The name of this loosely connected school of thought derives from the subtitle of Henry Nash Smith's seminal study *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950); Smith, the first scholar to receive his PhD in the field of American studies (in 1940 from Harvard University), defined his approach in the following way:

I use the words ['myth' and 'symbol'] to designate larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing, namely an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image. The myths and symbols with which I deal have the further characteristic of being collective representations rather than the work of a single mind. I do not mean to raise the question whether such products of the imagination accurately reflect empirical fact. They exist on a different plane. But as I have tried to show, they sometimes exert a decided influence on practical affairs. (*Virgin Land* vii)

Smith sees the 'Virgin Land' as one prominent symbol that is embedded in resonant mythic narratives about European encounters with North America, such as the frontier myth and the agrarian myth, readily conceding that myths (and the corresponding symbols) may be seen as fiction and thus may contain some degree of wishful thinking or even falseness. Alongside Smith, other influential Myth and Symbol scholars like R.W.B. Lewis and Perry Miller similarly investigated the nature of the American experience and its historical protagonists. Lewis suggests the image of the 'American Adam' in order to characterize the prototypical 'new world' settler as a figure of origin and an emblem of 'new world' beginnings:

> [T]he American myth saw life and history as just beginning. […] The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of a new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling […]. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero […] was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. (*American Adam* 4)

Perry Miller's American genealogical narrative is similarly steeped in religious discourse; he puts the Puritans' "errand into the wilderness" (cf. his book of the same title), a God-willed quest for a utopian community, at the center of the early American experience and therefore also at the center of American studies. 17th-century Puritan theology is thus seen as having had a lasting impact on the cultural imaginary of the nation. Miller shares with Sacvan Bercovitch, another prominent scholar of Puritanism, the sense that "the Puritan origins of the American self" (cf. Bercovitch's book of the same title) have guided the formation of the US nation-state through the "capacity for self-creation that Puritan theology attributes to believers" (Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* 13).

Overall, an evocative American primal scene is constructed by the first group of American studies scholars as they imagine the 'American Adam' in the 'Virgin Land' on an 'Errand into the Wilderness' (cf. Pease, "New Americanists"). The early phase of this new field of study is often referred to as "the American Studies movement" (cf. Marx, "Thoughts"), indicating a critical stance toward traditional disciplinary configurations that had been dominant in the English departments of many American universities, which seemed to imply some sort of political agenda. As the US felt increasingly pressured to explain (and advertise) itself to the world beyond its borders, the scholars of the Myth and Symbol School both identified and created powerful images for a national imaginary. It

is no coincidence that American studies programs and projects received major funding after the end of World War II and throughout the 1950s, and became quite a corporate enterprise (cf. Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas'" 181). In the wake of the 'Cold War,' 'America' was imagined in American studies in somewhat essentialist terms as a largely unified and homogenous entity. All of the Myth and Symbol scholars would probably have agreed that there is something like the "American mind" that can be studied in the intellectual history of the United States (ibid. 179). Furthermore, the exceptionality claimed for the object of study, i.e. the USA, was also claimed for the new discipline of American studies that sought to investigate the US "as a whole" rather than in distinct disciplinary pockets. When Henry Nash Smith asked, "can American studies develop a method?" (cf. his essay of the same title), he answered his question to the effect that he saw the "scholarship" of "American culture, past and present" (ibid. 207) carried out not so much within the framework of a particular methodology or theoretical approach but in the form of an interdisciplinary venture centering on a common subject, i.e. America. From the beginning, many scholars envisioned American studies as "an arena for disciplinary encounter and staging ground for fresh topical pursuits" (Bailis, "Social Sciences" 203). Myth and Symbol scholarship invoked American studies as the new ideal of scholarly and disciplinary coherence, yet by emphasizing the unity and uniqueness of American society, it often lacked a sufficient analytical distance from the object under investigation and scrutiny (cf. Claviez, *Grenzfälle* 209). Since the Myth and Symbol scholars did not thoroughly reflect their own positionality, their ideological presuppositions to a certain degree predetermined their findings, and their scholarly endeavors mainly produced an affirmation (rather than any precise definition or critique) of those American myths, symbols, and images on which the field imaginary of American studies relied so strongly.

In the mid-1960s, the Myth and Symbol scholarship of the first American studies cohort was challenged by many critics who began to question the unequivocal nature and the political implications of the American myths allegedly uncovered and categorized by the preceding generation of scholars. In the wake of the social protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, among them the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the anti-war movement, many critics proposed alternative genealogies of America and American identity formation that cast American history in a more critical light and contested the 'innocence' of the American Adam cultivating his 'garden' in the 'wilderness.' The dominant version of American beginnings, which had been privileging certain groups while marginalizing or entirely leaving out others, was no longer accepted as

representative of *the* American experience. What about the American 'Eve'? Or, more broadly, what about the experiences of women and non-white people in the United States, past and present? What about Native American removal from the 'wilderness' and slavery's role in cultivating the 'garden'? The representatives of the so-called Critical Myth and Symbol School, the second important group in the history of American studies, examined aspects such as violence, racism, sexism, and genocide as foundational for American culture. Whereas the symbols and myths carved out in the first phase of American studies were often not entirely debunked, they were now interpreted differently and seen in a much more critical light. This reorientation produced less flattering accounts of the making of America than the narratives produced by the Myth and Symbol School, which now appeared as idealized and romanticized accounts of the evolution of a white patriarchal America. Take, for instance, Henry Nash Smith's prominent symbol of the Virgin Land: Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land* reinterprets this image's gendered symbolism as a metaphor of rape and patriarchal exploitation, and Richard Slotkin, another leading protagonist of the Critical Myth and Symbol School, more generally explicates violence (rather than innocence) as the foundational American experience (cf. chapter 6).

While the Critical Myth and Symbol School was also concerned with grasping the specificity and particularity of the United States, it was not concerned with affirming the superiority of American culture and society but with critiquing the ideology of American exceptionalism; its critical reevaluation of US founding texts and myths led to a transformation of American studies research and practice as it addressed the national project from subnational perspectives and thus brought to light that the notion of a homogeneous nation and a single 'American' history was the product of a hegemonic master narrative that excluded the perspectives and histories of internal others. This revisionism coincided with the articulation of a 'negative' US exceptionalism and the development of new fields within and alongside American studies such as black studies, women's studies, popular culture studies, Native American studies, ethnic studies, and labor studies, to name only a few. These new fields addressed and tackled cultural and social hierarchies (i.e., asymmetrical power relations between men and women, whites and non-whites, as well as economically privileged and economically disadvantaged Americans) that were deeply inscribed in Myth and Symbol scholarship. This counter-hegemonic scholarship valorized the particular over the universalized American experience by addressing issues of identity below the level of the nation. In the process of deconstructing hierarchies, distinctions between high culture and low (or popular) culture have also been called into question, and the study of popular culture has become a center-

piece of American studies scholarship (cf. Cawelti, *Adventure*; Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*).

By emphasizing the heterogeneity of American society and by focusing on power asymmetries in the field of representation, the Critical Myth and Symbol School aimed at a more inclusive narration and representation of America and at a recognition of its multicultural legacy, privileging the heterogeneity of American society over any one-dimensional view of America 'as a whole' as the object of study; the American studies scholarship of this second phase thus was pluralistic rather than holistic in perspective and shattered conventional notions of 'Americanness' in the course of several decades. As this new cohort of American studies scholars (among them Leslie Fiedler, Alan Trachtenberg as well as the aforementioned Annette Kolodny and Richard Slotkin) became more prominent, scholars such as Henry Nash Smith felt obliged to revise their Myth and Symbol narratives:

> I proposed to use the terms "myth" and "symbol" to designate "larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing […]." I might have avoided some misunderstandings of what I was about if I had introduced the term "ideology" at this point by adding that the intellectual constructions under consideration could not be sharply categorized but should be thought of as occupying positions along a spectrum extending from myth at one end, characterized by the dominance of image and emotion, to ideology at the other end, characterized by emphasis on concepts, on abstract ideas. ("Symbol" 22)

An institutionalization of these new perspectives occurred in the reformulation of university degree programs and with the so-called canon debates of the 1980s. These often fierce debates (also referred to as 'culture wars') saw an at times dramatic confrontation between those who fought to preserve a supposedly universal "Western Canon" (cf. Bloom's book of the same title) and those who aimed at diversifying the narratives of America by substituting the universalist US master narrative (*grand récit*) with a plurality of 'small' narratives (*petites histoires*) and proposed to canonize texts (especially by women and minorities) that so far had not been canonical. Works such as Paul Lauter's *Reconstructing American Literature* (1983), Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* (1986), Henry Louis Gates's *Loose Canons* (1992), and A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward's *Redefining American Literary History* (1990) are exemplary publications on the 'new' canon which include formerly excluded or marginalized voices that express a particular, subnational (or subaltern) view instead of claiming to be representative of the nation as a whole. While 'weak' versions of multiculturalism merely advocate adding 'new' texts to school curricula and college

reading lists, 'strong' versions advocate more pivotal revisions concerning cultural legacies and the canon:

> "Multicultural" is not a category of American writing – it is a *definition* of all American writing. […] The concept of "mainstream" culture and "minority" cultures is the narrow view. Redefining the mainstream is the theme, the message, and the mission of [our project]." (Strads, Trueblood, and Wong, "Introduction" xi-xii)

As the national consensus around the idea of 'America' was either reformulated in more inclusive terms or questioned as a coercive concept in and of itself, subnational and multicultural approaches from the 1960s through the 1980s were strengthened; however, new constraints and limitations of the field of American studies became apparent in the process. While the Critical Myth and Symbol School successfully created sensibilities for inner-American differences and power dynamics and directed scholarly attention to the multicultural dimension of American national genesis and cultural production, it did not thoroughly question the framework of the nation as the basic conceptual category of scholarship and thus remained bound to the logic of national exceptionalism (cf. Tally, "Post-American Literature").

It is only in the third phase of American studies scholarship from the 1990s to the present after a paradigm shift or 'turn' carried by the representatives of the so-called New Americanists that the field began to pursue a transnational perspective in much of its work. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease's seminal *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993) clearly marked the transition from a subnational to a transnational perspective, as the essays in this volume place the USA in a wider context of postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies. The US as empire has become the object of many scholarly endeavors that no longer regard the US as a "self-contained nation" (Bender, *Nation* 3) and see continental expansion as the result of imperial rather than domestic politics. Thus, the New Americanists of the 1980s and 1990s (Amy Kaplan, Donald Pease, John Carlos Rowe, and Robyn Wiegman, among others) have fundamentally scrutinized and questioned the paradigm of American exceptionalism and its foundational role for the discipline of American studies by drawing on the work of "scholars whose concept of the nation and of citizenship has questioned dominant American myths rather than canonized them" (Rowe et al., "Introduction" 3). The New Americanists' agenda for American studies aims "to transform the traditionally nationalist concerns of the field to address the several ways in which 'America' signifies in the new global […] circumstances" (ibid. 3). Viewing the US as "a multicultural nation in a globalized world" (Bender, *Nation* 6) also necessitates

"globalizing American studies," as Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar suggest in their essay collection of the same title; nationalism here is cast as parochialism, and exceptionalism as an outdated field imaginary, provoking the questions whether "American Studies [can] exist after American exceptionalism" at all (Pease, "American Studies" 47), and whether "all American studies scholarship [is] […] propaganda" (Castronovo and Gillman, "Introduction" 1). According to Pease, the field of American studies needs to be "grounded in a comparativist model of imperial state exceptionalisms" ("American Studies" 80) and, as Srinivas Aravamudan states, has to continue its close examination of the "relationship between the state and the discipline" ("Rogue States" 17). The turn to a relational framework of analysis along the lines of Jane Desmond and Virginia Domínguez's "cosmopolitanism" and "critical internationalism" that operates with "a non-US-centric comparativism" ("Resituating" 286) seems as important as the "engagement with Postcolonial studies" (Rowe et al., "Introduction" 7) and the use of a New Historicist methodology that has also contributed to the field's reconfiguration (cf. Michaels and Pease, *American Renaissance*). The interdisciplinarity of the field of American studies (or 'critical US studies') thus is being reinforced in the work of the New Americanists on a new theoretical basis.

In a similar vein, Shelley Fisher-Fishkin's address to the American Studies Association held on November 12, 2004 (cf. "Crossroads") focuses on an impressive range of transnationally oriented scholarly activities by herself and others, including transatlantic, transpacific, and hemispheric American studies scholarship, as well as border studies. Characteristic of this new transnational critical focus are publications such as Radway et al.'s 2009 reader *American Studies: An Anthology*, which includes in its first section entries on "nation" as well as "empire" and "diaspora." There is also a new turn to non-English languages and multilingualism (cf. Sollors, *Multilingual America*; Shell and Sollors, *Multilingual Anthology*), as transnational American studies cannot be conducted and practiced with English-only sources.

The transnational American studies approach is diachronic, going back as far as the 15th century, as well as synchronic; through the lens of a transnational perspective, American beginnings (just like any other national beginnings) appear as more accidental and contingent, more chaotic and "messy" (cf. Schueller and Watts) than is suggested by historical and mythic narratives which assert their purposefulness, coherence, and telos. The transnationality of well-known cultural, political, social, and literary phenomena has in the past often been relegated to the margins; transnational American studies moves it to the center by analyz-

ing the US from a comparative angle as "a nation among nations" (cf. Bender's book of the same title).

To summarize: each of the following chapters addresses the three phases of American studies scholarship in terms of the national, subnational, and transnational approaches and perspectives they have generated; in the first phase, the so-called Myth and Symbol School focused on national themes and symbols; in the second phase, the so-called Critical Myth and Symbol School focused on subnational perspectives and groups that had been ignored in the first phase; and in the third phase, the so-called New Americanists questioned the nation as framework on the basis of a postnational or transnational and possibly post-exceptionalist agenda, and articulated a critique of the American empire.

However, I am not suggesting that every single piece of American studies scholarship and criticism can be subsumed under these three perspectives and in this exact chronological order. There is certainly a considerable amount of overlap, just as there are other frameworks that can be used to describe and to chronologize American studies scholarship. It also needs to be acknowledged that there is a strong connection between subnational and transnational approaches. Lisa Lowe's scholarship on Asian American history refers to "the international within the national" (cf. her article of the same title) and is emblematic of attempts to study the subnational and transnational in conjunction, as they are but two sides of the same coin: while the subnational approach frames ethnic immigrant groups within the national discursive field, the transnational does so with reference to the global; similarly, diasporic cultures can be examined as part of both subnational and transnational spheres. Yet, a national mythology is still affirmed in many current visions of the US in the face of a perceived fragmentation of traditional collectivities, and some versions of the transnational endeavor still lapse into constructing a US-centered universe.

4. AMERICAN STUDIES: MYTH CRITICISM – IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE – CULTURAL STUDIES

There are a number of descriptions of American studies that serve to define the field. Interdisciplinarity is usually a common denominator: American studies

> is a joint, interdisciplinary academic endeavor to gain systematic knowledge about American society and culture in order to understand the historical and present-day meaning and significance of the United States. (Fluck and Claviez, "Introduction" ix)

While various academic disciplines such as literary criticism, sociology, political science, history, economics, art history, geography, media studies, etc. engage in American studies, it is the discipline of cultural studies that allows us to *connect* e.g. political science to literature, art history to sociology, or history to economics and geography, and to integrate these various disciplinary perspectives into an American studies framework. Cultural studies has always operated as a discipline that in the field of American studies brings different approaches into dialog and that bridges disciplinary gaps. In what follows, all of those (sub)disciplines of American studies will be relevant for my account of core myths of the US, as myths are not specific to one particular sector of American society but are part of the larger "biography" of a nation (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 204), answer to "the need for a narrative of 'identity'" (ibid. 205), and constitute the "National Symbolic" that is carried by "traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals, and its narratives" in order to "provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity" (Berlant, *Anatomy* 20). Myth criticism therefore is relevant for analyzing political culture, sociological descriptions, historiographic accounts, literary texts, cartographical practices of mapping and naming, as well as national visual and commemorative culture, and may be concerned both with the semiotic as well as with the discursive dimensions of myths, i.e. with forms of (re)presentation as well as with their ideological function (cf. Hall, *Representation*). Myth criticism as practiced by literary and cultural critics, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, etc. has allotted quite different roles, meanings, and functions to myths; I will therefore briefly sketch some of these contributions to myth theory to arrive at a working definition of myth for the present volume.

One prominent branch of myth criticism has established a critical perspective on myths by contrasting them with "truth" ("logos") or "scientific thought;" myth here is considered as false, fictional, anachronistic, "primitive," or "pathological" (Claviez, *Grenzfälle* 14). Historically, myths have often been considered to be pre-modern constructions and interpretations of the world whose powers have been waning since the onset of the Age of Enlightenment. From this perspective, myth in modernity figures negatively as a tool of propaganda, political demagogy, and manipulation (as analyzed by Horkheimer and Adorno, cf. *Dialektik* 44). In the everyday use of the word 'myth,' which equates myth with falsehood, wishful thinking, or fiction, this meaning is still present.

The denigration of the nature and cultural work of myths as outlined above contrasts with myth theories by critics such as Ernst Cassirer and Hans Blumenberg, who have instead pointed to the function of myth as a way of making sense of the world. Cassirer does not consider myths normatively as anti- or irrational

but instead holds that myth provides "its own kind of reality" and rationality (*Philosophy* 4). Whereas myth seems "to build up an entirely fantastic world on the one hand" (Cassirer, *Language* 45), it is a "symbolic expression" and a "work" of "artful expression" on the other (ibid. 46, 48). Myths are "objectivations" (ibid. 47) of social experiences and contribute in meaningful ways to an intersubjective understanding of a culture or society. Cassirer's description of myth addresses its internal logic, its formal structures, and its sociocultural function, not its subject matter. Philosopher Hans Blumenberg in *Work on Myth* further elaborated on the function of myth as a fundamental human activity to "overcome the archaic alterity of the world" (Wallace, Translator's Introduction x) and to protect individuals from "the absolutism of reality" (Blumenberg, *Work* 3) by creating collective identities and solidarity. For Blumenberg, our need for myths does not dissolve with enlightenment thinking or positivistic rationality but rather figures as a timeless constant in the way we relate to the world at large (cf. ibid. 113).

Whereas it is debatable whether modern myths such as the ones discussed in this book can in fact be considered as a primary way of world-making, they are clearly part of a discursive formation and constitute a semiotic system that includes an intersubjective dimension. This intersubjective dimension, in my argument, works to establish the nation as an imagined community and extends to all those interpellated as members. The social function of myth as a popular belief system is to respond to an affective desire for ontological (re)assurance and operates in civil religious forms that create within a group (i.e., the 'nation') a semi-conscious yet deeply affective bond (cf. Bellah, "Civil Religion") which can be experienced and articulated as a kind of "public feeling" (Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* 2). The "structures of feeling" (cf. Williams's essay of the same title) that underlie these "public feelings" and "ordinary affects" sit at the intersection of individual experience and collectively intelligible explication.

Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* more critically turns to the role of myth in everyday life. Barthes conceptualizes myth as "a system of communication" (*Mythologies* 109) and as a "metalanguage" (ibid. 115) which functions on the basis of, and like a language. For Barthes, myth criticism is equivalent to ideology critique, whose task it is to continually de-naturalize and deconstruct what seems self-evident, natural, and objective: "[M]yth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things; in it, things lose the memory that they once were made" (ibid. 142). In this sense, myth may be instrumentalized to various ends: "*Myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear" (ibid. 121). The definition of myth as a means of providing coherence is echoed by the definition of ideology as

a system of cultural assumptions, or the discursive concatenation, the connectedness, of beliefs or values which uphold or oppose the social order, or which otherwise provide a coherent structure of thought that hides or silences the contradictory elements in social or economic formations. (Wolfreys, *Keywords* 101)

Sacvan Bercovitch has pointed out that scholars have often constructed a false opposition between "myth criticism and ideological analysis" which claims that myth criticism's task is "to 'appreciate' it [myth, HP] from within, to explicate it 'intrinsically,' in its own 'organic' terms" (*Rites* 358), whereas by contrast, ideology "is [an] inherently suspect" "vehicle of culturally prescribed directives for thought and behaviour" whose analysis "uncover[s], rationally, the sinister effects of its fictions:" "[t]o criticize a piece of ideology is to see through it, to expose its historical functions, necessarily from an extrinsic, and usually from a hostile perspective" (ibid.). This "double standard" (ibid.) obscures the ideological dimension/appropriation of myth and mythic texts; it is exactly this dual quality of myth – as meaningful self-representation and as ideological investment – that I will engage with in this study.

In the field of political science, Christopher Flood and Herfried Münkler have also argued against an earlier normative approach that eyed myths suspiciously and unilaterally as tools of political indoctrination without denying that political myths serve an ideological function. Flood examines mythmaking in political discourses in modern societies in the 19th and 20th centuries at the intersection of politics, (sacral) mythology, and ideology (cf. *Political Myth*). Herfried Münkler has redeemed the study of political myths as an integral part of discursively constructed modern national identities that should not be dismissed offhandedly as irrelevant or anachronistic. Pulling together much of earlier myth criticism (cf. Burkert, *Structure*; Barthes, *Mythologies*; Cassirer, *Language*; cf. also Berlant, *Anatomy*), Münkler identifies three aspects of myths: 1) (repetitive) ritual as the oldest manifestation of mythical thinking, 2) the narrative form of myth as a kind of storytelling, and 3) the visual and iconic dimension of the representation of a myth (cf. *Die Deutschen*). Again, it is the civil religious, not the purely religious aspect that is foregrounded and explored with regard to a national and cultural imaginary. All of these dimensions – the ritualistic iteration of myths in cultural practices, their various narrative patterns, and their visual quality and iconicity – will be addressed in each chapter of the present study.

Yet, the different ways in which we encounter myths in politics, art, literature, memorial culture, etc. do not exhaust the power and complexity of myth and do not even wholly explicate its meaning. We only know myth through our work on the workings of it, Blumenberg suggests, and we can never grasp myth

fully through rational or other forms of explication, as it exceeds complete semiotic access. In fact, "its function may be the 'only knowable aspect' that it possesses for us" (Wallace, Translator's Introduction xviii), whereas for the community of its believers, for whom its ontological status is evident, it presents the "holy truth" (Flood, *Political Myth* 32). Ideology critique is limited by the dynamic and at the same time self-effacing character of myth and by the fact that its ideological core settles into collectively shared tacit knowledge, or what could also be called the "political unconscious" (cf. Jameson's book of the same title) or a "state fantasy" (cf. Pease, *New American Exceptionalism* 1-39). Similar to Sigmund Freud, who finds mythical patterns in the unconscious (cf. *Die Traumdeutung*), Slavoj Žižek identifies the "unknown known" (cf. "What Rumsfeld") as part of our internalized ideological repertoire, which works effectively precisely because it is that "which cannot be named" (Pease, *New American Exceptionalism* 17). It is this implicit quality of myth that immunizes it against criticism time and again and accounts for its longevity and its capacity for make-believe in spite of obvious contradictions.

The historical 'making' of American national myths defies the assumption that myths lose their power and interpretive authority and become obsolete with the development of modern democratic societies; quite to the contrary: it is with the formation of the USA as a nation and republic in the late 18th century in the context of enlightenment thinking and a natural rights philosophy that a set of modern national myths emerge or 'are made' in the name of an exceptionalist American nationalism:

> Nothing in the history of American nationalism is more impressive than the speed and the lavishness with which Americans provided themselves with a usable past: history, legends, symbols, paintings, sculpture, monuments, shrines, holy days, ballads, patriotic songs, heroes, and – with some difficulty – villains. (Commager, *Search* 13)

It seems as if the anthropological and psychosocial dimensions of myths are of central importance to a national discourse that appropriates universality as an "American universality" (Claviez, *Grenzfälle* 16). The evolution of this "American universality" has been reconstructed by Richard Slotkin, who applied Jungian archetypes to a national context in order to critically identify specifically American archetypal patterns and the way in which they have been encoded in American myths. For Slotkin, "[a] myth is a narrative which concentrates in a single dramatised experience the whole history of a people in their land" by "reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors"

(*Regeneration* 269; 8). In the context of memory studies, Jan Assmann has described myth, somewhat similar to Roland Barthes, as "'hot' memory" whose foundational function it is to affirm the present as predestined and self-evident (*Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 78); I use 'foundational' in much the same way. Some of the myths that I address commemorate a glorious past (Columbus, Pocahontas, the Pilgrims and Puritans, the Founding Fathers) and connect myth to cultural memory and its various archives, while others (the melting pot, the West, and the self-made man) are myths of (geographic, cultural, and social) mobility that commemorate events and developments in the past but also envision the future of America. Yet, in Assmann's model, a myth is not necessarily always foundational but may also have a second function, namely to draw attention to a *deficit* between the commemorated mythic past and the lived-in present – this 'counter-presentist' effect may trigger social and political change, and instigate revolutionary acts.

In the context of American culture, Sacvan Bercovitch has identified the American jeremiad, a motivational sermon in the Puritan tradition, as a pervasive rhetorical structure that continually acknowledges such a deficit and postpones the closing of the gap between the 'foundational' and the 'presentist' dimension of myth without reneging on the promise of America and its utopian qualities. Even as the American jeremiad asserts that people have fallen from their (original) biblical, spiritual, or moral standard, it offers and embraces a second chance to return to or to fully realize the ideal public life with all its benefits for the individual and the community (cf. Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*). The American jeremiad can be considered a make-believe rhetoric that time and again affirms the ideological content of American mythology by smoothing over social and political discontent and by camouflaging social and political deficiencies. Such deficiencies are addressed more specifically by Donald Pease in his account of the US after the end of the 'Cold War' and 9/11, where he identifies precisely this kind of 'gap' between the national belief system and presentist experiences. According to Pease, it is the "state fantasy work" – the state fantasy being "the dominant structure of desire out of which US citizens imagined their national identity" (*New American Exceptionalism* 1) – that closes the gap between (the old) myth (of the 'Cold War' era) and (the new post-9/11) reality as the new situation exceeds the old myth's interpretive powers:

> Myths normally do the work of incorporating events into recognizable national narratives. But traumatic events precipitate states of emergency that become the inaugural moments in a different symbolic order and take place on a scale that exceeds the grasp of the available representations from the national mythology. Before a national myth can narrate

events of this magnitude, the state fantasy that supplies the horizon of expectations orienting their significance must have already become symbolically effective. (ibid. 5)

The "state fantasy" in times of crisis then facilitates an adaptation of old myths to a new situation in a way that does not shake the social and political order "by inducing citizens to want the national order they already have" (ibid. 4). In this logic, American exceptionalism is reiterated and reinvigorated as a state fantasy (or a state of fantasy; cf. ibid. 20); when examining what Pease calls "the new American exceptionalism," he in fact diagnoses the rerouting and ultimate "return of the national mythology" after 9/11, in which the "virgin land" becomes "ground zero" (ibid. 153). A study of American myths in historical perspective, then, is in no way obsolete, nor is it stating the obvious; even as we have come a long way since the beginnings of the Myth and Symbol School, the entanglements between historical myth and contemporary ideology are as complex as they have ever been.

To sum up the most salient aspects of this introduction's discussion of myth: First, a discursive rather than normative definition of myth is informing contemporary myth criticism as well as the analyses in the following chapters. Second, myth criticism needs to take into account the relationship between myth and ideology. Third, the power of myths derives from a seemingly paradoxical structure that involves longevity and continuity as well as variety and flexibility. Fourth, myth becomes manifest in narratives, icons, and rituals. Fifth, the tacit dimension of myth is part of its power to perform and to regulate the "political unconscious." The following chapters will discuss US foundational mythology within this framework.

5. STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the different aspects of American exceptionalism outlined in the text and with which myths do they correlate most clearly?
2. Give a definition of American civil religion and name a few examples of civil religion as manifestations of exceptionalism.
3. What is the respective outlook and agenda of the different generations/ cohorts of American studies scholars?
4. Discuss definitions of American studies in terms of their focus on interdisciplinarity.
5. Summarize in your own words the various dimensions of myth criticism.
6. What is the relationship of the different American myths to each other?
7. Discuss the relationship between myth and ideology as outlined in the text.
8. Research the context of this often quoted dictum: "[I]n the beginning all the world was America" (John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* 29).
9. Research the context of then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's statement that "[w]e are the indispensable nation" (*The Today Show*, 19 February 1998). Discuss its claims and implications in view of the ideology of exceptionalism.
10. In a comparative framework, can you think of the myths of other modern nations and relate, compare, and/or contrast them to those of the US?

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