

REWRITING THE AMERICAN CULTURESCAPE

Florian Andrei Vlad holds an M.A. in American Studies from the University of Heidelberg and a Ph.D. from “Ovidius” University, Constanta, in whose Faculty of Letters he has been teaching British and American literature for some time now. His first book-length volume on American fiction, based on his Heidelberg MA thesis, *Fictional Americas at War*, was published in 2006. After defending his PhD thesis, *New Flesh, Old Demons...*, on representations of contamination in American literature, he went on to co-author a book on British literature - *British Gothic and Its Travelling Companions* - and one on American 19th century: *Literary Selves and Identity Narratives in the First American Century*. After *Rewriting of the American Culturescape*, his current book-length projects focus on 20th century British and American poetry, and a volume dedicated to the American poet John P. Quinn.

FLORIAN ANDREI VLAD

**REWRITING THE AMERICAN
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EDITURA UNIVERSITARĂ
București, 2020

Colecția FILOLOGIE

Referenți științifici:

Prof. univ. dr. Adina Ciugureanu, Universitatea Ovidius, Constanța

Prof. univ. dr. Michaela Praisler, Universitatea „Dunărea de Jos”, Galați

Redactor: Gheorghe Iovan

Tehnoredactor: Ameluța Vișan

Coperta: Monica Balaban

Editură recunoscută de Consiliul Național al Cercetării Științifice (C.N.C.S.) și inclusă de Consiliul Național de Atestare a Titlurilor, Diplomelor și Certificatelor Universitare (C.N.A.T.D.C.U.) în categoria editurilor de prestigiu recunoscut.

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

VLAD, FLORIAN ANDREI

Rewriting the American culturescape / Florian Andrei Vlad. –

București : Editura Universitară, 2020

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-28-1049-8

821.111.09

DOI: (Digital Object Identifier): 10.5682/9786062810498

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Editura Universitară

Editor: Vasile Muscalu

B-dul. N. Bălcescu nr. 27-33, Sector 1, București

Tel.: 021.315.32.47

www.editurauniversitara.ro

e-mail: redactia@editurauniversitara.ro

Distribuție: tel.: 021.315.32.47 / 07217 CARTE / 0745.200.357

comenzi@editurauniversitara.ro

O.P. 15, C.P. 35, București

www.editurauniversitara.ro

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The title of this book features a concept, *culturescape*, which is obviously derived from a major attempt at grasping the defining characteristics of what Arjun Appadurai calls the combined effect of two distinct processes in the shaping of an increasingly global cultural economy. The title of Appadurai's essay, featuring in his seminal work, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, brings the two processes together: "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy."

In order to capture the bewildering complexity of these "disjunctive" and "differential" cultural processes, Appadurai develops his theory of the interaction of the five types of cultural flows, seen not as entities in dichotomic, oppositional relations, but as flows linked to perspectives or vistas, as a sort of perspectival landscapes, hence their names. The five perspectival flows are the *mediascapes*, the *technoscapes*, the *ethnoscapes*, the *financescapes*, the *ideoscapes*, thus briefly defined by the above-mentioned sociologist:

These landscapes thus are the building blocks of what (extending Benedict Anderson) I would like to call imagined worlds, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe (Appadurai 97).

Today's definitions of culture in a broad sense therefore include the technoscapes and the financescapes, as well as the more "traditionally cultural" ideoscapes, ethnocapes, and mediascapes. The last three, more than the first two, are important in this volume's understanding of American culture and American identity as part of an ongoing set of perspectival flows, whose dynamism and vitality defy most attempts at capturing the processes. If Appadurai refers to the five components of the global configuration of cultural flows, why shouldn't one feel tempted to go one step further, and call the whole lot "culturescape"? What is more, "American culturescape" would define the many-sidedness and the dynamic complexity of ever changing configurations, while also placing American culture, now in a transnational age, in a global context.

Therefore, the phrase "American culturescape" will be used to define the complex cultural work that a variety of actors will contribute to in the age under consideration, in connection with a number of American prose writers, part of a more comprehensive panorama. These writers, like arguably all authors, participate in a permanent process of rewriting. Consequently, all writers will be considered, no offense meant, rewriters, even if justifiably priding themselves on being original creators.

This volume, like any similar project, naturally comes from something which precedes it, as well as something larger that it is only meant to be a part of, which largely explains its obvious imperfections and incompleteness. The former drift has to do with expanding and deepening previous attempts, the latter with fitting this text and articulating it into something more comprehensive. Both directions, at a more general level, illustrate a

permanent preoccupation with illustrations of what has been defined as the American culturescape, a concept which will be further clarified, then used in the slender body of this book. The usefulness of its special meaning is, once again, totally due to “the inventor” of its five components, its “scapes,” for reasons and clarifications already sketched, to be subsequently completed.

The former direction, the expansion of previous work, is linked to a couple of book-length attempts at engaging with American literature in significant cultural contexts, which are likely to give it more than the status of a body of texts to be read and enjoyed by those particularly interested in a special realm untainted by power and ideology. This obviously is in line with decades-long developments in both literary studies in general, with American studies as an interdisciplinary field in this particular case.

This direction was mainly initiated by the author of these lines in a graduation dissertation under the supervision of Professor Remus Bejan. Grateful acknowledgements to him as well as to a series of other distinguished academics, both at Ovidius and abroad, have to be added. That dissertation on Kurt Vonnegut earned me a BA from Ovidius University at the beginning of the current millennium.

An MA at the prestigious Heidelberg Center for American Studies allowed me to take the next step, while adopting the latter direction, expanding and extending the initial scope. This included an examination of the focus of my former drift, having to do with Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut’s work was now placed within a larger ideological framework, dealing with warist discourse. It had to do with the connection between relevant fictional work

and American ideology in the 20th century as found in a number of influential novelists, such apparently “tough guys” as Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer, claiming to say a farewell to arms, while glamorizing war in their specific ways. Those who professedly illustrated the opposite attitude were Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller. For the invaluable advice toward an inclusion of history, politics, sociology in the interpretation of literary discourse as part of a prevailing all encompassing discourse, special thanks are due to Professors Dieter Schulz from the Board of Directors and Professor Philip Gassert, managing director of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies. The latter supervised my MA dissertation, while both gave me advice and graded it. I am grateful to them for the appreciations and positive remarks that encouraged me to have that Heidelberg dissertation completed, favorably graded and then published.

So far, it had been the supervision and advice of male academics and a preoccupation with the work of white male novelists, a tendency which is bound to be seen as fraught with difficulties. In a very sensitive multicultural environment in which, as a natural consequence of previous centuries-long undemocratic developments maintaining inequality, political correctness and identity politics are very important coordinates, writing a whole volume about several white male fiction writers may be seen with more than suspicion. One excuse that I can attempt to plead is that *Fictional Americas at War* exposes instances of warist discourse, and men more than women are guilty of promoting and perpetuating it. However, men are also important in challenging patriarchy and its discourses. Thus, one can see Vonnegut and other male writers on the “right side.” A good illustration has to do with the woman

to whom Vonnegut dedicates his *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Mary V. O'Hare. Mary reproaches male writers and filmmakers dealing with war for promoting patriarchal, warist discourse that extols masculinity and violence. In response to that, Vonnegut tried hard and succeeded in creating a failure. It was the failure of writing a book about war heroes and warist ideology, while also a tremendous literary success. In addition to that book, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, his whole work features a critical engagement with masculinity within the all-encompassing patriarchal discourse.

As succinctly as I may have tried to keep a justification of the paths leading to the writing of this book, important episodes are yet to come. Far from the least significant is the project supervised and coordinated by an outstanding academic whose contribution to this particular academic journey and to the development of American studies at Ovidius as well as in Romania and in Europe is to be duly acknowledged. This is Professor Adina Ciugureanu, currently the Treasurer of the European Association of American Studies. Professor Ciugureanu also served two terms as President of the Romanian Association of American Studies, a major role among several other ones that she brilliantly performed.

The project is my doctoral dissertation, focused on representations of contamination, plague, pestilence as important components of the Gothic dimension of American culture. The name of that dissertation is terribly and horribly Gothic: *New Flesh, Old Demons: Representing Plague and Pestilence in Post- Cold War American Culture*. This project brought together even more closely, although they had been reasonably interwoven beforehand, the above-mentioned two drifts or two tendencies, with a

more general attempt at defining the dynamic configurations of an ever developing American culturescape in which, arguably, the Gothic dimension of stark contrasts and ominous presences contribute to the rewriting of the original, rational narrative promoted by a series of historians and politicians from the founding fathers onward. It was an engagement with the complexity and challenges of dealing with definitions of American identity and American culture in an age in which the pillars of American Exceptionalism have been critically reexamined by a long series of scholars.

The next book-length project, the most comprehensive until then, was co-authored with an academic with whom I was quite naturally (in a Freudian way, of course) to take issue and to engage in arguments, which, in the long run, led to positive results. *Literary Selves and Grand Narratives in the First American Century* provoked me to work and critically respond to the ideas of the other co-author, Professor Eduard Vlad, with whom I share a surname and a patriarchal tradition that has to be tamed in this day and age, so to speak. That book further enlarged the scope, introducing more theoretical aspects of individual and group identity, with constructions of American identity in the 19th century providing the basis for an examination of what was there called, arguably, “the first American Century.”

Rewriting the American Culturescape takes previous directions, while focusing on a limited group of post-war and contemporary American authors. It is part of a more comprehensive project, yet to come, encompassing the diversity of what has been called here the American culturescape, placing, in their dynamic interaction, authors coming from different ethnic groups and cultural

backgrounds. For the time being, for the sake of clarity, the volume, again, focuses on four white male writers, which, in addition to Vonnegut, includes John Updike, Philip Roth, Don LeLillo. What is “worse,” someone might note and notice, they have all achieved a great deal of canonical prominence. That was the very point, or one of the main points, for which they were selected to represent this first section of a more comprehensive project.

As the initial American culturescape was sketched, since colonial times, but especially since July 4th – July 6th, 1776, when a new nation was “invented” by the patriarchal Founding Fathers and well into the 20th century, a prevailing narrative of American Exceptionalism featuring a coherent story moved by mainstream individualism and the pioneer spirit was promoted.

The coherence of this story, however, depending on the cultural dimension of a rising national identity, is complicated, as Anderson claims in his book on how communities are discursively imagined, by love, fear and loathing, with its roots in “fear and hatred of the Other”(Anderson 141). Any culturescape, however much it may be based on the Enlightenment discourse of freedom, progress and emancipation, with America as no exception, has therefore tried to define its “luminous core” in opposition to the Other as well, thus including in itself its own dark unconscious, its heart of darkness, where the voices of alterity were kept silent for a long while.

The four male writers in this volume, apart from what had been in the past oppressed, silenced, marginalized voices gradually rising into a more comprehensive American culturescape, significantly contributed to the rewriting of a previously mainstream, united-we-stand American identity, in which the American Dream had

provided the main impetus, in which Americanism had become a prevailing ideology. Let the other voices complete the patchwork-quilt picture of a diverse, yet very vital culturescape, in parallel and further work by the many scholars of various backgrounds and orientations that pay attention to it, in attempts at revealing contributions to a major polyphonic endeavor.

Among these voices, my last acknowledgements, gratitude and appreciation go to the whole Ovidius team that keeps American studies moving within the Romanian and European community of like-minded scholars, with the RAAS board members in particular, with everybody else in general, creating a spirit of emulation that is part and parcel of academic life in any institution worth functioning in the brave new world of entrepreneurship and facts, facts, facts first, with cultural interpretation last determining the global *Zeitgeist*.

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- Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *The Globalization Reader* (2000). Fifth Edition. Ed. Frank J. Lechner and John Boli. Wiley Blackwell, 2015.

In *Rewriting the American Culturescape*, references to the literary works will be made by the following abbreviations, accompanied by the respective page numbers of the quotes:

Kurt Vonnegut

- ST - *The Sirens of Titan*
- MN - *Mother Night*
- CC - *Cat's Cradle*
- GB - *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*
- SF - *Slaughterhouse – Five*
- G - *Galapagos*
- TQ - *Timequake*

John Updike

- RA - *Rabbit Angstrom: The Four Novels* [a volume including *Rabbit, Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit Is Rich, Rabbit at Rest*]
- T - *Terrorist*

Philip Roth

- GC - *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*.
- LG - *Letting Go*. New York: Random House, 1990.
- PC - *Portnoy's Complaint*.
- PA - *The Plot Against America*.

Don DeLillo

- A - *Americana*
- E - *End Zone*
- GJ - *Great Jones Street*
- W - *White Noise*
- L - *Libra*. New York: Viking, 1988.
- U - *Underworld*
- F - *Falling Man*

INTRODUCTION

From early colonial times, Americans have tried to define themselves, their new world, their emerging identity, consistently using figurative language as early as John Winthrop's "City upon a Hill." At first, it was with less grand rhetoric than that associated with the metaphorical expression in such late 20th century pronouncements as Ronald Reagan's about the tall, shining city on the hill.

Initially, the settlers on the hill were to show a model of Christian charity and help one another, with far from exceptionalist claims to make. For some time on, these settlers were mere extensions of their mother countries and defined themselves in relation to them. David Nye is one of those who traces the beginning of narratives of a new national identity in America, in a book with equally religious hints (*America as Second Creation*) to the revolutionary period:

There could be no American narratives until the revolutionary period, and even then it would take a generation to develop stories that could replace the colonial sense of European political and religious origins with nationalist stories about secular, American origins (Nye 1).

From the first intimation of the "New Eden," all the way through the pious requirements of Manifest Destiny, these narratives were largely clothed in religious attire, even if

colored by the Enlightenment spirit of the Founding Fathers. Looking back from a post-war perspective, Leo Marx had seen the creation of a distinct American identity in the apparent contradiction, which actually acknowledged the coexistence, of the machine and the garden, of “technology and the pastoral ideal in America,” a line of thought in keeping with the symbol and myth school in the early stages of the emergence of a distinct American studies scholarly realm. Leo Marx, rhetorically wonders, “What possible bearing can the urge to idealize a simple, rural environment have upon the lives men lead in an intricately organized, urban, industrial, nuclear-armed society?”(Marx 5), before he goes on to expound his version of the American culturescape as a fusion between two special kinds of pastoralism and the challenges of urban civilization.

The metaphorical language and its identity definitions continued all the way to the “American melting pot” at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Once arrived in the Promised Land of the New World, the newcomer was to become part of a homogeneous landscape, rather than culturescape, in the desired process of assimilation.

On the other hand, the metaphor of the “frontier,” in close connection with the image of the intrepid pioneer and his spirit, preserved its power in new cultural and political context all the way into the Space Age and to the end of the 20th century. America had been seen as an emerging nation of pioneers first going West, then challenging all sorts of frontiers, some of them famously and rhetorically dealt with in such impressive and memorable forms as JFK’s 1960 “New Frontier Speech.”

Going back in time to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as universally acknowledged by now, it was the nationalist project that many other states in Western Europe were pursuing, stressing the unity and purity of their cultures, by definition “superior” to those of the emerging nations around them, to the multinational empire next to them. Even if not so often mentioned today, there had been consistent cultural work by important institutions to construct such ideologies as French and German Exceptionalism, so that the American invention in this area should not be seen as a novelty.

The guiding spirits of America, however, noticed what the New World appeared to have, or rather, what it lacked, which made what they would call “the land of the free” exceptional in the context of the Eurocentric world: its lack of a feudal past, with its attending superstitions and oppressive, cruel and authoritarian rule. America, it was hoped, did not have to follow a long process of transition from the Middle Ages to capitalism: it already had its enlightened Founding Fathers and the Protestant ethic long before Max Weber came up with his sociological *magnum opus* about the spirit of the new age.

What was taking shape in the New World was also happening across the Atlantic, with wars and violent confrontations as almost inevitable features of this general development of Modernity, and the middle classes everywhere supported the nationalist project: imagining a mainstream community, a common history, pushing aside the “aliens,” establishing a common, canonical culture to be looked up to and worshipped as valuable cultural heritage and key identity dimension.

Things were becoming more complex and less monolithic after the fall of the colonial empires of some

European powers and new ways of imagining a culture in a world in which borders were increasingly difficult to control emerged., The center of authority began to be consistently challenged by new social configurations as well as by “the postmodern condition” and its relativism and skepticism. Such new phenomena and policies as multiculturalism, such new vast processes and their attendant perceptions coming under the label of globalization initially flourished within the more confined space of the Western World in its competition with the alterity figure beyond the Iron Curtain during the years of the Cold War. Gender, race, ethnicity became increasingly prominent in the challenge of an initially monologic, patriarchal American identity narrative.

The settings and the actors this volume engages with have been moving in the direction of such metaphorical constructions of the American imaginary as “the salad bowl,” “the patchwork quilt” or the Pizza of innumerable *stagioni*, if one is allowed to contribute a minor alteration to this multicultural dish. Although one might think that gender does not feature in this study of four male American authors, the intention was to see how they, as apparently privileged members of the “first sex” (in opposition to Simone de Beauvoir’s “second”), they do not promote the traditional patriarchal discourse, and when they appear to do so, they do it parodically, satirically, detaching themselves through various techniques and through the use of humor and irony.

The major contexts in which the four authors examined in this volume contributed to special ways of rewriting the American culturescape have already mentioned above: the Second World War and its aftermath, the Cold War and its major episodes, including the Cuban