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American Studies and Studies of America

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American Studies and Studies of “America”

Jack P. Greene. *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1993. \$29.95 hc. 216 pp.

Priscilla Wald. *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. \$56.95 hc. \$17.95 sc. xiv + 390 pp.

David R. Shumway. *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994. \$49.95 hc. \$21.95 sc. xiii + 407 pp.

Frederick M. Dolan. *Allegories of America: Narratives, Metaphysics, Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994. \$36.50 hc. \$15.95 sc. x + 232 pp.

R A N D A L L K N O P E R

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The multiple nations *within* “America,” the uncertainty about how far “America” extends, the critical sense that “America” was invented through untenable exclusions, the forlorn sense that “America” has lost defining narratives of its past and its identity, the seeming irrelevance of “America” to transnational cultures and economies—all of these have been contributing to thoroughgoing reconsiderations and reexaminations of the object of American Studies. The topic of the 1995 Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association, “Toward a Common Ground,” with its concerns to rethink the fashioning of shared identities through nationalisms, conceptions of a “people,” and internationalisms and to attend to different grounds for “belonging” in a “postmodern and post-Cold War world,” effectively exemplified the ways “common grounds” are being refig-

ured. The construction of “Americas,” through imagination and memory, and in the wake of multiculturalism, postcolonial theory, the study of other nationalisms, and the fascination with hybrid identities and borderlands, has emerged near the top of the agenda for putative “Americanists.”

The interest in borders, and in the instability of narratives and institutions that structure collective and national identities, has a correlative in the permeability of disciplinary boundaries that the books under review here enact. They have related concerns: pursuing the constructedness of America and repudiating the essentializing of nationality, reinvestigating myths of the origins of Americanism, attending to cultures and nations not included in the federal one. But one book is by a historian interested in the discursive construction of “America,” another by a professor of English who by no means limits her study of narratives of national identity to “literature,” another by a professor of literary and cultural studies whose call for “postdisciplinary studies” underlies his study of American literature as a discipline, another by a professor of rhetoric who approaches American political theory through narrative and allegory. The “post-Americanist” or “post-national” impulse that attends their studies resonates with a disciplinary dispersal: if an American ideal does not ground what they do, neither, for the most part, do well-defined disciplinary practices.

If these scholars do have common interests within their moment of disciplinary dispersal, the implications of their work are finally quite various. Where they differ the most, I think, is in their conceptions of the strength, durability, and social effects of dominant constructions of national identity. Donald E. Pease and (*National Identities Post-Americanist Narratives*, 1994) gives us one way of thinking about this in his characterization of “New Americanists.” He views them as people whose various identifications, not only as “Americanists” but also with social movements and disenfranchised groups, have directed their work toward criticism and dismantling of the coherence of the “national meta-narrative.” That is, contesting the “national symbolic order,” and being optimistic about changing it, can have certain political implications—particularly a contesting of the social arrangements “America” underwrites. This view strikes me as pertinent especially to Patricia Wald’s book, a volume in the excellent series of “New Americanists” that Pease is editing, because Wald sees “official” narratives of national identity as perpetually contestable and changing. But if the other three books see greater continuities and persistences in “America,” because even dominant national narratives are so multiple and contradictory and have such variable possible political effects, their versions of the nation do *not* lead at all to the same kinds of places, or necessarily to political conclusions one might expect.

I begin with Jack P. Greene’s *The Intellectual Construction of America* partly because it focuses on the earliest historical period, but more because it is the most conservative in its disciplinary project and in its claims. Without much pretension to a theoretical framework, Greene provides a fairly straightforward intellectual history. His concern is America as a construct, a set of meanings fabricated first by sixteenth-century Europeans—out of their utopi-

an fantasies, projected anxieties, and familiar categories of barbarianism and paganism—to comprehend this place, new and astonishing to them, and to justify their colonization of it and its peoples. He quickly turns, however, to his specialty, writings by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British and American writers who elaborated conceptions of America mainly through contrast to Europe. The insistent point he pursues in his investigation of this latter group is that, from the start, they spoke of America as a special place because of its natural abundance, its potential for development, the chances it offered for fresh starts and independent livelihoods, its inexpensive and unobtrusive governmental and religious institutions, its high wages, its liberty, its relative social equality, its relative absence of poverty, and the promise of the new sort of society and people emerging here. His subordinate, but frequently recurring, point is that, true to their colonial purposes, these commentators ignored or denied the experience, meanings, and counternarratives of Amerindians and slaves; these peoples' experiences, and the costs they bore in colonial development, were considered less pertinent to the construction of American identity than the achievements of white settlers.

None of this may seem especially striking. But Greene enters into controversy over the question of American exceptionalism, specifically in his disagreement with those who have discounted the idea of exceptionalism as an ideological invention of Cold War historians and have chosen to see the British American colonies, instead, not as special cases but as part of the larger colonial world, with much in common with England. Although he acknowledges the criticism that post-World War II “consensus historians” exaggerated the features that supposedly made America a distinct nation from its start—especially the predominance of the middle class and the supposed absence of class conflict—Greene stresses that the critics of exceptionalism are wrong to discount the testimony from 1492 to 1800. If, after all, there were gradations in wealth, contemporary observers were nonetheless right to claim that they were less extreme than in Europe; if there were social hierarchies, people nonetheless had more equality of opportunity and equal status before the law; if there were poor and dependent people, there nonetheless were fewer here.

The claims of these creators and explainers of America, but also to some extent the facts, Greene argues, provide grounds for taking a more modest exceptionalism seriously. And the bulk of the book is given over to demonstrating this—which is both its strength and its drawback. Greene is able to draw to good effect upon his vast knowledge of writings about America from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And he abundantly establishes his point that these writings pervasively treat America as a special place, usually a *better* place than Europe. The plentiful demonstration, however, also contributes to a predictableness. As Greene surveys the pertinent writings—statements by English writers who hoped America could correct European social problems, the literature promoting colonization, accounts by colonists proud of their successes, and European and American evaluations of colonial growth and the American revolution—his stress on the commonalities of their accounts makes his account

repetitive. Greene's amassed material succeeds in demonstrating, however, the radical embeddedness of American exceptionalism in the construction of American identity, and the durability of the ideas of America as distinctive and as a model for the rest of the world. His argument that exceptionalist ideas of America were to a great extent true and not just ideological fictions—even if they did disregard Amerindians and slaves—aptly helps to complicate our view of the construction of national identity. And if we are at a point of considering “post-national” scholarship, or at least at a point of disestablishing conceptions of “America” as rubrics or guideposts for wresting coherence from our studies, Greene's book would serve as a kind of cautionary tale about the centuries-long persistence and durability of dominant ideas of “America”—and perhaps about the difficulty of jettisoning these assumptions.

Priscilla Wald's *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* contrasts sharply with Greene's book. While Greene's account foregrounds a marked consistency in the intellectual construction of America, Wald stresses the mutability of “official” narratives of national identity, their contradictions, discontinuities, and incoherences. While Greene attends to a dominant version of American identity, registering excluded stories only by noting their absence, Wald takes the tension between dominant narratives of American identity and the “untold stories” of people excluded from its definitions as her focus. And in contrast to Greene's rather straightforward intellectual history, Wald fashions a theoretical framework that draws from the work of Benedict Anderson, Etienne Balibar, Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Freud, Lacan (and others) to think about sociocultural models of the constitution of national identity, psychoanalytic accounts of the constitution of the self, and their interweavings in peoples' identification with and estrangements from narratives of “America.”

As her framework, Wald attends to the fabrication and effects of the ever-changing “official” stories of “the American people,” focusing on two moments of national self-definition, at the mid nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century. In particular, she is interested in the way official narratives of the nation—represented here, in part, by legal discourse, Lincoln's presidential speeches, literary nationalism, academic histories of the nation, and stories of immigrant Americanization—worked to absorb challenges by Indians, blacks, immigrants, and others whose “untold” stories were excluded from the definitions of personhood and identity vested in those narratives. Her guiding principle (with thanks to Anderson's *Imagined Communities*) is that demographic changes and counternarratives of national identity continually alter the “we” of the nation-state impel the official stories toward revisions that both transform national narratives and attempt to preserve the unity and coherence of “We the People.” By relating Freud's disturbing misrecognition of his mirror-image as an off-putting stranger, in his essay on the uncanny, to the anxieties that self-identified Americans felt when the peoples repressed from national identity resurfaced to trouble its construction and render it strange, Wald discerns a psychoanalytic dimension in the imperative to retell the narrative of

America. But, of course, the efforts to overcome this sense of estrangement, to preserve the integrity of American self-identity, and to make its story appear continuous and natural, always fail, reconfiguring its difficulties rather than keeping them at bay.

As I say, however, this conception of national narrative is more the background and framework of Wald's book than her main concern; she focuses rather on extended readings of works by Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, Harriet Wilson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Gertrude Stein, all of whom, Wald argues, try to tell the story of the nation but, in the process, find that they have things they cannot say in the terms of the dominant and available stories of national identity—"untold" stories that trouble and challenge the existing definitions of national identity. Their writing thus becomes a struggle between the compulsion to tell the untold and the necessity of using dominant and familiar narratives of identity to ensure comprehensibility. Oscillating between the two creates texts whose disjunctions—whether they were subsequently declared "bad writing" or innovative confrontations with the limits of literary convention—dramatized the dilemma of either conforming to cultural prescriptions or refusing intelligibility. Confronting the limitations of this choice led them, Wald adds, to analyze both national storytelling and the ambiguities of their participation in it and to understand better the stories untold.

Wald's first chapter, mainly about Frederick Douglass, exemplifies her pattern of identifying troubled official narratives of the nation and then reading her chosen authors against them. Here, she begins with cogent readings of two Supreme Court cases, *Cherokee Nation vs. the State of Georgia* (1831) and the *Dred Scott* case (1857), arguing that the denials of the Cherokees' sovereignty over their land and Scott's self-ownership because of his descent from slaves at one and the same time try to preserve against legal challenge a national identity that excludes Indians and blacks and to strike at the bases of national identity. More specifically (though I cannot here do justice to the care and details of Wald's analysis), the conceptions of the natural rights of human beings—to liberty, to property—that underwrote the U.S. narrative of national identity, indeed that the nation was brought into existence to protect, are argued away for these people, shown to be alienable and contingent. This "rocked the basis of the Union" (23), and additionally raised the specter that, if rights are thus rendered matters of convention rather than nature, *anyone's* rights, including white people's, may be taken away by government. This specter hovers, too, in the background of Lincoln's speeches promoting preservation of the Union. For in Lincoln's new story of the United States, it is only the enlightened government of the Union that will save white Americans from slave—like nonpersonhood. It is also the preservation of the Union that, in saving America and American identity, insures the existence of every individual American "I" whose identity cannot exist without the Union. However, Lincoln glosses over the existence of equal black subjects in his reconstructed national story, and thus the subtext for black Americans, according to

Wald, was that in acquiescing to the subordination of one's self to the Union, they acquiesced to inequality within that narrative.

Wald's account of Frederick Douglass takes him as akin to the Cherokees and Dred Scott because his claim for a place among "We the People" reminds his white audience of his nonpersonhood and his "uncanniness" as a nonwhite subject. But the closer (and less fresh and surprising) connection is to Lincoln, because Wald reads the differences between *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and his *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) as movement toward affirmation of Lincoln's narrative of the Union and Lincolnian self-subordination to the union, though this is troubled by the equal black subject that Douglass to some extent must suppress. That is, Douglass moves from the *Narrative*, and terms prescribed by the abolitionists which he partly accepted and partly struggled against—his persona of the degraded slave, the attack on America as a slave nation corrupted at its root by its proslavery founders—to *My Bondage*, in which he assumes a freer American identity, presents himself as the legitimate heir of the founders, and champions the founding principles of the nation as uncorrupted by slavery, ideals the nation should return to. In each case, though (and I might characterize this as Wald's paramount concern), Douglass is faced with a dominating national narrative, the abolitionists' or Lincoln's; in adopting the terms of these narratives, he must suppress part of himself and his story, either his full personhood as an American or his full rights as one. But the repressed returns in Wald's symptomatic readings of his texts, their dissonances, narrative disruptions, awkward sentences, and so on.

In her other readings, Wald pursues similar, or at least analogous, dynamics. She reads Melville's *Pierre* against the background of nationalist publishers and editors and their demand for authorial subordination to the national ideal—a requirement that paradoxically makes declarations of independence matters of acquiescence. The story of Pierre's repudiation of his father and his subsequent suicide becomes an allegory of such double binds—an account of authorial rebellions against inherited narratives that either strand authors without an identity to tell or are founded on the very narratives they refuse, either case leaving them face-to-face with their own prescribedness. Wald pairs Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* with *Pierre*, again as a double story. The abandoned mulatta Frado's servitude in the northern, white Bellmont household—and her internalization of the identity of "Our Nig"—serves as an allegory for (and an analysis of) the writer's having to depend on northern white patronage, having to find a place in that northern national "family" and its domestic plot, and being compelled to meet the expectations of a literary marketplace that dictates for a black woman writer a diminished identity.

In Wald's treatment, especially, of Douglass and Wilson, the pressure of their untold stories and their struggle with the official stories appear symptomatically—in narrative disjunctions, awkward phrasings, and so on—an analytical strategy that is always intriguing and usually cogent, but that sometimes attaches an excessively large political unconscious to slips of the pen. In contrast, Du Bois and Stein, in Wald's account, work more programmatically to

create kinds of writing that resist and revise the forms of dominant national stories. Against a turn-of-the-century surge in academic histories of the United States that reacted to immigration and the memory of the Civil War with narratives of coherence and continuity based on English-Americanness, Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, fashioned a book that is part essays and part narrative, part analysis and critique of the dominant stories of the nation and partly a new way of writing history—an amalgamated form, Wald finally suggests, that echoed his vision of a refashioned, creolized, inclusive American “We the People.” And Gertrude Stein’s wordplay in *The Making of Americans* is largely the point—disruptions particularly of familiar narratives of identity that would accommodate immigrants to America, ways of registering their untold stories against the plots of Americanization, and her means of challenging her readers’ habits of comprehension.

Wald’s readings, then, show how texts reproduce exclusionary national narratives and trouble them, but also renarrate and change them—in the cases of Du Bois and Stein, with some success. David Shumway’s *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline*, while it invokes the same kind of dynamic of mutation, contradiction, and renarration, finally sees such great institutional power behind the creation of “American civilization” as to allow little effect for counternarratives. Although he calls his book a “genealogy”—which he means in the Foucauldian senses of incompleteness, noncontinuousness, and absence of origin or telos—it at times looks rather like a history, inasmuch as there *is* an endpoint toward which most of the study moves: the 1950s and 1960s, when, Shumway argues, the university had captured the definition and control of American literature from nonacademic critics; literary scholarship had been transformed from positivist research into criticism and interpretation; a peak had been reached for conceptions of American literature as unified by an aesthetic and a tradition; and “the project of creating American civilization” as a distinctive and successful thing “reached fruition.” And, despite Shumway’s qualifications, there does seem to be a relentlessness and finality to this victory. True, he repeatedly stresses that even at this moment of Cold War consensus, “when the tradition was the most coherently conceived and the least diverse,” it nonetheless “never added up to a ‘national narrative’”; the tradition always was, instead, “shreds and patches . . . stitched or glued together differently at different times” (20). The shreds nonetheless decidedly converge, in his narrative, in the post-war period of American exceptionalism, when the idea of American literature enjoyed its greatest success; and even in the “New Americanist” challenges to this idea, Shumway sees little relief from its hegemony.

This book, itself, in accord with Shumway’s genealogical conception, has several interwoven stories to tell. Central among these are stories of the definition of American literature, tracing the construction from the 1890s through the 1960s of what is “American” as well as what is “literature.” His insistent point is that these categories are created by institutions to perform various sorts of cultural work. So, the manufacture of “literature” begins here in the hands of nine-

teenth-century men of letters who are backed by influential literary periodicals and publishers but whose control over the definition of “the literary”—a rather loose definition, meaning anything they deemed worthy of publishing—is undermined by the advent of mass-market publishing and its devaluation of “the literary.” Shumway gives accounts of the ensuing struggles over the meanings and control of literature, waged especially by literary radicals and the New Humanists, whose versions of literature reflect their political programs, but with contributions to the contest by researchers in the new departments of English who begin to establish American literature as a discipline and by “nondisciplinary” scholars who write the early histories of American literature.

The version here of what was culturally at stake in the institutional definition of literature—the control of a category that had some (diminishing) power to shape and create culture and to confer cultural capital—is less sharp, perhaps understandably, than Shumway’s explanation of the cultural and political stakes in the definition of “American.” He begins the latter with late nineteenth-century conceptions that, rather than claiming American distinction, tended to assert American literature as a continuing expression of the Anglo-Saxon race. These conceptions served as “a significant basis for bourgeois unity” in the face of what seemed like a horde of immigrants arriving to swell the ranks of the industrial proletariat (38). Even if earlier literary histories saw some distinctive concerns in American literature (of the sort Greene traces), it is only amid the nationalism following World War I, Shumway argues, that the distinctiveness of America, and of democracy, was used to define traditions of American literature. This nationalism and, even more, the intense nationalism after World War II serve as crests in his narrative of the effort to secure the status of American *civilization*—a successful culture commensurate with the nation’s superpower status, as well as an assertion of the superiority of white Americans. If groups of intellectuals periodically demurred from affirming this “achievement”—and Shumway surveys such demurrals among the literary radicals, the New Critics, the “vulgar Marxists,” and the New York intellectuals—the dominant imperative Shumway sees is toward the establishment of a great literature for a globally supreme nation.

Shumway has written elsewhere about disciplinarity, the means by which a discipline (again in a Foucauldian way) constitutes its object to suit its needs and assumptions, and the ways in which a discipline regulates what counts as knowledge, who may speak, and what may be said. These are insistent concerns throughout this book. So, American literature, as both an aesthetic and a national category, was ultimately constituted as an object by its academic discipline—shaped and regulated especially, in Shumway’s account, by English departments, the American Literary Group of the MLA (begun in 1921), and the journal *American Literature* (begun in 1929). Positivist research into American literature—searching for sources, influences, and facts about authors and texts—initially prevailed in the academy over belletristic criticism by meeting the implicit requirements for a “discipline,” i.e., that it set rules for the continual manufacture of “knowledge” congruent with its basic assump-

tions. But when New Criticism turned criticism into a science and established that a literary work can sustain an infinite number of statements, the literary-critical approach took over the field. Although, Shumway writes, the huge shift from positivist research practices to hermeneutical literary interpretation has not yet been fully explained, at the least it remedied a deficiency of Americanist positivist researchers who had no disciplinary criteria for establishing an American literature canon or any bases for aesthetically celebrating American literary works. F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941) served as a watershed, crucially combining New Critical techniques with the project of establishing the unity and distinctiveness of the American literary tradition—and setting the stage for the consolidation of American civilization in the 1950s and 1960s.

Shumway ends his sweeping and informative account with the emergence of American Studies programs and the myth-and-symbol school of critics, which he characterizes as products of postwar nationalism, cold war money, a hermeneutic model of scholarship, and the imperative to understand America as a unified people. Not having inherited a diverse canon, the critics of this generation set about discerning literary traditions and cultural patterns in the already canonized writers, giving pride of place to the writers of Matthiessen's American renaissance as the figures in whose work the tradition coalesces around unifying myths or themes. In the process, they created bases for national unity that existed at the level of the ideal, in the "mind" of the "people," and that were not really socially or historically contingent. And, though Shumway repeatedly stresses that the myth and symbol critics (Henry Nash Smith, R.W.B. Lewis, Leo Marx) and the tracers of American literary tradition (Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler, Roy Harvey Pearce, Hyatt Waggoner) had no consensus about a national narrative or the unity of American civilization, they did agree, he writes, that a distinctive American civilization existed, and that American literature provided evidence for it.

As insistent as he is that American literature and American civilization have been constructs, differently overdetermined in the last century by a range of cultural and political needs and struggles, Shumway curiously keeps his own interests rather hidden. This is especially noticeable in his epilogue, where he sketches perspectives on the work of the last three decades and the prospects for the future. He lays out quite neutrally two opposing views of what has happened in American literary studies. In the first, that a revolution has occurred, in which the canon has been opened to the diversity of the American public, its constructedness has been recognized, and African-American countertraditions and feminist reconceptions of the tradition have taken effect. In the second, little has really changed; since the traditional canon remains dominant (even in the work of "New Americanists"), marginalized groups are present only as minority representatives, the survey course remains in place, and traditionalists and radicals alike shape their study in terms of American ideals and American exceptionalism. It would seem, however, that he more fully endorses the latter view of what has happened, because, while his vision of the future

includes continued opening of the canon, it resignedly stresses the survival of a core canon of the familiarly esteemed authors. This constitutes a mainstream that will continue to reflect the dominant race, gender, and class and be understood (though perhaps in different ways) as reflective of American civilization, thereby keeping the ideological and nationalist functions of American literature alive and well. Such apparent radicals as the New Americanists are using their (otherwise laudatory) sense of the constructedness of American literature simply to legitimate themselves in the discipline and thereby to inherit the old disciplinary apparatus. Exhortations to dismantle the unifying tradition, and instead construct multiple traditions or simply study all literature written in the geographical United States, are doomed to failure because a host of institutions depend on the existence of a unified and coherent conception of American literature. While these conclusions in some ways suit Shumway's sense of the power of institutions, and of a Foucauldianism pessimistic about the possibilities of opposition, they belie the ostensible purpose of his entire genealogy—to use the exposure of the constructedness and ideological functions of American literature to keep alive possibilities for changing it.

A much more sanguine view of "America" and its prospects is set out in Frederick M. Dolan's *Allegories of America: Narratives, Metaphysics, Politics*. The book is concerned in part with questions of American national identity, though much less concerned than these other books with its construction. It is more largely concerned with questions of postmodern political theory, specifically with the question of how we can speak, act, and judge without grounding in transcendental normative principles. It is better to say, though, that Dolan intertwines these two concerns, for he argues that discourses of American identity, almost throughout America's history, "allegorize" this problem of postmodern politics. America's anxiety over its own identity, and its "continually renewed attempt to found and refound a polity in the absence of a legitimating or reliable foundational discourse 'give' the postmodern or post-metaphysical problematic—the problem of acting without grounds and in the absence of traditional absolutes" the status of a "national mythology" (5). In turn he takes instances of American national ideology as occasions to think through postmodern politics. In a sense, then, Dolan's book is different from the others under review, inasmuch as he posits a singular national myth; traces it, without much of an eye to its "constructedness," in "official" (and mainly white and male) discourse; and assumes a kind of American exceptionalism. But because he shows how each attempt in American political discourse to secure a spiritual or metaphysical ground for the national project deconstructs itself, issuing in unanchored, contesting discursive fictions, his postmodern and postmetaphysical concerns imply a kind of postnationality too.

Dolan begins by invoking Hannah Arendt—a guiding intelligence throughout the book—and her argument that American culture was exceptional because it abandoned European political absolutes and replaced them with a Constitution whose authority resides in its capacity to be continually reinterpreted, amended, and augmented—even though the founders obscured this

innovative antifoundationalism by justifying the national project in terms of tradition and natural law. Dolan finds this tension—between transcendental legitimation of the nation and a polity that emerges through ungrounded interpretation—even earlier, in the sermon John Winthrop delivered during the Atlantic voyage, “A Modell of Christian Charity.” On the one hand, Winthrop invested the passage with the ideal meaning of founding a New Jerusalem and tried to isolate a divine absolute that would organize the community of believers as an enduring unity; on the other hand, the sermon marked a revolutionary departure from classical political assumptions and dealt with a New England of unfixed projects and possibilities. Winthrop’s project of fulfilling prophecy in the New World was enmeshed in the problem of hermeneutics, the uncertainties of interpreting the Biblical ideal through the practices and institutions of the community—which inevitably was a copy of the ideal model, a fictionalization of it, a faulty realization subject therefore to reinterpretation and reshaping.

Dolan sees a similar tension in the contest between “the purportedly Newtonian rationality of the Federalists and the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ of the anti-Federalists in the public debate over the U.S. Constitution” (8). That is, though America as a manifestation of a divine ideal is no longer in force in the eighteenth century, Publius of the Federalist Papers “perpetuates the legacy of the Puritan ecclesiastical polity” (59) by conceiving America as the logical development of a rational idea, a polity governed by disembodied reason. By contrast, the Anti-Federalists represent the constitutional order as an unstable system of multiple powers that have to be negotiated and renegotiated. Dolan frames this contest, however, in terms of the debate between Jurgen Habermas and his post-Nietzschean critics, suggesting a kinship between Habermas and the Federalists in their commitment to reason and deliberation, and between the critics of Habermas (including Foucault) and the anti-Federalists in their suspicion of reason as a mask for power, base interests, and potential tyranny. He does this, however, finally to suggest U.S. Constitutional politics as a kind of solution to the debate, partly because Publius was acknowledged as a mask or, as Dolan argues, as a fiction, a public identity designed to test the Constitution in public political discourse—a performance, a democratic practice, that resonates with Foucauldian and Arendtian post-metaphysical politics. He finds a model here for a politics that is not subject to perpetual unmasking (and the cynicism and nihilism that ultimately accompany such unmaskings and undermine the conditions of democratic public life) but that also need not take reason at face value or regulate itself by an ideal. The rub, of course, is that the metaphysical reassurance of a guiding ideal—a national ideal—still resided in Publius’s “America.”

Finally, however, these discussions serve mainly to frame Dolan’s main concern: to find a way out of the dilemma of postmodern political theory. On one side is Habermas, who insists on upholding the “serious” discourse necessary for the rational deliberation of democratic politics and distinguishing it from “fictive discourse” that cannot be tested or form the basis for agreements. On the other side are the poststructuralists who collapse all discourse into the play of the fic-