



Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time

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What we call American literature is quite often a shorthand, a simplified name for an extended tangle of relations." This is the argument of *Through Other Continents*, Wai Chee Dimock's sustained effort to read American literature as a subset of world literature.

Inspired by an unorthodox archive--ranging from epic traditions in Akkadian and Sanskrit to folk art, paintings by Veronese and Tiepolo, and the music of the Grateful Dead--Dimock constructs a long history of the world, a history she calls "deep time." The civilizations of Mesopotamia, India, Egypt, China, and West Africa, as well as Europe, leave their mark on American literature, which looks dramatically different when it is removed from a strictly national or English-language context. Key authors such as Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Ezra Pound, Robert Lowell, Gary Snyder, Leslie Silko, Gloria Naylor, and Gerald Vizenor are transformed in this light. Emerson emerges as a translator of Islamic culture; Henry James's novels become long-distance kin to *Gilgamesh*; and Black English loses its ungrammaticalness when reclassified as a creole tongue, meshing the input from Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

Throughout, Dimock contends that American literature is answerable not to the nation-state, but to the human species as a whole, and that it looks dramatically different when removed from a strictly national or English-language context.

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Sofia Samatar says

This book is a breathtaking roller-coaster ride through American literature, but not the American literature you usually find in anthologies. Dimock's study embraces texts like the Bhagavad Gita and the Egyptian Book of the Dead, engages with disciplines like geometry and physics, and places Henry James beside Gilgamesh and Coyote stories beside the legends of Hanuman. Best of all, you can actually read it. Oh, how I love literary criticism that's also good writing!

I was a little disappointed in the chapter on Black English, as I'd hoped Dimock would choose a particular text and explore it with the passion she showed in her treatment of, for example, *The Golden Bowl*. I was also surprised that Africa failed to pop up in her discussion of trickster stories. These disappointments are very small, however, in comparison to the great pleasure and enlightenment I got out of the book. Dimock takes risks: anyone who ranges as broadly as she does, who touches on as many different subjects, is going to be exposed to being "caught out" by specialists in various fields. The risks are worth it. Dimock's essays are always suggestive, and sometimes dazzling. Highly recommended.

Humphrey says

Perhaps any book with a re-defining project so impressive and thought-provoking will necessarily feel underwhelming in its application. The Fuller chapter is, I think, my favorite.

Cat says

A scholarly book about American literature and how we should think about it not in terms of the nation but in terms of the planet, not in terms of the century but in terms of "deep time" that can draw unexpected links and even create simultaneity between the ancient past and the contemporary.

Some of this book is mind-blowing...and some of its metaphors and ideas drawn from other fields (like fractal geometry as an analogue to literary genre studies) will I am sure stay with me. I'll admit that I am not a terribly abstract thinker, and Dimock revels in the abstract and also in an elliptical writing style that slowly swoops back to a complicated main idea...which is actually the *perfect* form for her ideas here, which are situated in the looping, the recurring, the eddying. Nonetheless, I find the style sometimes frustrating. And my innate skeptic sometimes becomes frustrated with the reaching for the metaphors from mathematics, physics, and ecology. Sometimes these metaphors are so helpful. For example, she talks about fractal geometry as a way of understanding the minute (the tiny variations and patterns along a coastline) or the enormous (galaxies, space), and then she connects up literary history this way -- that it inheres in close reading (tiny variations) and then a broad understanding of genre and its mutations. This metaphor rocked for me. And then other places, the metaphors would not work for me. Like talking about the crazy chronology of Robert Lowell in 1965 bending time by talking about Nero in 65. Um...I know I'm not being deep enough, but this is what literary allusion does, right? Sometimes Dimock's concept of "deep time" sounds to me like familiar literary concepts dressed up in new relativity clothing. (This may attest to more of my limitations in conceptualizing theory than it does Dimock's.)

I loved the chapter on Margaret Fuller and especially the final chapter "Ecology Across the Pacific," which talks among other things about ethical obligations to animals and cultural and experiential commonalities globally. It's a powerhouse, and best of all, it talks about monkeys.

Tom says

A somewhat overwhelming attempt to blow out the fuses and study literature by using all sorts of hybrid methods including physics, religion and translation studies. Dimock basically kicks out all the existing categories such as 'American Literature' or 'modernism' and starts from scratch. Most of it is really interesting, although miss Dimock tends to digress into oblivion. It goes to show that studying literature from an academic perspective is hardly an exact science.
