In this monograph Paul Giles proposes to reconceptualize American Studies and defamiliarize works of literature from Melville to Pynchon by placing them in the transatlantic context of Anglo-American relations. And conversely he examines “projections of American Culture” in British writers such as Thom Gunn. The author hopes to show how “conceptions of national identity on both sides of the Atlantic emerged through engagement with—and often, deliberate exclusion of—a transatlantic imaginary, by which I mean the interiorization of a literal or metaphorical Atlantic world in all of its expansive dimensions” (1). The monograph is divided into nine chapters. The first and last lay out the theoretical parameters of the study; chapters 2 through 8 focus successively on Frederick Douglass, Melville, Henry James, Frost, Nabokov’s Lolita, Thom Gunn, Sylvia Plath, and finally on Pynchon. Versions of five of these chapters have been previously published in article form. This may explain their inclusion here, and leads to questions regarding the choice of these authors, and the exclusion of others, in the light of the theoretical case Giles argues. I will focus first on the theoretical premises of the study, and then on particular authors and issues, without attempting a comprehensive survey of the book.

Under the shadow of the threat and promise of globalization, the object of Virtual Americas is to rethink the study of American literature and the formation of the American collective subject as reflected in literature and as constituted by literature. The problem of the “identification and status of American subjects,” and of the American nation-state, is to be placed in an international context, and in particular in the context of Anglo-American literary relations (257). Giles argues that this calls
for the deconstruction of the “mythic,” theological, concept of American identity as propagated by American histories of literature since Matthiessen, for “to pit myths and symbols of freedom against the forces of ideology” is no longer feasible (258-9). Not only will the politics of identity be unmasked as ideological, but ideology itself must be reconceived in aesthetic terms. Consequently, Giles’ objective is to show how “the imperatives of national identity are emptied out into fictional performances” in the literary works he chooses to examine (260). The “virtual Americas” of the title of this volume refers to “the construction of a subject predicated on division and disjunction” (284); hence “virtual American studies should be organized around a more general idiom of dislocation and estrangement, serving to interrogate not only the boundaries of the nation-state, but also the particular values associated explicitly or implicitly with it” (284). “A virtual America, therefore, would be a mythic America turned inside out” (14). This is an ambitious project. However, the theoretical resources, deriving from Marxism and deconstruction, that Giles draws on to carry it out are not employed to the best effect, nor is their application to particular works consistent or entirely convincing.

Traditional American Studies, as founded in an “area studies model,” which sought to determine the “mythic” essence of the American nation-state, assumed the close “proximity of religion and nationalism as narratives of cohesion” (7-8). Citing Jacques Derrida, Giles argues that modern technologies of communication and globalization threaten to undermine this circumscribed idea of the national community (9). The thesis that the relation between literature and national identity is not “symbiotic or natural” (3), but rather a function of identity construction is no longer new or startling. It is by no means self-evident, however, that communications technologies serve to undermine the nation-state, or to undermine all nation-states equally, and even if they do, it is not self-evident that this process follows a logic of emancipation. The deconstruction of the classical subject and of national and ethnic identity more plausibly anticipates the integration of all “human resources” into the global system as mere functions of production and consumption. The disintegration of the limits imposed by classic subject-identities facilitates their “total mobilization,” in the words of Ernst Jünger, in the service of the production of value and surplus-value, including the surplus-value of literature. Perhaps Giles is somewhat too optimistic in his evaluation of the emancipatory power of global communications, misled by the cadaver of Marxian utopianism and a misreading of Derrida as a prophet of our liberation from “ontotheology” and the “metaphysics of presence.”

Giles notes that the first British edition of Wired (1995) hailed Thomas Paine as patron saint of “the decentralized, anti-institutional forces of global cyberspace”; for "Paine in 1790, as for British Wired in 1995, the United States of America represents not so much a political or historical fact as a virtual reality” which makes the Puritan model of the “city on a hill” and the thesis of American exceptionalism appear anachronistic (254-5).
Citing Adorno, Giles holds that the collective self-identity of a nation ultimately derives from the theological heritage of metaphysical self-presence (256). Virtual America would signify the deconstruction of this theological heritage. It is doubtful, however, if the theological grounds of the state are so easily overcome. Carl Schmitt argues that the technological organization of the modern liberal-capitalist state, which deconstruction in fact facilitates through its critiques of identity, ultimately derives from theological premises and in particular from the mechanistic world view of Deism. Consequently a theory of American studies which intends to break with the politics of identity and American exceptionalism would have to critically engage the roots of this tradition in Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, and Jonathan Edwards, for example. The rhetoric of emancipation which American deconstruction has garnered from Derrida obscures the living actuality of these theological premises, which still inform American politics. A more thorough interrogation of modern subjectivism, such as undertaken by Heidegger, for example, would be necessary to reveal the metaphysical grounds of the collective subjectivity of the nation-state. To assume, as Giles does, the Marxist language of “exchange value,” which produces a “parallel world” where “phenomenal integrity finds itself fractured and duplicitously recycled” (12), and to imply that this parallel world of functions heralds a positive transformation of identity-politics, merely confirms the total mobilization of the planet under the regime of international finance capitalism. Giles’ thesis leads one to believe that the “deconstructive” labours of poststructuralism, the “critique” of the Marxists, disintegrate traditional concepts of identity only to affirm a technicist utopia of functional relations. It is not surprising that Wired magazine should hail the deist Paine as its patron saint. As Paine famously proclaimed, “every generation is a new creation”; the American version of Derrida’s deconstruction, along with the ghost of Marxism that Giles’ invokes, translates this ahistorical credo into a program for the 21st century.

Following Derrida, Giles holds that under the regime of the new version of American studies mythic America will (or should be) replaced by the virtual. The “virtual” is understood as the “aesthetics” of an all-corroding irony which empties concepts of their intentional reference in favour of the pure play of signifiers. Consequently nationalism is reduced to “a virtual construction,” because as an “aestheticized” concept it is not a “unifying social power,” but rather a “residual narrative” which “functions more as a signifier than as a signified” (20). It is difficult to see what this theory can produce except a further disintegration of the phenomena and their integration into global functional networks. Any pretension to emancipate the ubiquitous “other” of poststructuralist discourse becomes meaningless because the other is just another signifier without positive content, and consequently circulates as one and the same within the limitedlessness of the Same. The mere deconstruction of the classical subject of identity, and of the identity of the nation-state cannot solve this problem because it confuses the metaphysical subject with selfhood, and reduces our options to the choice between a classical subjectivity eviscerated by the socio-technical construction of identity and the collapse of subjectivity into functional networks.
For a time, perhaps, this collapse can be concealed in the guise of psychotechnical mechanisms of self-construction, self-realization, self-affirmation, and so on. Nor is it convincing to write off every sense of national or ethnic self-identification which does not pay lip service to the dogmas of marxist postmodernism as a fascist and organicist fantasy (280).

It is doubtful, moreover, that the collective subject of the nation-state, as well as collective subjectivities of race and ethnicity are indeed on their last legs, as Giles seems to think. The virtual subject of “dislocation and estrangement” (284), as Giles admits, is itself a refiguration of the old American topos of diversity within identity. Even more telling for Giles’ thesis is his refusal to consider the specifically Anglo-American collective cultural (and racial) consciousness as the requisite context of his interrogations of literature: the author rejects the “spector of a transatlantic imaginary” as constituting a hegemonic discourse (16-7). This leaves him surprisingly blind to the common strain of religious exceptionalism and empire building which the British founders of the American colonies bequeathed to American national consciousness. To hold, for example, that Henry James “ironizes” the American effort to forge an “identity based on the primacy of race or soil” (114), is itself the apex of irony, since James, as is well known, was so ardent an Anglophile that he took British citizenship to protest American neutrality in the First World War. James’ work would have to be examined in the context of the New England intelligentsia and the tradition of “idealism,” race consciousness, and imperial missionary zeal to which James as well as Woodrow Wilson belonged. Indeed, Wilson took America into the war as fast as he could.

The failure to interrogate the Anglo-American imaginary is especially evident in Giles’ treatment of Herman Melville. In what way, Giles asks, “does a continuing postcolonial encounter with the British empire come to frame, indeed to define, the range of Melville’s artistic ambitions?” (56) The answer the author ventures in his exegesis of Moby-Dick is typical: Melville’s works “decenter and mystify the internal structures of belief” which the novel articulates. This is certainly true in some respects, and in fact, Ahab represents the catastrophic consequences of American religious and political exceptionalism. Giles fails, however, to engage the question of the interrelation of religious fanaticism, the conquest of nature, and the American drive for hegemony which Ahab’s ship of state articulates, and concentrates on the somewhat parochial details of the book’s reception in England. Since Giles proposes to write something other than a reception history the effect is anticlimactic. Certainly the problem of Anglo-American imperialism, and the common roots of its “imaginary,” cannot be opened up in these terms. His treatment of Billy Budd leads to similar objections: rather than showing how Billy Budd exposes the grounds of American imperialism in the assimilation of the British model of Edmund Burke as well as the French model of revolutionary democracy associated with Thomas Paine, Giles claims that “ideology metamorphoses itself into an aesthetic, virtual construction” (86). With this all concrete historical specificity of analysis is lost. Melville’s
prophetic art is far more acute than this reduction to aestheticism will allow—he reveals the grounds of imperialism in the functional war-world, and from the standpoint of a metaphysical if not doctrinal Calvinism dramatizes the integration of the virtues of civilization (Claggart) with the “truth” of technology in the service of total mobilization (Vere). Ideology is an aesthetic construction only in the sense that it serves the will to power of the war-world as a way of mobilizing human and material resources. The argument of “virtuality” simply mystifies the dynamic of American empire and how America had assimilated the British imperial “mission” and its ideological values of race and religious exceptionalism by the close of the 19th century. Alfred Thayer Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890), which had a strong influence on Presidents McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, as well as in Britain, could be read as a companion work to *Billy Budd*, particularly in view of the emphasis Mahan puts on national character and the necessity of expansion.

The author takes a similar tack in treating of Melville’s other works. Writing about “Benito Cereno,” Giles argues that Melville transposes Victorian “social assumptions into elaborate masquerades, where authority is constituted through fetishistic paraphernalia or some inward, self-gratifying perversion rather than according to any coherent ethical imperative or metaphysical sanction” (73). Melville’s *The Confidence Man*, in turn, subjects all opposing positions to a “structural irony” which empties them of content (75). These judgements simply overlook the metaphysical dimension of these works, and the metaphysical passion of the man himself, and substitute a dream of irony for Melville’s long struggle with the tradition he inherited. *The Confidence Man*, for example, elaborates an extended critique of “confidence”—that is, a critique of the secular faith of philanthropy or “love and mankind,” and American utopianism, just as Pierre offers a portrait of the incestuous and self-devouring nature of the love of humanity propagated by the new priesthood of the French Revolution. The motif of cannibalism in “Benito Cereno” also harks back to the French Revolution and Edmund Burke’s insight that the Revolution uproots and kills established tradition, yet in its dependency upon it is forced to feed upon its remains. There is certainly material enough here for reflection on the transatlantic imaginary, but Giles, unfortunately, makes little use of it.

Certainly one way in which American Studies and literary studies have been revitalized, and the idea of a monolithic American identity put into question, is through the inclusion of an ethnic America previously excluded or marginalized. Therefore it is puzzling that Giles does not devote more attention to African American writers and ignores native American writers and other representatives of “ethnic America.” While he does devote some attention to Sylvia Plath he effectively sanitizes her of her ethnic background, although it might offer some clues to her particular brand of virtual America. What could have led Sylvia Plath, aside from her personal demons, to turn her unfortunate, diabetic father, whose chief crime seems to have been to bring his humorless classroom persona home with him, into a Hollywood-style nazi monster? What does her assimilation to “mainstream” New England America and
the Anglo-American imaginary tell us about the politics of the ethnic stereotyping of a “politically incorrect” ethnic group? While Giles may be correct that Plath’s poetry represents a “fragmentation of American idealism” (Emerson), which involves a “destabilization of national cultures as well as psychological identities” (217), it would be worthwhile to investigate how this fragmented idealism in fact congeals in the imaginary of popular culture and its academic counterpart to construct personal and collective subject identities. Giles’ own materialist premises call for this kind of interrogation, rather than the aestheticization of the phenomena which he practices. In fact, Virtual Americas is at its strongest in evoking the stultifying Cold War atmosphere of Eisenhower’s America, and in his reading of Pynchon, as of Nabokov, Giles is able to show how the specificity of the American post war period is refracted and refocused through the lens of British culture.

The author’s desire to bring about a revitalization of American Studies arouse, he writes, out of “a sense of frustration with certain ways the Americanist field was being conceptualized” in the 1990s (xi). This is understandable, and Giles’ project of bringing a transatlantic perspective to the perceived insularity of the field an admirable one, even if in my opinion he has not been entirely successful in carrying out his program in this book. This is due in part, I think, to his choice of authors: the omission of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, for example, is puzzling. Pound in his cage at Pisa could certainly offer an instructive perspective on the transatlantic imaginary. Secondly, Giles’ reliance on Derrida and Adorno often lead him to suspend in-depth historical analysis of the common metaphysical and theological grounds of “Anglo-America” in favour of a rhetoric of irony which avoids the central conceptual issues. To judge by Virtual Americas, the hybrid of postmodern marxism in its application to literary studies tends to suffocate historicity in irony, to treat the living past as a corpus for consumption, and for this reason American Studies would be well served by a renewed return to the political and metaphysical sources of the American Republic and empire.