In »Call Me Ishmael«, Charles Olson exclaims »SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America«. Indeed, from the start, history and identity in America have been intricately tied to issues of space: from the idea of the »city upon a hill« to the transnational (soft) power of the United States, space has always served as an important parameter of power gained or lost and of the struggles to maintain or resist it.

With contributions that range from the construction of America in (European) academic discourses to children’s fiction, this collection provides an extensive and insightful study of how space influences our understanding of America.

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If history is not only temporal or chronological, but also spatial and relational (and if, conversely, our understanding of geography itself is never historically innocent) then it follows that our analysis of ideas of postmodernity must consequently be informed by this kind of geohistorical perspective.

David Morley, »EurAm, Modernity, Reason and Alterity«, 1996

Explaining why she would not vote for Barack Obama in the 2012 Presidential election, Tea Party Express Chair Amy Kremer claimed that »[for Obama] it’s not about the Shining City on a Hill, the greatness that has always been America, that our Founding Fathers were about« (qtd. in CNN 2012: par. 176). Although Kremer’s insistence on American exceptionalism and its Puritan founding myth may be naïve, even questionable, it still points to some relevant issues, namely (among others) the enduring centrality of Puritan spatial metaphors within mainstream American discourse and the idea that the ‘foundation’ of the United States marks both a specific moment and place in time. While she may not harbor much interest in or appreciation for a critical American historiography, Kremer still unwittingly confirms David Morley’s claim quoted at the beginning of this introduction that space (in Kremer’s understanding: the image of the »City Upon a Hill«) and time (the History of the preeminence of American leadership) are to be considered mutually constitutive and that one cannot be adequately analyzed without paying attention to the other. Morley discusses space and time in the context of postmodernity, which adds an interesting twist to the discussion. For, not unlike the rhetoric of the City Upon a Hill
or the related American Dream, postmodernity posits itself as a democratizing force, questioning hierarchies while simultaneously obscuring its own perpetuation of imperialist structures.²

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said similarly links history and space when he contends that »[t]he appropriation of history, the historicization of the past, the narrativization of society [...] include the accumulation and differentiation of social space« (1993: 78). By offering a more nuanced understanding of space historically (and of history spatially), Morley’s proposal of what he calls a ›geohistorical perspective‹ seeks to make visible the construction behind such naturalized narratives evoked by Said. The question that emerges is: How would such a geohistorical perspective on America (or more specifically, the United States) look like? What are the physical and epistemological demarcations of space in America? Or, in other words: When and where can we locate America?

One might start by probing the significance of spatial metaphors in the construction of a historical identity of the nation. What images are needed to conceptualize America? The aforementioned ›City Upon a Hill‹ certainly is one of the earliest and most enduring ones. It was most prominently employed by John Winthrop who, using a verse from the Bible, reminded the Puritan brethren that »wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are uppon us« (1630/1994: 233). The image became so central to the country’s »national imaginings« (Anderson 1983/1991: 9) that numerous U.S. politicians of both major parties have utilized Winthrop’s phrase to market their agenda of American exceptionalism, a myth that, as William Spanos explains, »has determined not only the unilaterality of American foreign policy from the beginning of its existence but the very American culture on which this benignly aggressive foreign policy depends for its practice« (2003: 30). A speech given by John F. Kennedy provides a famous instance in which he likens his presidency to the first Puritans in the ›New World‹, faced with »the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier« (1961/2012: par. 12). The ›Shining City Upon a Hill‹ is then not to be mistaken for a peaceful parish. It rather marks the construction of an imperialist center set on expanding its territory. At the time Kennedy delivered his address, the Cold War was well underway, and the competition between the Soviet Union and the United States for preeminent leadership extended from global territory to outer space. Finally, in their most recent manifestation, American notions of expansionism and manifest destiny have transitioned from a war for territory to a war on terror.

While idealized notions of early Puritans ›roaming in the wilderness‹ abound, it becomes quite clear that space, in American history, has hardly ever been innocent and has very frequently been tied to imperialist agendas. When Klaus Benesch refers to the idea of space in America as »a contested terrain, a site of continuous social and cultural struggle« (2005: 19), he does, of course, not solely mean exterior sites of conflict, for the contestation of land has been
an inherent part of American identity since the country’s inception. The apparent wilderness encountered by the Puritans was, in fact, heavily populated by a number of nations with different languages and customs, who ended up being decimated and relocated to reservations, because they somehow wouldn’t want to accept that they would never be considered anything beyond the primitive heathens the Puritans so desperately sought to label them. As Jean Baudrillard claims in his reflections on America, »[h]ere in the most moral society there is, space is truly immoral« (1986/1999: 9). It is certainly never innocent or ›free‹, as, for instance, Frederick Jackson Turner implies in his essay »The Significance of the Frontier in American History«, first presented to the public as a lecture in 1893.

Only in the twentieth century has there finally been some acknowledgment that the acquisition of territory did not take place in an ›uncivilized‹ void, and that the repercussions of the conquest of America can still be felt today, not only by Native Americans, but also by African Americans, whose very presence is a reminder of a trauma underlying American society, one that is as much tied to territory as it is to race. When Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous »I Have a Dream« speech in Washington in 1963, he disclosed the American Dream of equality as a mostly unattainable myth, especially to those outside the white, middle-class mainstream. As Howard Zinn explains, racism and notions of racial superiority became institutionalized, among other reasons, to diminish the chances of crossracial solidarity amongst servants and slaves. Constructed hierarchies are thus presented as a narrative of nature and biology, when, in fact, racial markers ensuring hierarchical opposition are »historical, not ›natural‹« (1980/2005: 38). American history is thus just as much a story of the invention and expansion of space, as of its regulation and confinement.

If membership in the ›imagined community‹ of the nation is also contingent upon factors such as race or language, what about those who cannot claim one distinct side for themselves? Gloria Anzaldúa was among the first to give voice to those socially and politically displaced in the borderlands, »a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary« which appears »in a constant state of transition« (1987/1999: 25). Rather than the much appraised ›threshold of opportunity‹, the borderlands Anzaldúa delineates are spaces where transgression is both imminent and dangerous. The »mestiza consciousness« Anzaldúa conceptualizes closely links identity to the spatial markers of geographical, cultural, social, spiritual, and psychological borderlands, the spaces between and beyond conventional dichotomies. The frontier, hailed by Turner as a symbol of progress and democracy, is challenged by the Mexican–American frontera, highlighting how borders may serve both as bridges and boundaries.

While Border Studies has for quite some time been mainly associated with the Mexican–American frontera and with Chicano identity, in recent years the
study of the U.S.–Canadian border has finally gained more scholarly attention. There is finally more of an understanding that ›America‹ extends beyond the borders of the U.S.-American nation-state. Hence the essays in this volume not only present space in general as a multi-faceted field, but they also contend that issues of space in America pertain just as much to Canada as to the United States.

Although Canada’s status as a ›Western‹ country makes it apparently less necessary to ward off unwanted illegal immigrants through American security border fences, the relationship between the two countries still remains unequal, with Canada positioned as a junior partner to the United States. In Canadian writer Margaret Atwood’s words, »Canada is an odd country: patriotism has always been regarded with some suspicion in it, because—as in any satrapy—getting too uppity about yourself might offend the imperial centre and thus be bad for business« (1972/2012: xxiv). The ›imperial centre‹ here refers to Canada’s southern neighbor. Yet Canada has had its share of confictuous relationships within its own boundaries, too. They include, for instance, the animosity between the French-speaking Quebecois and the English-speaking rest of the country and, on a different level, the ongoing marginalization of First Nations people who, although not decimated as violently as in the United States, have repeatedly found themselves on the weaker end in their relations with (the mostly white) mainstream Canadian society.

Despite the intricate ties to issues of dominance and oppression in the instances of space depicted above, I in no way want to suggest that spatial relations in the Americas are solely to be explained in this manner. However, as conceptualizations of space »are tied to the relations of production and to the ›order‹ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to ›frontal‹ relations« (Lefebvre 1974/2000: 33), a more nuanced discussion of space in America also needs to pay attention to such factors. In the present collection of essays, we have tried to be mindful of these codes, signs, and relations.

This book is not intended as a definite take on the topic at hand. Instead, it seeks to take up discussions already existing in the field and engage them critically. In the introduction to Thirdspace, Edward Soja proclaims that it »becomes more urgent than ever to keep our contemporary consciousness of spati-ality—our critical geographical imagination—creatively open to redefinition and expansion in new directions, and to resist any attempt to narrow or confine its scope« (1996: 2). The aim this book is precisely that: to provide a multiplicity of voices and to feature various conceptualizations of space, be they geographical, social, or epistemological, and to place them in dialogue with one another.

The first section of the book at hand focuses on conceptualizations of American space from afar. Taking the movie No Name City by Austrian director Florian Flicker as his point of departure, Leopold Lippert discusses Americanness as a deterritorialized specter conjured up in the Austrian Western city ›No Name
City near Wöllersdorf. Rather than viewing the nation-state and national identity as naturally given, Lippert proposes American identity as an act of global performance. Ida Jahr’s »America, the Threat of Time« zeroes in on the Norwegian Americanist Sigmund Skard who, while being a European pioneer in American Studies, developed an ambivalent position toward America: to him, American culture became equally a symbol of progress and modernity as well as a potential destabilizer of the Norwegian nation-building project. Jahr traces the tensions between these two perspectives, chronicling Skard’s America as a heterotopic space of ambivalence.

Placing America’s second section moves on to the realm of the imaginary. First, Julia van Lill probes the imagined landscapes to be found in Lucy Maud Montgomery’s young adolescent fiction. For instance, in her novel Anne of Green Gables, space is constructed and shaped by the protagonist, the young orphan girl Anne, who finds new names and identities for the various natural sites in her surroundings. Place thus functions as a signifier of the young girl’s identity and creativity. More specifically, the exterior natural landscape comes to be linked directly with the protagonist’s interior space of imagination. Following her essay, Georg Drennig’s »Fallujah Manhattan Transfer« looks at the comic book series DMZ and its futuristic depiction of Manhattan as a divided city, a war zone where various groups fight equally for survival and control, each laying claim to representing the ›real‹ America. Using Foucault, Drennig analyzes the inner-city war zone as a dystopian space in which those elements signifying an authentic American sense of identity ultimately cause the city’s demise. In his chapter, Jeff Thoss takes us to the border between fiction and reality. Through the concept of metalepsis, that is, transgressions between narrative levels, Thoss analyzes the ways in which various spaces are unsettled and rearranged in Stephen King’s short story »Umney’s Last Case«. Ultimately, Thoss argues, metalepsis becomes not an indicator of the interrelationship between reality and fiction. Instead, it signifies a shift toward a re-definition of the border between these two ontological levels that seems to have dissolved in postmodernity. Michael Fuchs’ »The Black Hole at the Heart of America?« discusses a text that eludes easy categorization: Oscillating somewhere between a novel, an academic treatise and the written representation of a documentary movie, House of Leaves challenges the reader’s perception through various layers and modes of narrative, thereby creating a complex web of stories and histories, at the heart of which lies a typical American family. Reading the text(s) as a haunted house tale, Fuchs critically assesses quintessential American themes, such as home or family.

The third section of the book moves from the realm of the imaginary into actual border spaces within and around the Canadian nation-state. Yvonne Völkl’s essay focuses on the real and imagined borders between the French-speaking Quebecois and the English-speaking part of the country. Völkl’s analysis of the
Canadian movie *Bon Cop, Bad Cop* highlights the latent tensions between these two factions. In the film, both sides are given ample opportunity to delve into clichés toward each other. Yet the plot goes beyond the level of prejudice to, as Völkl proposes, not only construct, but also deconstruct linguistic, political, and sociocultural boundaries between the two groups, suggesting that cooperation may be the best option, after all. Whereas Völkl focuses on inner-Canadian relations, Evelyn P. Mayer investigates the relationship between Canada and its southern neighbor, the United States. As Mayer’s »The Significance of the United States and the Canada–U.S. Border for Canadian National Identity Construction« suggests, Canadian identity is always constructed vis-à-vis the United States. Taking instances from Canadian literature as well as popular culture, Mayer traces Canadian identity as a contested, uneven terrain, in which Canadians increasingly seem to feel the need to insist on a self forged independently from their U.S.-American neighbor.

The final part of this collection tackles the space of the marginal in literature and popular culture. Diana Benea’s chapter discusses the haunted presence of Native Americans in American society as depicted in Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Mason & Dixon*. Benea suggests that by positing Native Americans as ghosts within the story, Pynchon critically assesses America and American history as spaces characterized by a »return of the repressed«, in this case the repressed trauma of Native American genocide. Madalina Prodan’s »Searching for a Mixed-Blood Identity in Sherman Alexie’s *Flight*« equally deals with the issue of Native American historiography (or lack thereof) within American literature. Her chosen text, Sherman Alexie’s novel *Flight*, focuses on the coming-of-age of a young mixed-blood. Deconstructing conventional notions of Indianness, Alexie, according to Prodan, presents the hybrid identity of the mixed-blood as a potential mediating force between the dominant white and the marginalized Native American cultures. In the volume’s final essay, Judith Kohlenberger traces science’s development from a marginal space of freaky nerds toward a money-making industry. Through various popular broadcasting formats appealing to the masses, science has not only become more accessible to a wider audience, it has also become associated with coolness rather than »nerdsville«. As Kohlenberger argues, science and popular culture have, in fact, become mutually constituent spaces.

There is definitely much more to be said about space (and time) in America, and many more directions and angles could be chosen for such a collection. But while the space of thought and critical inquiry ideally remains an open-ended field, the space of printing and publication, unfortunately, is not. One thing seems rather certain: As a point of departure for scholarly analysis and discussion, space is here to stay, and our little book seeks to do its part in furthering that discussion and in keeping it open to various perspectives.
NOTES

1 | While I am specifically using a quote by a member of the conservative faction, I, of course, in no way want to suggest that Amy Kremer or representatives of the Tea Party or the Republican Party have been the only ones capitalizing on this idea in the course of the campaigns for the 2012 elections. Images linking contemporary America to the so-called ›Founding Fathers‹, thereby underscoring America’s preeminence as ›world leader‹, were utilized by both Democrats and Republicans alike.

2 | I am using the present tense here simply for clarity and succinctness. Whether we actually are still located in postmodernity is, of course, up for debate.

REFERENCES


