

David W Fletcher, January 2005

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Heller, Lee E. "Made in the U.S.A.: The Construction of Academic Knowledge and the Limits of National Culture." *Poetics Today* 19, no. 3 (1998): 335-356.

Lee Heller, an Educational Consultant in Santa Barbara, California, questions the validity of any coherent national culture, something he feels is constructed or invented historically. Further, such notions of unified nationality inhibit proper knowledge of "what culture is, how it operates, and how we might go about studying those operations" (336). Dismissing national identity as invention and myth, albeit evolved since the French Revolution through its phases of nation-state in the eighteenth-century and national imagination in the nineteenth-century, Heller sees the national organizing of group identity as the effort of Western governments "to impose centralization, to reduce heterogeneity (by assimilation or exclusion), and to ensure internal coherence" (339). He agrees with Ernest Renan that "nation" has become "a soul, a spiritual principle." He concurs with Ernest Gellner who states, "Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes preexisting cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates cultures: *that is a reality*" (339). As a result of the debilitating effects on academic knowledge by this "serious fiction" (Giles Gunn) and "nationalist historiography" (Hans Kohn), Heller looks for new ways to define "America" in order to reexamine assumptions about its "culture."

Heller shows the parallel development toward the end of the nineteenth-century of American literature studies with U.S. nationalism. A half century later, American Studies coopted with a variety of academic disciplines to promote U.S. Cold War ideology. An "ontological holism" resulted that gave American culture a separate "rhetorical existence" that

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trended away from diversity (343-345). Heller surveys the opposing work of “postnational” New Americanists but suggests they left the “fundamental and inherently ahistoricist principle—belief in ‘America’—intact” (346). To construct America as plural, Heller suggests several important changes. First, call American Studies by its proper name—United States Studies. Second, accept the fact that culture does not coincide with and exceeds political boundaries. Third, establish vertical connections along the entire hemisphere, i.e., Canada, Central and South America. Fourth, look for commonalities in subjects, rhetoric, types, and themes. Fifth, resist the temptation to construct “a new singular culture, totalizing, exceptional, and deaf to difference.” Sixth, examine local customs and traditions with a view “to produce a critical and deconstructive knowledge about nationalism” (348-353). By such reexamination, Heller hopes Americanists can adopt a “multilayered, dialogic model of culture-as-cultures . . . and surrender a unitary national identity as the endpoint of their scholarly pursuits” (335).