Introduction

It is often said that Americans have little sense of history. Like most generalizations, this is a distortion, but it is probably true that space more than time has determined what it means to be American. Upon their discovery of the Americas, Europeans began not only to revise the cartography of their global maps but also to take possession both physically and mentally of a vast new space. For Native Americans, of course, the conquest meant displacement or even eradication. American culture has been shaped in response to the vast territory of the United States. Its history chronicles, explains or justifies territorial struggles, expansions, settlements and displacements. Correspondingly, American literary and artistic production responds imaginatively to the challenge of laying claim to the continent. This collection is an attempt to reflect the various American responses to the concept of space. It brings together researchers specializing in literature, history, cultural studies and linguistics and reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the work on American space.

To take hold of the continent, militarily, politically, and imaginatively, Americans created new myths and icons to represent their territory. These founding myths persist and are constantly renewed and revised. The section on **"Mythologies of Space"** examines the ways in which Americans have responded to spatial typologies by revisiting and reshaping them or by radically questioning them. These myths are not only the stuff of literature; they have also motivated immigrants and settlers and thus shaped American history.

The earliest depictions of the discovery of America figure the new continent as a welcoming naked woman. Marie Bouchet shows how Nabokov takes up this myth in *Lolita*, mimicking the history of conquest by structuring the novel around the European narrator's double exploration of the nymphet and the vast territory of the U.S.A. In *Lolita*, the land and the child evade capture, eluding the explorer's efforts to take possession of them. The journey revises the dichotomous characterization of America as a paradisiacal land of milk and honey (in parallel with the nymphet of "silk and honey"). Instead, like Lolita, the land is a hybrid patchwork of vulgarity and beauty. Jaques Pothier looks at a number of other dichotomizing spatial myths in his study of Michael Cimino's film, *The Deer Hunter*. The film divides space between the civilized and the wild, linked in the founding American legend of Rip van Winkle with masculinity and femininity. Moreover, the American paradise contrasts with the hell of Vietnam and the American self with the Oriental other. Pothier shows how these dichotomies are disturbed in the course of the film, though the closing scene restores a fragile unity through catharsis.

Several of the articles look at the myths linked to Westward expansion. Michel Barrucand explores the different ways in which nineteenth century American poets represented the vanishing wilderness, from Longfellow's requiem to the American Indian in *The Song of Hiawatha*, to Bryant's hymn to the pioneers in *The Prairies*, to Whittier's loving description of settled territory in *Snow Bound*. David Rio and Marie-Christine Michaud look at how the presence of ethnic Americans in the

West revises clichéd notions of that space. Rio's study of Basque American writers shows how they revise the image of the cowboy. Michaud demonstrates how Italian immigrants were drawn westward by myths of liberty and opportunity and how they contributed to settling the new territories.

New mythologies include the representation of the city and the street as a place of fear, as well as a racially dichotomized space. On the other hand, small town America is normally portrayed as a place of safety. Antje Dallmann examines three recent urban novels to show how recent writers take up tropes of conspiracy and paranoia to critique a divided American society. Zachary Baqué studies the television series, Twin Peaks, showing how, beyond the surface realism, David Lynch creates a symbolic space that is dichotomized, both familiar and strange, and evidently constructed.

Despite its unifying myths, though, the United States is also a nation of regions, cities and communities. The section on **"Place and Nation"** explores the tension between local and national identity, between fragmentation and unification. Not surprisingly, studies focusing on precise locations nuance generalizations about American space. Gilles-Antoine Langlois looks at how New Orleans, whose planning was modeled on French towns, became overwritten with signs of nationalism after the Louisiana Purchase. The image of the city has continued to evolve in the national consciousness, most recently after the devastation of hurricane Katrina. Corinne Duboin examines Dorothy West's representation of a particular time and place in her last novel, *The Wedding* (1995). The fictional enclave of wealthy African Americans summering in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, in the 1950s mirrors the prejudices of the white majority. Nathalie Vincent looks at Bret Easton Ellis's representation of Los Angeles in the 1980s in his novel, *The Informers*. The city is a space of mobility, but not of liberty, for Ellis's characters are trapped there, wandering aimlessly in an existential void.

One of the major fractures in America has been the division between North and South. Anne Stefani examines the dichotomous thinking that has contrasted the North to a South defined exclusively in terms of its history of racial conflict. She argues that beyond regional distinctions, North and South have many social and cultural aspects in common. In her study of Chantal Akerman's film, "South," Marie Lienard also takes up the problem of dichotomous thinking. She argues that in its imaginative response to a Texas lynching, far from portraying a specific place, Ackerman's film presents an archeology of horror that owes as much to European experience as to American.

Efforts to build a unified sense of national identity are obviously important in such a vast and diverse country as the U.S.A. In her study of Life magazine in the 1940s, Heather Jane Bayly-Colin demonstrates the role the press, and more specifically photographers, played in building national identity. Henri LePrieult examines the development of the discipline of linguistics in the United States, showing how the idea of a "home-grown structuralism" depends on the relation between anthropology and geography.

Constructing a nation also implies establishing its boundaries and demarcating territories within that larger space. Indeed throughout the whole of the nineteenth century, America's first priority was to expand and organize space,

motivated by the ideas of the frontier and Manifest Destiny, as well as by sectional difference. The section on **"Frontiers, Boundaries and Limits"** looks at some of the consequences and extensions of the expansionist impulse. Lionel Davidas examines the case of American intervention in the Caribbean islands, inquiring whether the Monroe doctrine does not in fact serve as a justification for a new expression of Manifest Destiny.

Paradoxically, American expansion has always been accompanied by the contrary impulse to impose restrictions, notably related to race. Jaqueline Jondot's study of literature by early twentieth century Arab immigrants shows how protagonists encounter restrictions and limits instead of the freedom and opportunity that drew them to leave the Middle East. A similar experience of confinement is described in Cécile Cormier's study of Chinese immigrants to California who were confined by immigration authorities upon arrival in the United States. The poems inscribed on the walls of their prisons try to make connections with the land that excludes them. In a discussion of a more contemporary representation of limits, Gilles Mayné describes how the black protagonist in Phillip Roth's novel, *The Human Stain,* defies racial restrictions by passing as white, only to find himself ostracized for overstepping the newly drawn boundaries of political correctness. Affirming American individualism by going against the majority, the protagonist becomes, in the words of the novel, "the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I."

The economic and political motivations and consequences of boundary making are complex and shifting. Lisa Veroni investigates the close correspondence between African American representation in Congress and the percentage of black voters within congressional districts. Examining the voting record of the *Congressional Black Caucus,* she suggests that economic differences may now be as politically significant as racial ones. Laurence Gervais-Linon looks at new trends in the reclaiming of urban space through the gentrification of former ghettos. Notions like the new frontier and the urban renaissance have been used to justify what is in fact a major shift in urban political economy and culture.

Though American identity is clearly built on the connection with the land, the essays in this volume amply demonstrate the multiple conflicts inherent in that relationship. The section on **"Exile and Belonging"** examines the tension between estrangement from and identification with America. The problem of belonging is acute for African Americans, as Tunde Adeleke shows in his study of nineteenth century Black American Nationalism. Alienated within a predominantly white racist nation, they looked to Africa as an alternative. Divided between two continents, they had to construct a dual cultural space. Liminality or a space between two countries also characterizes the experience of America's newest arrivals, as Diane Krumrey shows in her study of contemporary literature by and about immigrants. She looks at the ways in which writers represent the fragmentary, cross-national identity of a newly mobile generation of immigrants who move at will between their old and new countries, belonging to neither.

A sense of exile is not exclusive to new immigrants. Pascal Bardet examines the representation of space in F. Scott Fitzgerald's fiction, showing the pervasiveness of the figure of the exile, alienated from his environment. Fitzgerald's characters are

essentially homeless, unable to settle either in Europe or America, so that finally, their territory is the road. Bénédicte Meillon demonstrates the centrality of the motif of exile in Barbara Kingsolver's collection, *Homeland and Other Stories*. As well as representing the immensity and diversity of American landscapes, Kingsolver's fiction radically questions Americans' claim to the land. Distance allows a new perspective on America, as Anne Reynes reveals in her study of Kay Boyle's work. Like many writers in voluntary exile in France, Boyle's expatriation allows her to redefine her vision of American identity.

Another important tradition in American writing concerns man's relationship with Nature. With the Transcendentalists, the conception of the American wilderness changed radically. For Thoreau especially, the wild had to be respected and conserved rather than tamed. In the twentieth century, the very act of representing Nature in writing has become problematic. Yves-Charles Grandjeat demonstrates the tension in Barry Lopez's nature writing between the necessity of describing the wilderness in order to foster respect for the environment and the writer's reluctance to appropriate it through representation. Lopez resolves this conflict by refusing the romantic impulse to connect with the natural world, representing the human observer as an alien in the landscape. Annie Dillard's approach to nature is rather different, as Nathalie Cochoy shows. For Dillard, language is the best available means of approaching nature. If the writer cannot touch the world through discourse, she loses it; thus, Dillard's writing reveals a series of strategies for coming closer to the elusive wilderness.

In addition to scholarly papers, this volume includes contributions by three American poets. They are, instead of foreign visions of the representation of American space, testimonies of the various responses of American artists to this challenging concept. Marilyn Nelson's poem deals with intimate personal space, recounting the return of an African American to the Southern family home, "the ragged source of memory." Like other "*lieux de mémoire*," the home in "The House on Moscow Street" is represented as a kind of monument to those who have disappeared; moreover, the poem functions in the same way, imaginatively calling up the lost ancestors. In a very different vein, Michael Waters' poem "Commerce" visits one of the American continent's natural wonders, Niagara Falls. The poem ironically recounts a cruel nineteenth-century spectacle, in which a raft of assorted animals is launched over the falls. The poem captures the vulgarity and the strangeness of this circus-like commercial exploitation of nature. Finally, poet and teacher Julie Fay presents excerpts from the book that came out of a National Endowment for the Humanities writing project on the victims of the floods that devastated eastern North Carolina following hurricane Floyd in 1999. In the essay printed here, Fay describes how the ways in which individuals rebuilt their lives after the catastrophe reveals the lines of fracture dividing the community as well as the ties binding it together.

Nathalie Dessens and Wendy Harding
(Université Toulouse-Le-Mirail)