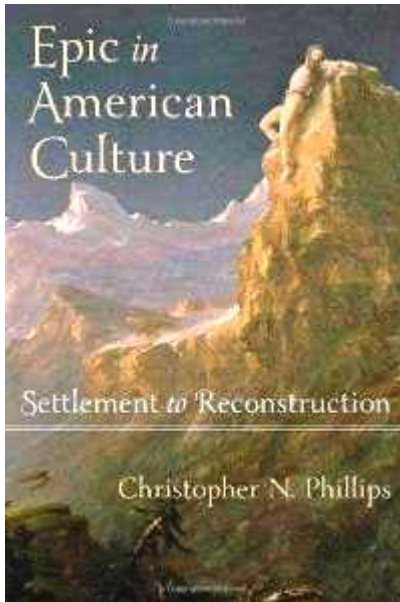


Who's Afraid of American Epic?



The above question, although asked in jest, has some serious repercussions for scholars of early American literature. For, despite the presence of a number of fully fledged Anglophone epics (most notably, perhaps, Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*) and a downright profusion of Hispanic ones (among which Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana* stands out) in the field, these texts are rarely taught, seldom studied, and, it seems, almost never loved. Therefore, although few will admit to fearing these books, exactly, we nevertheless collectively shy away from them in ways that obscure their worth and real importance for imperial and national literary genealogies. Doubtless, the generic qualities of epic-lengthy narrative verse with drawn-out digressive imagery (epic similes), yawn-inducing catalogues, and elaborate divine machinery—do not help its case. Because of this, the teaching of the form in fragmented, bite-sized chunks is popular and understandable. The two books under review here do not necessarily argue against this habit. Both steer clear of stale arguments that would have us (re)read and appreciate the entire works. Instead, Phillips and Altschul encourage us to think about epic in ways that are more “meta:” examining, respectively, the work that the term “epic” accomplishes in the early national North American imagination and the existence of the genre as evidence of a supposedly higher culture in a scholarly hierarchy that systematically privileges European (Spanish) tradition over colonial (Latin American) literary production.



Christopher N. Phillips, *Epic in American Culture: Settlement to Reconstruction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. 376 pp., \$70.



Nadia R. Altschul, *Geographies of Philological Knowledge: Postcoloniality and the Transatlantic National Epic*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 264 pp., \$45.

In addition to convincingly executing their largely abstract, academic arguments, both books also succeed in arousing interest in the primary works that they discuss. So much so that it is worth being attuned to the possible pedagogical implications of these books: one might, taking off from Phillips, for instance, teach epics (or parts thereof) precisely for how they revise common ideas about national poetry, visual artistry, and even the great American novel: *Moby Dick*. My considerations below therefore consistently link both books back to pedagogy, because the connection to what goes on in the classroom helps to make the intellectual payoff of their arguments simultaneously more concrete and easier to appreciate.

At first glance, both books seem to share an interest in philology: judging by Altschul's title and Phillips's focus on "the changing meanings of 'epic' as a term as it travels from poetry to law, to art criticism, and eventually into the realm of cultural work more generally" (5). But Phillips's study of epic is philological in the classical sense—from the Greek *φιλολογία*: the love of words and their historical meaning—whereas Altschul considers philology as the disciplines of literary and linguistic scholarship and their role within imperial and post-colonial academia. Phillips combines a natural, easy-going style of writing with considerable theoretical sophistication when discussing epic as a literary genre, a painterly style, and a rhetorical register in America from about 1700 to 1876. His command of the epic and scholarly tradition, citing examples from Homer to Whitman, and quoting John McWilliams's 1989 *The American Epic* alongside Wai Chee Dimock's highly theoretical forays in *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*, is impressive. More remarkable, perhaps, especially for a first book, is that he does not articulate a strong, single argument that is made by each chapter with increasing force. Instead, following Phillips feels more like taking a leisurely, guided tour through the landscapes of epic in America than participating in an adamant rhetorical debate. Although the tendency to survey sometimes obscures the stakes of his scholarship, his gentle, observant voice unexpectedly draws one in to read every single chapter, despite the best-laid plans to skip some out of the exigencies of time.

In his short, somewhat under-annotated, introduction, Phillips constructs an intellectual lineage of what he calls "my concept of how writers of epic choose their traditions— ... *the epic impulse*— ... a form of reading, with superlatively extensive annotations in the form of an 'original' work" (14). This impulse thus connotes writing (not necessarily epic) verse or prose in ways that continue the tradition begun by older epic works. Phillips's choice to read for this impulse is smart and inclusive because it allows for considerations of writers like George Sandys and Phillis Wheatley, who surely contributed to the tradition of American epic in important ways, even though they never wrote one, strictly speaking. Phillips's awareness of and honesty about the limitations of his work are also admirable: he admits to ignoring mock epic and war poetry, which may disappoint those looking forward to a contextualization of Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan* (1637), Ebenezer Cook's *The Sotweed Factor* (1708), or James Grainger's *Sugar Cane* (1764). But his surveys compensate for such

losses by incorporating Elizabeth Graeme's commonplace book and Sarah Wentworth Morton's poetry, works that establish more surprising vistas in the American epic tradition.

Colonial poetry is not treated as a separate category by Phillips, nor is it the area where his real interests lie. Instead, his strongest observations are on the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries—strengths dictated in part by the abundance of epic texts produced in those eras. His method and spirited defense of close reading are heartening to literary scholars, though he rarely spends more than one page discussing a single text. This habit does not facilitate in-depth readings of the (often lengthy) primary texts, but Phillips is at his best in pithy observations. His introduction is followed by a prologue, which works together with the first chapter to conduct a survey of epic in the American literary tradition up to 1800. Chapters 2 and 3, however, switch gears to provide overviews of the terms "epic" in constitutional law and landscape painting, respectively. Chapter 4 returns to literature with a consideration of epic traditions in Transcendentalism and beyond. Overall, the book seems oddly front-loaded, with large and fast reviews in the first four chapters making way for (mainly) single-author readings in chapters 5 through 8 (Cooper; Sigourney; Longfellow; Melville)—a shift that is not acknowledged or explained.

Phillips's gift for succinct, learned remarks can be seen in his points on Wheatley, for instance. Initially, Phillips stresses her youth and desire to please and impress her male readers, writing: "it could be that the most moving thing about Patroclus's story for Wheatley is the moment when the young hero must seek patronage, even debasing himself to get it" (29). While, later, he notes: "Wheatley more openly turned mourning into rebellion in ... 'Niobe in Her Distress' [when she creates] a grieving, flesh-and-blood mother ... This is the epic of Penelope, of Dido, of Eve, the forlorn woman whose greatness has been overshadowed by the masculine tendencies of epic narrative" (50). John C. Shields has called attention to the fact that Wheatley may have known Richard Wilson's [painting](#) *The Death of the Children of Niobe* through William Woollett's [engraving](#) of it. A close reading of this painting (or the print) would have jibed well with Phillips's clear interest in the decorative arts.

Another talent of the author is the history of the book—a field he neither introduces nor theorizes, though he practices it particularly well. Sometimes the upshot is merely funny, as when the image of Achilles in mourning illustrates a story called "The Travelled Ant" in the 1813 *A Present for Good Boys* (chapter 1, p. 32). But usually it is more profound, as when a copy of the *Iliad*, inscribed to James Madison, establishes "Homer as a source of elite cultural capital" for the composers of the Constitution (83). Phillips also excels at helping us understand the relative cost of books or paintings, from the "extravagant" production values of Joel Barlow's *Columbiad* (1808) to Benjamin West's "epic" large-scale paintings, including [Christ Healing the Sick](#) (1811, 1817), whose price was warranted, apparently, because of their "epic" status (105).

Perhaps most surprising in Phillips's book is the strong connection he repeatedly draws between epic, sentiment, and pre-Civil War novels. Early on, he notes "the preponderance of the elegiac in American epics ... [and how] the language of mourning served to import the discourse of sentimentalism into epic" (9). This observation dramatically expands the reach and the appeal of such a difficult literary form, which Phillips traces in the *The Leatherstocking Tales* (chapter 5) and throughout Melville's marginalia in others' novels and poetry (chapter 8). Finally, I found Phillips's take on a genre he calls "the Indian epic" (chapter 7) revelatory both for the tradition he identifies and treats as well as for how themes of death and sacrifice work toward establishing a national mythology.

Pedagogical ideas or notions on how to make maudlin poems attractive to students are hard to come by in Phillips's work. Yet portions of the book itself, precisely because of its easygoing, surveying quality might well be taught, if only to establish some perspective on the importance and development of the genre in America. Excerpted epics might be the best way to go in the classroom, and Phillips helpfully points out the most salient bits of the works he discusses. He also makes us aware that these pedagogical dilemmas have a history of their own: "in the 1790s, many were accustomed to encountering epic poems in fragments, both in anthologies and in schoolchildren's textbooks" (63).

Transitioning from Phillips to Altschul is easiest via the former's fourth chapter, where he traces the philological ideas surrounding epic—that it, for instance, creates a national language as well as character—in early literary scholarship and the correspondence between Emerson and Carlyle. Of particular importance are the responses of the Transcendentalist poet Jones Very to Francis Lieber's *Encyclopaedia Americana* (1829-33), showing "the adoption of German academic methods within a nationalistic American culture" (143). Altschul picks up where Phillips leaves off by describing how Latin American linguistic and literary scholarship (mainly of epic poetry) were also intertwined with nationalist aims in the nineteenth century. In order to critique this association, she turns to "the particular criollo medievalism [medievalism practiced by Latin America-born scholars]... of a foundational nineteenth-century figure: the Venezuelan grammarian, editor, political, and legal scholar Andrés Bello (1781-1865)" (5).

Altschul thus immediately gives her project the kind of argument that Phillips's book lacks. Yet in the process of stating and refining her aims, she sacrifices intelligibility—especially for those outside her direct field. My difficulty understanding her book may well stem from my ignorance of Latin American scholarship—judging by its blurbs, for instance, the book is "compelling [and] highly readable"—yet even my years-old familiarity with Walter Mignolo's idea of the colonality of knowledge did not adequately prepare me to follow Altschul's reasoning. But instead of dwelling on the difficulties posed by the book, I will try to summarize and respond to her prose as best I can, merely noting how, in comparison, the meticulous and

seemingly effortless clarity and sagacity of Phillips's writing shines very brightly indeed.

At its core, Altschul's project concerns philological scholarship, which includes literary criticism *avant la lettre*, and how it has sought to devalue colonial ways of knowing as opposed to European paradigms of accomplishment. This last judgment is what Mignolo has called "coloniality of knowledge," and Altschul uses his idea alongside "Johannes Fabian's notion of 'the denial of coevalness'" (10). Fabian's concept is enlightening and applies to colonial circumstances as well as later national situations in that "postcolonial lands were considered 'stuck' at a prior historical time, living in the never-ending past, while Europe was a historical and thus changing society that had progressed into the realm of modernity and the future" (10). Here, I immediately thought of the Smurf-blue prehistoric Picts that John White placed as contemporaries to Virginia Algonquins in his [watercolors](#) from the 1580s alongside Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlow's suggestions that Native Americans still lived in Ovid's Golden Age. This impulse to pronounce subjugated populations as somehow earlier than European societies made the colonized seem simultaneously innocent, ignorant, and in need of imperial updating, so to speak.

These prejudices are relevant because Altschul wants to think through how postcolonial scholars set about historicizing their past. She does so by looking at so-called "Occidentalist resistances:" "a form of struggle with coloniality that is carried out from within an Occidentalist frame of mind, [meaning] the cultural self-understanding of the Americas as an extension of Europe" (13). This attitude is obviously conflicted: while it negates agency on the part of Americans (which are, after all, "stuck" Europeans-to-be), it nevertheless problematizes the wholesale valuation of European ways of knowing. Altschul investigates "post-independent criollos" who are, significantly, also "postcolonial subjects." This emphasis is new and fills a void in Latin American scholarship, which has previously been concerned mainly with "the relationships of Europeans (or their descendants) vis-à-vis the populations of indigenous and African origins" (15).

Altschul's book looks at creole postcolonial literary scholarship as it speaks to and positions the author(s) with regards to Spain. Her lengthy introduction provides a focused overview of theories of postcolonialism in Latin America, although I could not always discern what exactly her contribution was to concepts such as settler postcolonialism. She describes her methodology as "kaleidoscopic, which means that a key element will be turned around and observed from assorted angles in order to extract different facets of meaning" (24). I found this approach both mesmerizing and, at times, myopic, but Altschul does expand her perspective from Bello by including other scholars as well: María Rosa Lida, Ferdinand Wolf, and Gaston Paris. Although I initially sorely missed treatments of primary literary texts in this book, it should be noted that such close readings would simply not fit Altschul's objective. She is interested in the history of medievalism and in drawing out the politics and

aesthetics of that field—an entirely legitimate intellectual pursuit. It remains, however, difficult to conceptualize how her argument applies to North America because, first, medievalism was not a major scholarly preoccupation in the nineteenth century (to my knowledge); and second, because postcolonialism does not lend itself unproblematically to the study of North American history.

Altschul's book consists of three clear parts: on the colonality of Hispanic American philology; on metropolitan philology and the settler creole scholar; and on medievalist Occidentalism. These three parts are subdivided into two chapters each. Epic is central to three chapters (3, 4, and 5), the latter of which most immediately engages Bello's scholarship, showing "specific instances of Occidentalist resistances ... in a group of Bello's scholarly and literary engagements ... connected through epic nationalism, such as the *Poem of the Cid*, *La Araucana*, and his 'American Silvas'" (27). Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga's *La Araucana* (1569-89), which relates the start of the hostilities between the Spanish and the Mapuche in what is now Chile, is often fragmentarily included in anthologies of early American literature, which is why I turn to its treatment here.

In Altschul's penultimate chapter, she interestingly releases her rhetorical hold, admitting that her work complements Mary Louise Pratt's readings of Bello in *Imperial Eyes* and citing at length from Pedro Grases's biography. Altschul argues that Bello's changing ideas of epic stem (in part) from the need for differentiation between the newly independent Latin nations. Unlike his contemporaries in Argentina, Cuba, and Chile, Bello did not turn to colonial texts to invent a national literary tradition, but was instead heavily invested in a posited connection between classic epics and medieval heroic narratives which, he claims, shaped later Latin American traditions. Here, Altschul proceeds lucidly and systematically, unearthing Bello's "surprising definitional fuzziness" (151) and helpfully contextualizing his writing on *El Cid* with those on *La Araucana*. Yet, even for someone (like myself) who has read that entire epic with great interest, the discussions of it do not come alive. Altschul's own points, however, are convincingly presented.

Connecting Altschul's argument to pedagogy is difficult, but not impossible. Rather than invite students to think through the intricacies of postcolonial or Occidentalist scholarship, I imagine that the idea of nationhood might prompt more discussion. The epics appear in Altschul's work to illustrate different kinds of national affiliation, and they serve this purpose well. For more advanced students, inviting them to read and evaluate dated scholarship might provoke debates on what is acceptable in academic evidence and methodology. More directly relevant to Altschul's work is the question of what exactly epic, as a genre, has meant for ideas of national literatures, language, and character. Despite the occasional hiccups in my comprehension of her work, she adds to our understanding of the genre's implications, which Phillips has immeasurably enlarged.

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