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American National Character: The Role of Tall Tales in the Creation of National Identity

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Abstract

The term “national character” can be dually understood. It can either refer to the collective psychosocial characteristics of a nation, or to a literary construct. This observation opens up space for a theory that could offer the explanatory potential needed to relate the concoction of heroic narrative tradition, American national mythology and the cult of the body, in order to demonstrate how this mixture becomes the unique narrative-somatic substance of the American national identity. An identity, which, since the times of Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, may be claimed to be fluid; always “in the making.”

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the apparent paradox of the liquid Americanness is a function of an ongoing deconstruction of the inherent opposition between the “larger than life” epitomes of the American national identity and the “life-sized” men and women of the United States, who perceive themselves as American by reference to mythological narratives, rehashed in political speeches, with which they identify, despite the obvious discrepancy in “dimension.” In other words, I endeavour to show that Americanness has always been dissimilar to itself, and therefore it retains a potential of endless self-revision, and thus, as a concept, it is processual rather than static. The locus of the ongoing deconstruction is shown in the representations of the bodies of two American national characters: John Henry and Pecos Bill.

Keywords: *tall-tale, national character, body*