CHAPTER 3

Remapping America: The Epic Geography of Post–World War II American Poetry

In post–World War II America, with international socialism in ruins and the conservative tradition virtually nonexistent, the liberal consensus emerged as the dominant ideology. Its optimism about America’s future was a result of the victory over fascism and the nation’s economic prosperity. Although history was rapidly unfolding as the United States established its “geopolitical dominance” (cf. Hunt 115–50) and as the Soviet Union sought control over Eastern Europe, the immediate postwar period seemed deceptively apolitical. With the postwar economic boom and the rise of the society of affluence, simmering social conflicts were largely kept outside the public consciousness. Radical movements such as the Popular Front of the 1930s dissolved. Many leftists embraced the liberal consensus, while others sided blindly with the Soviet Union, or withdrew from politics altogether. Those who did seek to maintain the legacy of the 1930s in the postwar world fell victim to red baiting and often lost access to literary, cultural, and political institutions. The powerful liberal consensus associated radicalism with Stalinism, adding to the marginalization of leftist ideas that fell outside the liberal spectrum.

Paul Buhle has suggested that this was the lost generation of radical activism: “They had the ideas that would live, but could take flight only in the political practice of another, still younger generation” (187). This claim can be extended to the engaged tradition of American poetry. It is not that political literature or rebellious subcultures disappeared; they “existed alongside the culture of containment” and “made themes of revolt
and liberation available to the youth, black, feminist, and gay movements of the 1960s and 1970s” (Medovoi, Rebels 50). In the same manner, as Michael Thurston has shown, poet-activists such as Eve Merriam (1916–1992), Walter Lowenfels (1897–1976), Aaron Kramer (1921–1997), and Edwin Rolfe continued to write short poems for immediate political occasions (cf. Thurston, “Tranquillized Fifties”). But the political climate made it increasingly difficult to believe in the politics of literature. Where modernism and political engagement entertained strong ties in the works of authors such as William Carlos Williams and Muriel Rukeyser, both of whom were actively involved with the Popular Front institutions of the 1930s, the anticomunist action of postwar America sundered that link (cf. Filreis Modernism from Right to Left). In the intellectual climate of an increasingly institutionalized American poetry, liberal forces were often concerned with “the refinement of taste and the preservation of national culture” (von Hallberg 34). Even the more diverse audience who had gained access to American universities as a consequence of the G.I. Bill largely operated within the limits of what Lionel Trilling called “the liberal imagination” (cf. Trilling).

Thomas McGrath (1916–1990), Norman Rosten (1913–1995), and Melvin Tolson (1898–1966), all products of the 1930s, refused to surrender to what they considered a false liberal consensus. They believed that in order to have a real postwar solidarity among people, claims to US leadership—or to any kind of national leadership, for that matter—had to be overcome in the name of global solidarity. The poets discussed in this chapter utilize the late modernist epic as a medium to understand the possibilities and predicaments of a form of global solidarity in post–World War II America. Their poems vary in their geographical scope: from North Dakota to the American continent to Africa, and in their presentation: from autobiographical to historical. McGrath’s autobiographical journey into the past, Letter to an Imaginary Friend (1957–1985), creates a representative hero who realizes that the present must not only reactivate but also reconsider the rebellious spirit of an earlier generation; Rosten’s The Big Road (1946) establishes a symbolic transnational road that becomes the heroic manifestation of the progress and disasters produced over centuries by the expansion of the modern world-system; and Tolson’s Libretto for the Republic of Liberia (1953) reflects Western culture through Liberia by creating a heroic vision of a transnational parliament of humankind, a “cosmopolis of Höhere” (Libretto 183). For all of these poets, however, the purpose of the epic is to create an egalitarian vision of solidarity that requires the participation of the people of all nations.

Epic poetry in particular lent itself to reconsidering the political imaginations and the position of the poet in a Cold War world since it traditionally