

*Special Issue: Literary Counterhistories of US Exceptionalism*  
*Guest Editor: Joseph Darda*

- Pg. 73 Preface  
*Donald E. Pease*
- Pg. 80 Introduction: Narratives of Exception in the Warfare State  
*Joseph Darda*
- Pg. 88 The End of Futurity: Proleptic Nostalgia and the War on Terror  
*Aaron DeRosa*
- Pg. 108 “Prey to Unknown Dreams”: Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves*, and the Exceptionalist Disavowal of History  
*Susan Strehle*
- Pg. 128 Ironizing Identity: Cosmopolitanism and Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” as Critique of Hispanicist Exceptionalism  
*John C. Havard*
- Pg. 151 The Uses of Tragedy: *A Thousand Acres* and American Exceptionalism  
*Mary Vermillion*
- Pg. 174 Redeemer Nation and Apocalypse: Thinking the Exceptionalism of American Exceptionalism  
*William V. Spanos*

## Preface

DONALD E. PEASE

In the call for papers to this special issue of *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* on literature and American exceptionalism, the editors describe American exceptionalism as an under-theorized subject within literary studies. They challenge the contributors to this volume to reflect upon “the place of literature in the past and present debates surrounding US exceptionalist thinking.” Individually and collectively, the essays the editors have selected for inclusion disclose the significance of American exceptionalism to the production and reception of American literature. But as Joseph Darda attests in his splendid introduction, “Narratives of Exception in the Warfare State,” the contributors have decided to engage the version of American exceptionalism that emerged after 9/11.

With remarkable range and acuity, each of these essayists offers impressively fresh and persuasive readings of the ways contemporary and canonical American writers have either anticipated or directly engaged the temporal, spatial, and subjective dilemmas inherent to post-9/11 American exceptionalism. Since all of the essays in this volume either explicitly acknowledge or allude to the ways in which the events that took place on September 11, 2001 influenced received understandings of American exceptionalism, I will begin these prefatory remarks with a brief account of the version of American exceptionalism that took hold after 9/11.

American exceptionalism is the name of the foundational state fantasy responsible for the production, narration, interpretation, regulation, and transformation of the United States’ imagined national identity. The narrative matrix of American exceptionalism consists of a constellation of foundational tropes—“Virgin Land,” “Redeemer Nation,” “American Adam,” “Nature’s Nation,” “Errand into the Wilderness”—invented to sustain the American

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people's imaginary relations to the Real imperial state. The psychosocial logics accompanying this fantasy enable US citizens to construe historically factual events like the forcible resettlement of indigenous populations, the institution of slavery, and the annexation of Mexican territory as exceptions to the nation's ruling norms of freedom and equality of opportunity. American exceptionalism requires the supplement of these psychosocial processes of disavowal to regulate the meanings that could and that could not be assigned to the state's fantasy work.

In displacing historical events with the representations through which they became recognizably "American," American exceptionalism produced national reality as an effect of the imaginary. But the state's reaction to the catastrophic events that took place at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 caused the Real state of exception to come disjoined from the tropes integrating it to the imagined national identity. In his address to the nation, President George W. Bush replaced the nation's foundational tropes with state performatives—"Ground Zero," the "Homeland," "Preemption"—that reconfigured the national people's foundational fantasy:

On September 11, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. Americans have known wars, but for the past 136 years they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war, but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. . . . Americans have known surprise attacks, but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day, and night fell on a different world. . . . I will not forget the wound to our country and those who inflicted it. . . . Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.

A state of exception names the situation in which the sovereign suspends the rules and laws regulating the polity in the name of securing the order of things. President Bush named the state of exception he inaugurated at "Ground Zero" the "Homeland Security State" because "our enemies" violation of "Virgin Land" had disconnected the national people from their habitual relation to the state. After the president figured the events that took place on 9/11 in relation to the Homeland Security Act, he suspended the psychosocial logics of denial and disavowal underpinning American exceptionalism. The state's suspension of the logics of disavowal sustaining the benign representations—religious liberty, economic mobility, absence of class and colonial structures, opposition to imperialism—of the nation's putative uniqueness, radically altered conventional understandings of American exceptionalism. Rather than concealing them, the post-9/11 state of exception brought the exceptional people (detainees, illegal combatants), exceptional spaces (Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo, special rendition centers),

and exceptional temporalities (preemptive strikes) into spectacular visibility. At this Ground Zero, the national people encountered the specter of the nation-founding state violence that the state fantasy of American exceptionalism had formerly disavowed. With the suspension of the state fantasy that the nation was founded on Virgin Land, the violence that this dream covered over threatened to swallow up the entire field of visibility.

Prior to reading this issue, I would have been hard put to come up with the names of American novelists who explicitly reflected upon the spaces, peoples, and temporalities that the state excepted from its systems of representation. However, each of the contributors to this volume on literature and American exceptionalism describes how the writers under their examination have seized upon these post-9/11 anomalies to disrupt exceptionalist temporalities, to excavate forgotten histories, to conceptualize subjectivities excluded from exceptionalist discourse, and to render imaginable an entirely different relation to the placement of American exceptionalism.

Aaron DeRosa's essay, "The End of Futurity: Proleptic Nostalgia and the War on Terror," singles out Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and Lauren Groff's *Arcadia* (2012) as paradigmatic examples of an emergent genre DeRosa calls "proleptic nostalgia fiction." The novels DeRosa includes under this categorization are uniformly critical of the temporal orientation of post-9/11 exceptionalism. Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and Lauren Groff's *Arcadia* (2012) both begin in the 1970s. Each novel concludes in a dystopian future (2021 and 2019, respectively) markedly different from the prospective fates the narrators imagined for themselves before 9/11. The narrator of *Arcadia* alerts readers to the significance of such proleptic nostalgia by remarking that "when we lose the stories we have believed about ourselves, we are losing more than stories, we are losing ourselves."

Before 9/11, expositors of American exceptionalism represented the unfolding of American history as the progressive development of American principles guided by Manifest Destiny. The triumphalism of the post-Cold War 1990s summoned Americans to envision the future as the site for the evangelical spread of American democracy across the world. But the Global War on Terror the Bush administration declared after 9/11 shattered the image of a providential future as an expendable delusion. DeRosa believes that in the aftermath of 9/11, "proleptic nostalgia fiction" emerged to give expression to a collective longing for the retrieval of an American exceptionalist future. To explain the historical conditions for the genre's emergence, DeRosa sets "proleptic nostalgia fiction" in a differential relation to the temporal logic of the preemptive strike.

According to DeRosa, proleptic nostalgia fiction promoted a post-9/11 attitude toward futurity that was the obverse to Bush's doctrine of preemption. A preemptive military strike follows a temporal logic that imagines acts of future aggression that have not yet occurred so as to justify the use

of lethal force to make their non-occurrence absolutely certain. In carrying out such a strike, the government arrives at a life and death decision in the name of a sovereignty whose power derives from its preemptive disruption of time's unfolding. Whereas the agency of preemption anticipates threats it will have eliminated beforehand, the novelists DeRosa includes in the genre of proleptic nostalgia fiction invite their readers to recognize how the doctrine of preemption also destroyed the exceptionalist futurity in whose name the strike might have legitimately been carried out.

The exceptionalist prospect that inspired proleptic nostalgia fiction was based on an understanding of the United States as exempt from the laws of history to which other nations conformed so that the "redeemer nation" could become a model for them to emulate. However, in "Ironizing Identity: Cosmopolitanism and Herman Melville's 'Benito Cereno' as Critique of Hispanicist Exceptionalism," John C. Havard locates the origins of American exceptionalism within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trans-Atlantic contests among Euro-American imperial nation-states. According to Havard, each of these imperial state formations devised a version of exceptionalism that supplied the juridical exceptions to internationally agreed upon rules and norms these states needed to govern the excepted spaces and excepted peoples that their colonial projects had created in the Americas.

Havard specifically explains how the United States constructed its exceptionalist self-representations in opposition to the exceptionalist discourses that Spanish administrators invented to justify Spain's colonial rule. After demonstrating how the Anglo-American discourse of "Hispanicism" represented Hispanophone nations as lacking the capacity for democratic deliberation and self-government, Havard shows how notions of US liberal individualism evolved in opposition to Hispanic despotism. Following this exposition, Havard describes Amasa Delano's reactions to Benito Cereno as conditioned by his Anglo-American prejudices against Catholic Spain. At a significant turning point in his reading of "Benito Cereno," Havard discerns an alternative to Delano's imperial exceptionalism in the irony he attributes to the implied author's skeptical cosmopolitanism.

Havard reads "Benito Cereno" as Melville's articulation of a transnational cosmopolitanism that liberates the narrator from the provincialism inherent to Delano's American exceptionalist mentality. However, in her remarkable essay "'Prey to Unknown Dreams': Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves*, and the Exceptionalist Disavowal of History" Susan Strehle dismantles the American exceptionalist mentality by interpreting Louise Erdrich's 2008 novel *The Plague of Doves* within the context of an imagined trial that would render the exceptionalist mentality accountable for the centuries of extralegal violence performed under its jurisdiction.

The United States wealth and power and its image as the anticolonial leader of the free world rested upon a history of accumulation through dispossession and imperial expansionism. The trope of "Virgin Land" was

invented to disavow this entire relay of historical events and to replace the fact that the land was already settled by a vast Native population with the belief that it was unoccupied. American exceptionalists' substitution of the belief in "Virgin Land" for these historical realities enabled them to refuse responsibility for the dislocation and, in some instances, the extermination of entire populations. The land became American through the erasure of Native Americans' claims to the land and the eradication as well of the Native American history that kept track of those erasures.

*Plague of Doves* is Erdrich's testimony to the real injustices that resulted from the lynching of three Native Americans, who were hanged without trial in Emmons County, North Dakota, at the turn of the twentieth century after being falsely accused of murdering the members of a white family. Strehle takes Erdrich's testimony to add as evidence in the trial missing from the earlier case. But instead of replicating the positions of defendants and victims recorded in the Emmons County register, Strehle charges the exceptionalist mentality itself as responsible for serial acts of homicide.

The white settlers who migrated to the Western territories practiced a form of juridical sovereignty in their relationship with Native Americans that involved their taking up a paradoxical position—at once inside and outside the law—that was indistinguishable from the state of exception. After describing Native Americans as bereft of any human attribute other than biological life, these white settlers construed indigenous peoples as irretrievably voided of the juridical right to human life. This construction enabled white settlers in the West to arrogate to themselves the sovereign power to decide over the life and death of Native peoples.

At a key point in her essay, Strehle cites Judge Antone Coutts' discovery of the similarities in "the influence of instinct upon a wolf and history upon a man," for in both "justice is prey to unknown dreams." Judge Coutts, whose juridical perspective is torn between his Native American and European American identifications, had earlier observed that he "who goes to the law holds a wolf by the ear" (114). After remarking the connections Coutts has adduced between the law of the American West and the instincts of the wolf, Strehle links both images to the habits of disavowal formative of American exceptionalism's juridical unconscious. In restoring historical witness to the atrocities American exceptionalism disallowed juridical representation, Strehle reaches into the Native American historical archive so as to awaken American exceptionalists into recognition of the predator that has taken possession of the US system of justice.

Rather than restricting her reading of *Plague of Doves* to a condemnation of the whites responsible for the lynching, Strehle interpreted the novel as a quasi-legal form of testimony that bore indelible historical witness against the transgenerational criminal mentality that Strehle wants brought to justice. Whereas Strehle construed American exceptionalism as a form of criminality from which Americans could dis sever themselves, in "The Uses of Tragedy:

*A Thousand Acres* and American Exceptionalism,” Mary Vermillion characterizes American exceptionalism as a tragic form of life that is so deeply engrained in the subjectivity of Jane Smiley’s male protagonist, Larry Cook, and so inextricable from the force through which he attempts to liberate himself from it, as to remain inseparable until death.

Jane Smiley wrote *A Thousand Acres* ten years before 9/11. But Vermillion has interpreted Larry Cook’s character as a personification of the state of exception that took possession of the US polity after 9/11. Vermillion specifically allegorizes the Cook household from *A Thousand Acres* as a polity modeled after the Homeland Security State.

To accomplish this allegorical reading, Vermillion characterizes American exceptionalism as answerable to the logic of a captivity narrative. Captivity narratives bearing headlines like the “Rape of Iraq” or the “Rape of Afghanistan” that abounded in the media after 9/11 demonstrated the ways in which the United States relied on demonized others as figures through whom to disown aggression by recasting acts of imperial predation as forms of liberation. According to Vermillion, Americans habitually project “the threat American exceptionalism itself poses to American freedom onto some external force or (racialized) Other: communists, jihadists, or, in earlier days, Native Americans.” Because Larry Cook, the head of the household, has internalized the psychosocial logics of American exceptionalism, he cannot recognize that the main threat to the freedom and well-being of his daughters is internal and derives from the exceptionalist pathology with which he exempts himself from responsibility for raping both of his eldest daughters and with which he undertakes to forcibly liberate them from capture.

Although they focus on different manifestations, all of the contributors to this issue have rendered visible the exceptions that American exceptionalism at once disavowed and rendered “invisible.” In his summational, concluding essay to this issue that he has entitled “Redeemer Nation and Apocalypse: Thinking the Exceptionalism of American Exceptionalism,” William V. Spanos names the composite of these exceptions “the specter, which, in fact, has always haunted” American exceptionalism. Spanos also proffers an explanation as to why this Other that American exceptionalism normatively covered over should reveal itself now.

According to Spanos, after the Bush administration declared the *global* war on terror and turned the state of exception into the planetary norm, the teleological narrative of American civilization came to its *end* “in both senses of the word: its fulfillment and its demise.” When it became *total*, the spectacle of American exceptionalism underwent *self-destruction*, and spontaneously revealed the exceptions that this form of governmentality had to repress or annihilate to maintain its authority as the truth.

After characterizing the Global War on Terror as the fulfillment of the exceptionalist mentality, Spanos conducts a compelling re-envisioning of the whole arc of American literary culture and literature. To demonstrate

the figural truth of this apocalyptic end of American exceptionalism, Spanos cites a series of hitherto unrelated passages from five texts of the American cultural archive produced between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1850) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857), Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) that uncannily prefigure the post-9/11 exceptionalist manifestation as a self-consuming absolute spectacle.

Unlike the other contributors to this volume who require the state's version of post-9/11 exceptionalism as a repressive mechanism against which to project excepted temporalities (as do DeRosa and Havard), excepted people (as does Strehle) or to conceptualize a contrary subjectivity (as Vermillion does), Spanos has pursued the *exceptionalism* inherent to the logic of American exceptionalism to its apocalyptic end—and left no place to return.

Without exception? Let's hope . . .

## **Introduction: Narratives of Exception in the Warfare State**

JOSEPH DARDA

Because the sovereign power of the president is essentially grounded in the emergency linked to a state of war, over the course of the twentieth century the metaphor of war becomes an integral part of the presidential vocabulary whenever decisions considered to be of vital importance are being imposed.

—Giorgio Agamben

The doctrine of exceptionalism has long organized the stories the United States tells about itself. Founded on the contradictory belief that the nation is unique yet universal, exceptionalism has been variously defined as providing the “psychosocial structures” by which citizens have disavowed the exceptions taken by the state (Pease 33–35); an understanding of the United States as the “apotheosis of the nation-form” and model for the world (Kaplan 15–16); an always already achieved ideal and discursive site of struggle (Singh 38–41; 136–38); a strategy by which US imperialism is distinguished and distanced from other imperial histories (Rowe, *Literary Culture* 6); and a conviction that the United States is called by a divine destiny, as a millenarian “redeemer nation” (Spanos, *American Calling* 12–16; *Globalization* xvii). Maintaining a belief in American exceptionalism, as these definitions underscore, relies on selectively remembering and construing the past, by negating the state-sanctioned violences that directly contradict the nation’s alleged exemplarity. It is no coincidence, then, that many of exceptionalism’s leading critics—Donald Pease, Amy Kaplan, John Carlos Rowe, William Spanos—were trained as literary scholars and write with a sensitivity to the ways in which narratives are constructed within and contribute to, even structure, a national political culture. Exceptionalism is a psychosocial logic, a way of differentiating and absolving the state, and a rationale for warmaking. But it

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is also a narrative framework. The contributors to this issue of *LIT* identify US exceptionalism as a storytelling enterprise and, in turn, investigate American literature's ability to reveal, contest, and rewrite the exceptionalist narratives of the nation's past and imagined future.

The War on Terror has reinigorated the critical scrutiny of American exceptionalism, and the following five essays all to varying degrees engage with issues of military violence and its legacies. Warfare is not only enabled by exceptionalist rhetoric ("a nation called to great responsibilities") but is also the foremost subject of exceptionalist disavowals ("a time set apart").<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben argues that war is figuratively fundamental to declaring a state of exception in the United States. "Because the sovereign power of the president is essentially grounded in the emergency linked to a state of war," he writes, "over the course of the twentieth century the metaphor of war becomes an integral part of the presidential political vocabulary whenever decisions considered to be of vital importance are being imposed" (21). In order to deactivate the legal order and effect an anomic sovereign authority, the president must invoke an image of the nation at war, as Franklin Roosevelt did during the Great Depression. However, when considering the post-World War II era, this "metaphor of war" is rarely merely figurative. In fact, if we define war more broadly as "organized state violence," as Rowe does ("US Novels" 813, 829–30), or according to combat medals awarded, as Mary Dudziak does (28–29), wartime begins to engulf much if not all of the nation's history.<sup>2</sup> The emergency becomes the rule. This condition is not easily preserved, though. The head of state must invoke wartime continuously while never admitting to the result: wars made and fought on a permanent basis, a warfare state. However contradictory the logic, anomic sovereignty is achieved by narratively constructing war as extraordinary and brief, as a series of regrettable but necessary one-off events. These many narratives of exception are framed by and ultimately come to reinforce a belief in US exceptionalism.

In this way the narrative structuring of warfare is fundamental to preserving the state of emergency, and so literature becomes a critical site for challenging these exceptionalist accounts of war. There is a long-standing tradition of American authors interrogating the nation's stories about itself and its conduct in the world, as indicated by the historical breadth of this issue. Before surveying the contributors' essays, I would like to briefly discuss the most recent focus of anti-exceptionalist literary criticism: the War on Terror and the exceptions taken by the state under the 2001 AUMF and USA PATRIOT Act, many of which are only now coming to light in the wake of the Edward Snowden leaks. Unfortunately, these analyses have often failed to ground twenty-first-century counterterrorism in historical perspective. In June 2011, one month after Osama bin Laden was killed in a bunker in the Hazara region of Pakistan, *Atlantic* writer Matt Gallagher asked why we have yet to see the great War on Terror novel, going so far as to coin the genre of

GWOT (Global War on Terror) fiction. “Almost a decade after the first bombs were dropped in Afghanistan,” he wrote, “even the most avid bookworm would be hard-pressed to identify a war novel that could be considered definitive of this new generation’s battles.” His desire for a “definitive” account of the ongoing war—a narrative arc with a beginning, an end, and a takeaway message—is built on a conventional understanding of what warfare is and should be. Gallagher is attached to the idea that wars carried out by the US military are temporary events that necessitate extraordinary means; they conform to a narrative framework (a “generation’s battles” can be told in a “definitive” way) and tell of remarkable times (the subject of a “great” novel). And yet there is real danger in addressing the War on Terror in these terms when considering the continuity between it and the many undeclared and uncompleted wars of the twentieth century.

Although their work is unlikely to meet Gallagher’s criteria for GWOT fiction, many of today’s novelists are indirectly engaging with the War on Terror by returning to midcentury Korea. While commentators continue to characterize the years since 2001 as an unparalleled era, these authors foreground the history of the Korean War to suggest otherwise. However subtly, they trace the rhetorical and material origins of the War on Terror back to 1945, when the US established a military government in Korea, and 1950, when the war began in earnest. It was Korea, they remind us, that provided the rationale for building a permanent standing military and a network of more than seven-hundred military installations around the world. Those mining this history include some of the most acclaimed American novelists writing today: Ha Jin in *War Trash* (2004), Philip Roth in *Indignation* (2008), Chang-rae Lee in *The Surrendered* (2010), and Toni Morrison in *Home* (2012). In what could be called the literature of the long War on Terror, these authors do not merely suggest a similarity between Korea and today’s antiterrorist wars but a continuity. Never formally declared, the Korean War was the first in a series of modern-day conflicts in which the newly formed Department of Defense would navigate around the very idea of war, seeking the endorsement of the United Nations Security Council rather than Congress and characterizing it as a safety measure—a “police action,” not a war. To this day the Korean War has not officially ended; an armistice, not a peace treaty, was signed in 1953, and there are still 40,000 American military personnel stationed in South Korea.<sup>3</sup> These twenty-first-century Korean War novels highlight the enduring nature of American warfare by fracturing the timeframe of the conventional war novel favored by Gallagher. Lee backtracks to 1930s Manchuria, which some consider the true beginning of the Korean War,<sup>4</sup> while Roth recounts the early 1950s from the perspective of an already dead American soldier.

But Ha Jin’s *War Trash* offers what may be the most direct counterhistory of the nation’s permanent state of emergency. *War Trash* is devised as the memoir of Chinese veteran Yu Yuan, a POW during Korea. In the novel’s twenty-first-century present, Yuan is visiting his son and grandchildren in

Atlanta where he sits down to record what he witnessed during the war. This frame narrative is revealing in how it casts the War on Terror as a legacy of Korea. When encountering the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) at customs, Yuan is concerned by an old tattoo on his stomach, which reads, “FUCK . . . U . . . S . . .” This tattoo, we later learn, was branded on him during the war by Chinese Nationalists (those who would immigrate to Taiwan after the signing of the armistice) as “FUCK COMMUNISM” and later altered in China to an anti-American message. Observed by a TSA officer, Yuan recounts, “my heart fluttered like a trapped pigeon, afraid that the husky, cheerful-voiced officer might suspect something—that he might lead me into a room and order me to undress. The tattoo could have caused me to be refused entry to the States” (3). During the Korean War, Yuan was among the biological stakes (the “war trash”) of the conflict, branded by one side and then the other before returning to China as a suspected traitor. Under the watch of the Department of Homeland Security’s most visible agency, he senses this same bodily vulnerability. Yuan is once again worried about the political content of his body, as a thing to be concealed, regulated, monitored, and “refused entry.” In this Pulitzer Prize-nominated novel, Ha Jin identifies the global biopolitical logic of the War on Terror as arising from the Korean War-era ascendancy of the US military. Yuan recognizes that the “metaphor of war” is not merely invoked but actualized on a permanent basis by the United States. With this knowledge, he writes his memoir from Georgia in English so that his American children and grandchildren might one day understand his life in East Asia—and locate their country, as an enduring military presence, in the world.

Certainly re-narrating modern American wars as continuous rather than bounded—as a single unending state of emergency—is not achievable in one, or even a dozen, novels. However, when taken together, this growing body of literature articulates an emerging counterhistory of the American warfare state that refuses Gallagher’s call for “definitive” literary accounts of war. Novels are not manifestos, of course, and it would be ungenerous to read them as if they were. But they do tend to serve as revealing cultural barometers, identifying social shifts that are sometimes only beginning to crystallize. In the case of the twenty-first-century Korean War novel, the renewed cognizance of this little-known but formative war in US history may signal a transition in how Americans think about the exceptions taken by the state and the way they get told afterward. The contributors to this issue bring to light other residual, dominant, and emergent attitudes toward exceptionalism as they have changed and evolved throughout American history. They chart the many counterhistories advanced by literary authors, counterhistories in which the state’s disavowed violences are neither absolved nor rendered extraordinary. While the nation’s narratives of exception and technologies of war continue to evolve, as Snowden’s global surveillance disclosures demonstrate, so too does this literary antithesis.

The following essays trace narrative challenges to exceptionalist nationalism across three centuries of literary history. Considering the effect of 9/11 on how Americans' conceive of the future, Aaron DeRosa suggests that present-day US culture is marked by a strange "nostalgia for the future." Whereas the Cold War-era National Security State imagined a teleological future of ever-widening American influence around the world, today's Homeland Security State is instead organized around a backward-looking nostalgia for this former era and its imagined future. Analyzing Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and Lauren Groff's *Arcadia* (2012), DeRosa theorizes a genre that criticizes this exceptionalist nostalgia by combining mimetic narratives of the past with speculative representations of the near future, a "proleptic nostalgia fiction." Whereas Pease has argued that the traumatizing images of the nation's disavowed histories might offer sites from which to advance alternatives to the dominant state fantasy (38-39), DeRosa contends that speculative literary futures, which trouble the arrogance of military preemption, provide another course by which to counter exceptionalist violences.

Focusing on one of today's most celebrated writers in Louise Erdrich, Susan Strehle meanwhile considers a novel that does not move forward but back to the historical lynching of three Native Americans in Emmons County, North Dakota, at the turn of the twentieth century. Erdrich's *The Plague of Doves* (2008), she argues, reimagines this history while revealing the national myths (Manifest Destiny, Virgin Land) that facilitated the erasure of the genocidal wars against Native Americans. Though disavowed, this history lingers in the subconscious, the "unknown dreams," of Erdrich's fictional North Dakota town. While Leslie Marmon Silko has criticized Erdrich for prioritizing aesthetics over politics, Strehle underscores the way in which she in fact employs narrative style to political ends, fracturing and reorienting the reductive history of a nation with a destiny.

Turning to the nineteenth century, John Havard analyzes Herman Melville's novella "Benito Cereno" (1855) to shed light on narrator Amasa Delano's racist view of Cereno. Whereas previous criticism has focused more on Delano's anti-black racism, Havard instead considers how Delano understands Cereno according to the "exceptionalist discourse of Hispanicism": the nineteenth-century attitude that Hispanophone people were not only violent tyrants but inefficient as well, unsuited for managerial roles in the capitalist world. Contra previous critics, however, he does not attribute Delano's views to the author but rather reveals how Melville provides a critical commentary on Hispanicism by ironizing Delano's perspective. In this way Melville challenges an "exceptionalist cosmopolitanism" that assumes Americans to be exclusively suited for benevolent global governance, and he advances an alternative "cosmopolitan awareness" that remains wary of identity categories and exceptionalist beliefs.

While Havard recounts the rise of early internationalist exceptionalism, Mary Vermillion considers the narrative arc of its long-feared decline. She argues that exceptionalists have repeatedly mobilized the tragic genre to glorify the nation's pursuit of freedom and aggrandize its fall. Analyzing Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991)—a modernized retelling of *King Lear* set in the wake of the Vietnam War—she suggests that Smiley allegorizes her main characters Larry and Ginny Cook, with Larry representing exceptionalists' celebration of the human will at the cost of others' freedoms and Ginny embodying Americans' belief in their own innocence, as dissociated from and victimized by the state. The novel dramatizes the social complexity of life in the United States, never altogether free nor altogether innocent but inevitably entangled in an often troubling national history.

Characterizing the War on Terror as the fulfillment of the exceptionalist narrative, William Spanos reveals the way in which five nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural works forecast this discursive end of exceptionalism. When George W. Bush addressed Congress on September 20, 2001, he invoked the genre of the American jeremiad wherein the United States is a chosen but ever-threatened nation. His shock-and-awe war in the Middle East would, moreover, render the long-disavowed violences of the state visible to Americans and the world. In this regard, Spanos argues, the War on Terror embodies the "liminality" of US exceptionalism in which it is revealed as spectacle or "self-de-structs," in Heideggerian terms. Analyzing American literature from Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1850) to Michael Herr's Vietnam memoir *Dispatches* (1977), he traces a literary prehistory to this post-9/11 liminality. These literary works in different ways suggest that at this discursive end of exceptionalism Americans might retrieve language from the spectacle and once again act as a polity.

Taken together, these five essays scrutinize exceptionalist national narratives and the literary counterhistories advanced from Melville to Erdrich. By noting the centrality of "metaphor" and "vocabulary" to warmaking, Agamben locates storytelling at the heart of sovereign power in the United States. But the contributors to this issue emphasize that how these stories get told—how we situate ourselves in relation to the world—has very real effects on the conduct of a nation mired in permanent war and its own narratives of exception.

## NOTES

I would like to thank the anonymous readers who contributed their time and wide-ranging knowledge to this issue. I would also like to thank the editors, Gina Barreca and Margaret Mitchell, for allowing me to collect and edit this set of essays, and Donald Pease, to whom this issue is indebted in many ways. Lastly, for sharing their insightful and original work, I am very grateful to the contributors: Aaron DeRosa, Susan Strehle, John Havard, Mary Vermillion, and William Spanos. Thank you.

1. These lines are taken from George W. Bush's 2004 State of the Union address, in which he characterized the United States as a "nation with a mission" with "no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire." Simultaneously, however, he represents this call to war as extraordinary: "we sense that we live in a time set apart. . . . And even some of the youngest understand that we are living in historic times."

2. By using the term "organized state violence," Rowe is able to disassociate war from the state's claim to defining what does and does not constitute warfare. This category would include slavery, the CPUSA's war on capitalism, and the many overlooked "small wars" (821–22, 829). Dudziak, on the other hand, uses the state's definition of war against itself, recounting a military history of permanent war through the eligibility criteria for combat medals and membership in veterans' organizations.

3. In Bruce Cumings account, it was the Korean War—aggravated by the "loss" of China in 1949—that provided the rationale for building a permanent standing military and a global network of more than seven hundred military installations throughout Europe and Asia. There are still tens of thousands of American soldiers stationed at South Korean bases today (*Dominion* 395).

4. When Japan invaded northeast China in 1931 and installed the puppet state of Manchukuo, Koreans represented the vast majority of resisters. Among them was the man who would later take the name Kim Il Sung. There was, however, a small number of Koreans who joined the Manchukuo Imperial Army, an arm of the Imperial Japanese Army. Among them was future President of South Korea Park Chung Hee (Shin'ichi 259). For North Koreans, this anticolonial war produced Korean heroes (Kim Il Sung) and traitors (Park Chung Hee), a history that would directly inform the Korean War of the early 1950s. "They essentially," Cumings writes, "saw the war in 1950 as a way to settle the hash of the top command of the South Korean army, nearly all of whom had served the Japanese" (*Korean War* 44–45).

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## **The End of Futurity: Proleptic Nostalgia and the War on Terror**

AARON DEROSA

It was always the becoming he dreamed of, never the being.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*

People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint—it's more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly . . . time-y wimey . . . stuff.

—Doctor Who, “Blink”

In its single season run, ABC's *Flash Forward* (2009) narrates the consequences of a mysterious event that causes the entire world to black out for two minutes in which they can see themselves six months in the future. The foreknowledge sparks confusion, anger, and terror, as a wife sees herself with a different man, a suicidal cancer patient is alive and happy, and an FBI agent sees absolutely nothing. Of course, the future does not appear to be written in stone: knowing the future impacts one's decisions. Although not a wholly original concept—Philip K. Dick explored a similar idea in “The Minority Report” (1956)—it resonates differently in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Where America's triumphalism of the post-Cold War 1990s “summoned us all to live permanently in the future” (DeLillo 33), the attacks shattered the illusion of a future attained. This collapse has haunted the US in ways not fully understood yet. As American policy shifted from a Cold War “National Security State” to the War on Terror's “Homeland Security State,” so too did the temporal direction of the exceptionalist project. Where the former sought to secure the future of liberal democracy abroad, from Latin America to the Far East, the latter has been dominated by domestic security and is nostalgic in orientation. This nostalgia has already been registered in countless cultural forms, and literature has specifically responded with texts as diverse as Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* and Ronald Sukenick's *Last Fall*.

But there is a unique literary strain that dialectically responds to the temporal shift in American exceptionalism that I have elsewhere called a

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“nostalgia for the future.” In the aftermath of the attacks, Americans may have lamented the post-lapsarian condition of the nation-state, but they also longed for a future exceptional status that would now never come to be. And a growing number of texts have tapped into this undercurrent. An emergent genre of fiction seems to have arisen out of this concern. Two paradigmatic texts, Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and Lauren Groff’s *Arcadia* (2012), are both mimetic narratives that begin in the reader’s familiar past (the 1970s) and intersect with the historical record (9/11), but end in an imagined future (2021 and 2019, respectively). Rendered sensible by the preceding narration, these projected futures respond to the United States’ sense of futurity in an age where the liberal democratic project seems to have ended before its time, and critique the stalled nostalgia of contemporary American exceptionalism.

### A TIME OF INCOMPLETION

Groff’s *Arcadia* paints a vision of the United States in the 1970s as a terrifying place, described in terms of rampant apocalyptic (atomic) anxiety, embroilment in Vietnam, and the increasing conservatism of Cold War political culture. Yet the idealism of the liberal democratic project remains alive, displaced onto a hippie commune in upstate New York. As Abe Stone, the father of the novel’s protagonist, Bit, and one of the founding fathers of the commune, explains, “What we wanted to do was unusual. Pure. Live with the land, not on it. Live outside the evil of commerce and make our own lives from scratch. Let our lives be a beacon to light up the world” (14). Just as Abe’s presumption of purity echoes John Winthrop’s vision of America as a city on a hill, the commune duplicates many of the problems of the exceptionalist mythos entwined in American history, and the first two sections of the novel demonstrate the rise and fall of this ersatz utopian space. Section 1, which narrates the extensive renovation of a dilapidated mansion where the “free people” of *Arcadia* might live, articulates how such an exceptionalist project must come into being. As Donald Pease suggests, exceptionalism is less a condition than it is a “process whereby citizens established an exemplary national order” (33).

*Arcadia* thus eschews a static model of exceptionalism that categorizes communities as “‘distinctive’ (meaning merely different), or ‘unique’ (meaning anomalous), or ‘exemplary’ (meaning a model for other nations to follow), or that it is ‘exempt’ from the laws of historical progress (meaning that it is an ‘exception’ to the laws and rules governing the development of other nations)” (Pease 9). Rather, the novel depicts exceptionalism as a process of creating, extending, and legitimizing a “state fantasy” of national identity (2). When the free people arrive at this unkept mansion, whose doorway bears the inscription “Et in Arcadia Ego” (“Even in Arcadia, I [Death] exist”;

29), they construct just such a fantasy. The phrase comes from Virgil and two well-known seventeenth-century paintings by Nicolas Poussin. In the latter's compositions, two shepherds encounter the inscription on a tomb in the idyllic pastoral landscape. The free people of Arcadia respond to the inscription by misreading the Latin "ego" as egotism, eliding the implied subject (Death), and appropriating the idyllic name Arcadia. Notably, they doubly misread the carving, as they fail to acknowledge the line was "hastily chiseled" above the front door (29), implying the house may have already been abandoned or in decline when it was marked. The misreadings demonstrate the free people's erasure of death and decay, and the commune is founded on an assumption of unbounded futurity.

That futurity, David Noble argues, is endemic to exceptionalist fantasies, which he argues are constructed on a "two world" metaphor: one world envisioned as a timeless and immutable natural state to which a nation aspires, the other a realm of culture and imagination in which nations currently exist. Noble's argument that modern nations believed their cultures had "grown out of the national landscape" privileged a vision of the nation as participating in an exodus from one world into another, from timefulness into timelessness (*Death* xxvii): "Today we are trapped in the meaningless flux of time. Tomorrow we will be free from history" (*Debating* 1). Such a vision of timelessness stands in contrast to the generational world where nations rise and fall, and markets boom and bust. Such timefulness structures *Arcadia's* four sections that loosely conform to another of Poussin's paintings, "A Dance to the Music of Time." Identified by Groff as part of her inspiration for the novel, "A Dance to the Music of Time" depicts a circle of four dancing figures representing the cycle of poverty, labor, wealth, and pleasure. Groff writes, "The painting itself is lovely, complacent, but the sky is darkening" ("Monsters of Academia"). The novel not only transcribes the individual's encounter with finality at the tomb, but also the cyclicity of the "human condition" ("A Dance").

The ideal toward which the free people of Arcadia strive, however, is envisioned as free from such cyclicity. Theirs is a teleological narrative of progress, an exodus from time that will be realized with the completed renovations to Arcadia House. This triumph will allow the free people to abandon their lean-tos and buses that currently comprise "Ersatz Arcadia," downhill from the mansion. Literally a hilltop beacon of light, Arcadia House is the metaphorized exceptional state that Bit mistakenly calls a "renovelation," which his mother in turn interprets as a "re-novelization," a "Reimagining [of] our story" (18). But to achieve such a status, exceptions must be made. First the "nonhierarchical society" is amended for the construction process (12), and later, a division of labor is erected that duplicates the broader gender politics of the time. "If we had centralized child care and cooking," Abe suggests, "we could actually get enough work done to support ourselves and make money. . . . Maybe even make a profit this year" (32). It may be these

exceptions that prompt discomfort from Handy, the spiritual leader of the commune, when the renovations are completed at the end of section 1. While the discomfort is never identified, and could be attributed to his being kept in the dark about the project—Abe secretly marshaled the effort while Handy was away—Handy’s disappointment might also be a recognition that the project represents a false idealism. The path to Arcadia House is not the exodus into the timelessness of an exceptional state envisioned by the free people of Arcadia.

The construction of Arcadia House speaks to the two world metaphor that undergirds American exceptionalism. Interestingly, the novel is set in a period of dramatic change in how Americans envisioned their exceptionalist goal. Beginning in the 1940s, an increasing internationalism prompted a shift from seeing “nations as expressions of the state of nature to seeing the international marketplace as the state of nature” (Noble, *Death* xxvii). This shift from nations to markets as the natural and stable goal of the exceptionalist project makes sense after World War II in which international markets opened on an unprecedented scale. The result was a feeling among the middle classes of a shift from complexity to simplicity; that the “Artful, particular, timeful national economies were about to be replaced by an artless, universal, timeless global economy. . . . Now we were reaching the end of history” (*Debate* 16). However, in order to bring about such a universal marketplace, America, as the “Leader of the Free World” in Harry Truman’s postwar words, needed to expand its scope. To meet the challenge, the United States passed the National Security Act of 1947 to expand liberalism on a global scale through direct military intervention (Turkey, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan), covert insurgency (Chile, Nicaragua, Iran), and economic engagements (Cuba on one end of the spectrum, Japan on the other).<sup>1</sup> The ideological threat posed by the Soviet Union in particular not only challenged the possibility of an exodus into a timeless global economy, but also the teleological narrative of American liberal progress. The National Security State thus sought to bring about the exceptionalist state through the imperialistic expansion of markets and the eradication of the “un-American ‘other’” (Hogan 17).

The collapse of the Soviet Union legitimized American foreign policy in the minds of many Americans and heralded what Tom Engelhardt dubbed American victory culture, and what Francis Fukuyama triumphantly declared as the “end of history.”<sup>2</sup> It is in this context that the 1990s prompted Americans to envision the exceptionalist project as either nearing completion, or already attained. The bifurcation between these two visions—the nearly accomplished and the accomplished—can be understood in terms of what Giorgio Agamben describes as “messianic time.” Like Noble’s (similarly biblical) exodus from time, Agamben’s messianic time is neither chronological (the minute-by-minute of our lives) nor is it eschatological (in which time comes to an end); it encompasses both the retrospection of the past and the anticipation of the future.<sup>3</sup> “It is the time that contracts itself and begins to finish”

(Agamben 2). Messianic time refers to the remembrance of all past moments that prepares us for a future that is in the process of coming into being.

Messianic time thus productively identifies the confusing temporality of the exceptionalist exodus from one world into another. This process registers both a sense of incompleteness and anticipation, a sense that the future may, at any point, manifest in the present moment. It is this feeling that *Arcadia's* five-year-old focalizer, Bit, experiences when he perceives the renovation of Arcadia House in terms of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. *Grimm* structures Bit's perceptual field. "Separate drawers emerge in his mind, now, to sort people into" (42): Handy is "a frog king," while others take on the characteristics of woodsmen, ogres, and queens. In particular, Bit latches on to the story of the "Six Swans" in which a princess's brothers are turned into swans. The princess is cursed for six years, during which she must remain mute and sew shirts for them. When the curse lifts, the princess has finished all but one arm, resulting in the sixth brother maintaining a single swan wing.

It is through this story that Bit makes sense of living in messianic time. The "Six Swans" is a story of anticipated release and the specter of incompleteness, and Bit has remained mute through much of the first section in solidarity with his depressed mother, Hannah. Although the completion of Arcadia House promises an exodus into the exceptionalist future, and Hannah along with the rest of the free people are restored, Bit is compelled to remain silent. A momentary lapse, however, yields a stifled laugh, which coincides with Abe falling from the roof whereby he loses the use of his legs. The juxtaposition of the speech act with Abe's injury suggests the "curse" of timefulness remains active, and the completed House was not the teleological exodus the Arcadians imagined. And yet the house summons the free people to live in the future, and elides the internal fractures within the community.

### EXCEPTIONALISM AFTER THE FALL

The 2001 terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center seemingly brought American futurity to an end, and augured in an anxious uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> One way this manifested was through a profound distortion of the spatial and temporal orientation of the exceptionalist project. Whereas the National Security Act promoted a liberal democratic expansion abroad as the process to achieving a timeless future, the Homeland Security Act affirms national boundaries and is primarily post-lapsarian in sentiment. The Act's stated objectives are to "guard the nation's borders, prevent domestic terrorist attacks, create a national defense strategy, and reduce damage from natural disasters and terrorist acts" (Harper). From TSA security to increased immigration restrictions, the temporal direction of the Homeland Security State is primarily nostalgic for a Virgin Land. Contemporary scholars have acknowledged this change in terms of the rhetoric deployed, as when Marc Redfield analyzes "9/11"

as a pure, numerical, and distinctly American marker (16), or Pease's argument that "Ground Zero" and "Homeland" replace the Virgin Land metaphor (158). Referring to the new deployment of the term "homeland," Amy Kaplan comments that the Bush Administration went "through great lengths to tighten and shore up those borders, legally, politically, and militarily. . . . The word 'homeland' contributes to the cultural work of securing national borders, while it also produces a sense of radical insecurity" ("Homeland" 59). The risk of creating such a secured space, Kaplan writes elsewhere, is the possibility of "reinstating a teleological linear narrative of historical continuity, of viewing American history, even in its imperial dimensions, as a singular march from Columbus to the Puritans to the Monroe Doctrine to twentieth-century military interventions to the Bush doctrine—and practice—of preemptive strikes" ("Tenacious" 36). The new discourse of the homeland revivifies an isolationist discourse that elides the imperialist dimensions of drawing such borders.

It is these types of discriminations through which Bit is enculturated in Arcadia over the intervening decade between sections 1 and 2. Now 14 in 1982, Bit reflects on the newcomers to the commune: "There are good Newbies who believe in work and poverty and simple food. And there are others, freeloaders, Trippies and Runaways, people hiding out here, diluting the pure beliefs of the Old Arcadians" (101). Bit's language testifies to the strain placed on a community that ballooned from 50 to 900, bearing with it a set of "layered tensions . . . the overcrowding, the hunger" (85). He perceives these tensions against a foundational purity, but neglects the fact that such purity is repeatedly undermined by the public disagreements between the founding fathers, Abe and Handy. Indeed, Abe and his wife, Hannah, have secretly raised a giant pot crop against the commune's wishes to help fund Arcadia's growing consumption. And Arcadia House, formerly a marker of Arcadia's exceptionalist status, now simply duplicates the outside world. As one living in Ersatz Arcadia puts it, "Handy goes on about equality and subverting the hegemony, but Arcadia's no different from anywhere else. You all are up on your hill. We're down here in the mud" (104). And Bit only vaguely recognizes the privilege he holds in the community.

Situating himself among the Old Arcadians, Bit perpetuates a minoritizing discourse against the newbies, who stand outside of the exceptionalist Arcadian mythos. Arjun Appadurai notes that such a discourse is endemic to liberal social thought, whose condition is marked by an "anxiety of incompleteness" which arises out of the process of creating categories of majority and minority (8). In the liberal tradition, minority populations, from the perspective of the majority, always stand as an impediment to a pure community. "They are embarrassments to any state-sponsored image of national purity and state fairness. They are thus scapegoats in the classical sense" (42). One of the characteristics of these majority/minority categories is that they bear an implicit fear that the categories can be flipped. This fear derives from

the association of a small internal minority population with a larger external majority.<sup>5</sup> This is precisely the sentiment Bit expresses when he associates the Newbies with the untrustworthy hordes from the outside world that threaten Arcadia's purity. This comes to a head when Arcadia's annual Cockaigne Day celebration promises a massive influx of unwanted visitors. The community must vote on whether to keep true to their ideal of openness, or close the borders and preserve the commune. They choose the former, but with disastrous results.

Despite the barbarians at the gate story spun by the "pure" Arcadians, loose border security and naïve idealism are not the cause of the commune's demise. More precisely, the destruction of Arcadia happens from within, in the minoritizing discourse that separates Newbies from Old Arcadians, Outsiders from Insiders. Anger and violence arise from the "complex interactions between faraway events and proximate fears, between old histories and new provocations, between rewritten borders and unwritten orders" (Appadurai 100). In the Newbies and Outsiders, the Arcadians duplicate the broader national discourse from which they fled. Despite isolating themselves, the Arcadians still think in terms of nuclear anxiety and peace marches, Reagan's War on Drugs and the Vietnam draft. They transcribe the faraway events of late-twentieth-century American history into their own proximate fears within Arcadia. And it is from this process that the minoritizing discourse arises within Arcadia—not from the threatening bands of Outsiders looking to participate in the commune's Cockaigne Day celebration.

This discourse is most readily apparent in Bit's would-be romance with Handy's daughter, Helle, who returns from the Outside at the beginning of section 2. While she is technically an Old Arcadian, she is not treated as such. Handy all but disowns her, and others describe her as "*Acting out since she's been back*" (134). Even Bit, who is smitten, enacts this communal sentiment. He laments that he "can't see the old Helle under the new gloss and glamour of the Outside in her" (86). Bit is drawn to her, but remains distant, and describes his relationship to her in terms of a mission statement:

He takes photograph after photograph of Helle, and she vamps for him, blushing under his attention, flaring her fingers like gills, moueing like a model. Every photo takes him a hairsbreadth closer to her, to the essential core of Helle, a purified Helle that he will one day hand back to her on a sheet of photographic paper.

Here, he imagines himself saying. This is you.

She will look at the print and know herself, at last, and she will wonder how she missed herself all along. Helle, seeing Helle as clearly as she sees the rest of the world: this is something to be dreamed of. (125)

The discordance between what must be Helle's perception of her act (moueing like a model) and Bit's (flaring fingers like gills) is telling. For Bit, Helle must be purified by purging her of her Outsider status, constructing her Insider identity for her through his photography.

Bit's affection prompts him to take a leap of faith and entrust her with the information of the hidden pot crop. Treated like an insider now, Helle betrays Bit by giving the pot to the newbies, and then sleeping with a pair of Outsiders at the Cockaigne Day celebration. Her egocentrism, however, does not return her to Outsider status, but actually aligns her with the other Arcadians; in the wake of the festival fiasco (a death brings the FBI and the collapse of Arcadia), the free people vulture the communal belongings as they flee the commune. Bit is forced to admit that Helle's egotism is no different from anyone else's, a discomfiting reflection of the broader incompleteness of the Arcadian project.

### PROLEPTIC NOSTALGIA

If the first half of Groff's novel encodes the dissolving belief in a teleological narrative of exceptionalist futurity, the second half speaks to and against the uncertainty of the post-9/11 moment. Section 3 jumps forward thirty-five years to 2008, where Bit resides in New York City. Having just been abandoned by his wife, Helle—with whom he has a child after reconnecting years after Arcadia's collapse—Bit's depressive nostalgia mirrors that of the post-9/11 city, which “winces and holds itself more closely” (207). He describes the communal sentiment in the terms established above: the dissolution of a teleological narrative. The impetus for New York's holding itself more closely rests in

the story they had told about themselves from the moment the Dutch decanted from their ships onto the oyster-strewn island and traded land for guilders: that this place filled with water and wildlife was special, rare, equitable. That it could embrace everyone who came here, that there would be room and a chance to thrive, glamour and beauty. That this equality of purpose would keep them safe. (207–08)

Bit is crippled by an overwhelming sense of nostalgia. As a photography professor, his job is “officially to teach the lost art of the darkroom” (176), and assigns his students to go on a “digital fast” for the weekend. His first photo show juxtaposes his friends' “handsome adult Outside faces” against “their achingly tender and open Arcadia faces” (191). And the main narrative arc of this section is Bit's abandonment by Helle and his futile efforts to recover that lost life.

The novel does not end on this note. Instead, it jumps forward another decade to the year 2019, where a pandemic forces Bit, along with his daughter and mother, to return to Arcadia. The temporal leap places the reader's present in the narrator's past, and prompts a series of questions about the nature of the stories we tell ourselves. The Cold War vision of an exodus into timeless futurity, perceived as accomplished in the 1990s, was challenged by the

9/11 attacks. And as Groff demonstrates in section 3, the transition from the nation to the homeland represents not only a shift in the spatial dimensions of American exceptionalism, but the temporal direction as well. Kaplan notes, “‘Homeland’ also connotes a changed relation to history, a reliance on a shared mythic past engrained in the land itself. This implies a sense of time, as well as space, different from nineteenth-century notions of America as a ‘Nation of Futurity,’ throwing off the shackles of the past, or President Kennedy’s rhetoric of the New Frontier” (“Homeland” 60). If 1990s victory culture lived perpetually in the future, then the twenty-first century has seemingly lived in the past, nostalgically returning to a pre-lapsarian innocence.<sup>6</sup>

I have argued elsewhere, however, that Americans also seemed to exhibit a nostalgia for the future, “the sense that, after 9/11, the future Americans felt was divinely ordained, naturally predetermined, and/or socially inevitable was no longer possible” (DeRosa).<sup>7</sup> This nostalgia for the future manifests broadly, from the apocalypticism of contemporary political debates to the alternative history novels that challenge linear temporality and preordained futures.<sup>8</sup> Works like Ken Kalfus’s *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*—in which the War on Terror concludes with a sweeping liberal democratic uprising in the Middle East—articulate other historical possibilities, and direct their nostalgia not toward a lost idyllic past, but for a future that will never be. Groff’s *Arcadia*, as described above, fits within this pattern as well. The dissolution of the exceptionalist narratives of the American city on a hill, Arcadian selflessness, and even the Stone family purity undermine notions of teleological progress.

To address this shift, a number of novels project the nation into the not-too-distant future. Groff’s *Arcadia* and Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are paradigmatic texts in this emerging genre that foregrounds America’s nostalgia for the future: an exceptional future that seemed preordained, but now can no longer exist. I call this new genre *proleptic nostalgia* after Mark Currie’s narratological classifications of prolepsis and Ian Baucom’s analysis of architect John Ruskin. These innovative texts structurally foreground America’s concern over its lost futurity in such a way that warrants a unique classification. As the description of *Arcadia* above demonstrates, the novel is primarily mimetic, set in a fictional past largely familiar to readers, and intersecting with a historically recognizable event, the September 11 attacks. And the same is true for Egan, whose collection of interconnected stories also begins in the 1970s and weaves through a recognizable history. But both novels disrupt this temporality by concluding in the near future: 2019 and 2021, respectively. Such projections are profound, imaginative, odd, insightful, and provocative. And framed as they are in the context of otherwise mimetic narratives, they structurally negotiate the complex nostalgia of the post-9/11 moment. Along with a handful of other novels, Groff and Egan represent a hybrid genre that anchor speculative projections of the future within traditional mimetic fiction.

The future is a complex concept that denotes, in Baucom's analysis of Ruskin, "both the pleasure of that which is yet to come and the anticipated pleasure of looking back on the present from afar, from a distance at which the present becomes an absent past that may be nostalgically recuperated" (51). Pleasure derives, that is, not just from anticipation, but the "anticipation of retrospection" (Currie 30): that the present will be worthy of remembrance in some future. One of the ways this manifests is through the narratological term, prolepsis ("he would regret becoming a New York Mets fan") that negotiates the distance between some future point (in which the Mets are bad [2013]) and the present (in which the Mets are good [2000]). Annie McClanahan adeptly demonstrates how this narrative technique is used in post-9/11 fiction such as David Foster Wallace's "The Suffering Channel" (more familiar to readers might be Messud's *The Emperor's Children* or Andre Dubus III's *The Garden of Last Days*), set in the days and months prior to 9/11, but situating the reader in a position of suspense and anticipation, as he/she knows what will happen in the fall of 2001. Doing so, McClanahan states, "compels [readers] to inhabit two opposed modes of historical consciousness at once: the naivety of a 'pre-9/11' mindset, in which the names and dates are meaningless, and the knowing judgment of a 'post-9/11' mindset, in which the meaning of the events is inscribed as having been always already present within them" (55). The texts McClanahan identifies fit within a traditional model of prolepsis, narrating from a present understood to be the same as the reader's.

Proleptic nostalgia fiction, however, operates differently. Currie states that prolepsis requires a complex relationship between "three time loci that structure the communication: the time locus of the narrated, the time locus of the narrator, and the time locus of the reader" (31). In mimetic fiction, the time locus of the narrated and the narrator always precedes that of the reader, as the reader always encounters events that have already happened. Currie identifies one form of prolepsis as "rhetorical prolepsis" in which a narrator anticipates a reader's future objection ("Now, you might say this tale is too unbelievable, but hear me out"). Rhetorical prolepsis such as the strategy we see in Wallace's "The Suffering Channel" negotiates the space "between the time locus of the narrator and the time locus of the reader" (31) through an implied understanding of what will happen in mid-September 2001. Proleptic nostalgia operates similarly, but here the time locus of the narrated and narrator chronologically follow the time locus of the reader. In doing so, it creates discordance in the dynamic of narrated-narrator-reader. Because the text is primarily mimetic, the idea that the narrator can speak of the reader's future situates the reader within the text's past. It reverses the order of awareness from "reader > narrator > narrated" to "narrator > narrated > reader." It places the reader in the position of a past that, according to Ruskin, will be nostalgically recuperated some day.

There is certainly an affinity between what I am calling proleptic nostalgia and the vibrant contemporary discussion about preemption. As David

Palumbo-Liu argues, preemption is predicated on an imagined future; specifically, “the Imagination is retooled to serve a pathological purposefulness that exploits the fearsome elements of an obsessive use of Imagination” (161). Tellingly, the *9/11 Commission Report* identified “imagination” as one of the failures prior to the attacks (339), and one of the challenges of responding to terrorism is to “think the unthinkable.” One method to meet this challenge was borrowed from corporate strategists in the form of “scenario-thinking,” which involves imagining an outcome and then trying “to develop plausible scenarios to show how these events might occur” (McClanahan 46). That is, they start with the end result and work backward. This logic undergirds the doctrine of preemption, which “brings the future fully into the present, creating a temporal compression that makes a distant, possible future appear present and certain” (48). The imagined becomes the actual. The creativity of fiction takes on unprecedented importance in this front in the War on Terror. Alan Nadel recognized this in his analysis of the “novelistic qualities” of the *9/11 Commission Report* that sought to bring order to the swirl of history (31).

Such re-novelization, to appropriate Bit’s term, of our future is precisely the subject of proleptic nostalgia fiction. Written in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the War on Terror, the global recession, and the post-2008 partisan stalemate in Washington, the twenty-first century hardly seems worth remembering. Americans live in a nation whose teleological narrative of progress toward an exceptional world has been profoundly distorted, and in need of a reimagined story. It is in this context we might consider the thirteen interwoven chapters of Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* whose title is clarified halfway through the novel: “Time’s a goon, right? Isn’t that the expression?” (127). Fittingly, the expression is uttered by Bosco, a washed-up, overweight musician trying to create a linear narrative that explains his life. His pitch to his publicist: “The album’s called *A to B*, right? . . . And that’s the question I want to hit straight on: how did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?” (127). Bosco proposes a national comeback tour in which he will duplicate his frenetic, all-out performances from the height of his career in the 1970s. But Bosco’s returning to the glory of his past in the present (2004) is implausible and dangerous. While his PR agent tactfully avoids saying the tour would probably kill him in his current physical condition, Bosco anticipates her concern and responds, “That’s the *whole point*. We know the outcome, but we don’t know when, or where, or who will be there when it finally happens. It’s a Suicide Tour” (129). Bosco proposes his last performance be a deathly spectacle, a final artistic act that brings the anticipated future (his inevitable death) into the present. Three years after the September 11 attacks that loom over these stories, Bosco’s rationale echoes the logic of the suicide bomber.<sup>9</sup> But if Bosco’s plan is an act of terrorism, it is also an act of scenario thinking, imagining the future and the steps to summon it.

If the album's title purports to bridge the gap between past (rock star) and present (fat fuck no one cares about), then the tour bridges the gap between the present (fat fuck) and future (the famous-in-death artist). Bosco's efforts are indicative of the futile efforts of the novel's other characters that seek to draw a straight line between "then" and "not yet." The album title even names the novel's two sections, "A" and "B." The question of "what happened between A and B" (101), uttered in the last chapter of section A and the first chapter of section B, structurally extends one of the novel's overarching thematics: making sense of time. Suspended in a state of ignorance, readers of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* must anticipate, project, and imaginatively construct the connections between these nonlinear, multiply-focalized stories. As two different characters put it at different times, they feel as if they "were looking back" on themselves from some distant future (65, 336). And it is this sensibility that drives the novel's conclusion as Egan pushes past the constraints of historical time into the near future.

The narrator gestures toward the type of detective work readers will be asked to perform through traditional proleptic flash forwarding in chapter 4 (1973). The chapter begins with a nostalgic invocation, as Rolph—the child of a legendary music producer who refuses to grow old—demands his father and the others remember their last family vacation to Hawaii: his first four speech acts begin with the word "remember." Yet Rolph's nostalgia for the past is juxtaposed with the heterodiegetic narrator's nostalgia for the future, as she insistently interjects information from their future. "He [Rolph] thinks, I'll remember this night for the rest of my life. And he's right" (63). Rolph anticipates the present as a future object of nostalgia, and this is confirmed by the narrator. The future blasts through this story, as each character's life is briefly sketched into the present (2008). The use of narratological prolepsis creates a doubleness in which the reader occupies both a godlike position, having access to the narrative's future, and the suspension of that knowledge that comes when a reader identifies with a character blissfully unaware of what awaits them (Currie, *The Unexpected* 14).

Establishing teleological narratives, however, is not the point. The chapters operate like an out-of-order flipbook that draws more attention to the gaps than the images themselves. This is precisely the tension chapter 12 highlights thematically and structurally as the novel moves into the near future of 2021. Structurally, the narrator speaks of future events that have not yet happened in the reader's world, but have already happened in the storyworld. Having been acclimated to a familiar world through the preceding eleven chapters, the reader is invited to feel comfortable in the revoking of their godlike access and asked to occupy positions similar to Rolph and the other characters of chapter 4 in their blissful unawareness of what awaits them. "Because the future does not exist, thinking about the future exists in a state of suspense, waiting for its arrival, and for the object of thinking to pass from virtuality into actuality" (Currie, *The Unexpected* 11). The effect is the

generation of a state of anticipation, suspense, and incompleteness between A (the present) and B (the future).

Thematically, the chapter narrates the 13-year-old Lincoln's obsession with "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," the moments of constructed musical gaps like in Jimi Hendrix's "Foxy Lady" and Steve Miller Band's "Fly Like an Eagle." A snapshot of Lincoln's working notes reads: "'Bernadette,' by the Four Tops: 'This is an excellent early pause. The voice tapers off, and then you've still got 1.5 seconds of total silence from 2:38 to 2:39.5, before the chorus kicks back in. You think, Hey, the song didn't end after all—but then, 26.5 seconds later, it does end'" (244). The notes gesture toward the rationale behind Lincoln's obsession. As his mother Sasha explains, "The pause makes you think the song will end. And then the song isn't really over, so you're relieved. But then the song *does* actually end, because every song ends, obviously, and THAT. TIME. THE. END. IS. FOR. REAL" (281). The messianic temporality described here is offset by Lincoln's efforts to master the anxiety attendant to such suspense. Working against this project, however, is the harsh reality that the end is not knowable in the moment. As a song unfolds, it is not known whether one is experiencing a pause or an end. And when song pauses can last over a minute, the anticipation is palpable and terrifying.

The novel's concluding chapter operates similarly. Also set in 2021, a sell-out music promoter named Alex nostalgically repeats a memory of a one-night stand from fifteen years earlier—an encounter narrated in chapter 1 (2006) and focalized through his sexual partner Sasha (Lincoln's mother in 2021). Knowing his current employer, the washed-up producer Bennie, used to work with Sasha, Alex inquires about their relationship, prompting a wave of nostalgia to sweep over Bennie as well. They give in to their shared nostalgia and stop by Sasha's former apartment and ring the buzzer: "Bennie stood close to Alex, and they waited together, suspended in the same precarious excitement" (339). Like the great rock pauses of the preceding chapter, and the replacement of the WTC towers only blocks away from their present location, Bennie and Alex hang suspended between knowing the silent response from the apartment is a pause and knowing it is an end. "And in that moment, the longing he'd felt for Sasha at last assumed a clear shape: Alex imagined walking into her apartment and finding himself still there—his young self, full of schemes and high standards, with nothing decided yet. The fantasy imbued him with careening hope. He pushed the buzzer again, and as more seconds passed, Alex felt a gradual draining loss" (339). The draining of such careening hope, what brings Alex from point A in chapter 1 to point B in chapter 13, remains uncertain and unknowable.

What *Goon Squad* provides, then, is an imagined future akin to the corporate scenario permutations McClanahan described. But rather than map out a teleological narrative, Egan foregrounds the instability and anxiety between the reader's present and future, the gaps in the songs. Prolepsis, Currie tells us, foregrounds the plasticity of the future. The future differs from the present and

past not only because it is “non-actual; it is also open, and in being open, it is subject to our efforts, desires and will” (*The Unexpected* 11). The novel projects this future from the efforts, desires, and will of the tenuous futurity of the post-9/11 moment. Early on, Egan establishes the anxiety attendant to the incomplete skyline. Sasha opines, “It’s incredible . . . how there’s just nothing there. . . . There should be *something*, you know? . . . Like an echo. Or an outline” (36). For Sasha, speaking in 2006, the absent towers are unrecognizable as a pause or an ending in America’s exodus from time; has the exceptionalist project been stalled or has it come to an ignominious end? Twenty years later, the sentiment remains:

The weight of what had happened here more than twenty years ago was still faintly present for Alex, as it always was when he came to the Footprint. He perceived it as a sound just out of earshot, the vibration of an old disturbance. Now it seemed more insistent than ever: a low, deep thrum that felt primally familiar, as if it had been whirring inside all the sounds that Alex had made and collected over the years: their hidden pulse. (331)

Juxtaposed against Alex’s failed idealism and his nostalgic pining for his one night with Sasha, the absent towers testify to the loss of an exceptionalist teleology.

It is through the unique form of prolepsis that readers can both bear witness to the future and situate their present as an object of nostalgic reflection. Unlike prolepsis in traditional mimetic fiction, proleptic nostalgia treats the reader’s future as if it were already lived. The result is a genre structurally invested in imaginative scenarios. Unlike the logic of preemption that operates as if the imagined future were already present, the projection also distances readers, foregrounding the gap between now and soon. The pairing of such a defamiliarizing projection with the familiar mimetic narrative is what gives proleptic nostalgia its distinctiveness.

#### FANTASIES OF THE FUTURE AND POST-9/11 EXCEPTIONALISM

The type of defamiliarizing jump into the future performed in the final chapters of *Goon Squad* threaten to lapse into the science fiction (SF) subgenre of “near future” fiction. Near future fiction is characterized by its depiction of a world that is “imminently real—one of which we can have no definite knowledge, which exists only imaginatively and hypothetically, but which is nevertheless a world in which (or something like it) we may one day have to live, and toward which our present plans and ambitions must be directed” (Stableford). Unlike far future fiction which “tends to be associated with notions of ultimate destiny, and is dominated by metaphors of senescence,” the near future appears more familiar. It also echoes the logic of corporate

scenario-thinking and preemption. And it is perhaps for this reason that there has been such a prolific outpouring of near future fiction in the post-9/11 period (Fox; Newitz). Texts like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, Brian Slattery's *Lost Everything*, Vernor Vinge's *Rainbows End*, and Jane Rogers's *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* envision American surveillance, imperialism, globalization, and ecological destruction in the not-too-distant (20–50 years) future.

This trend away from the far future is noted by eminent SF writer, William Gibson, who published his first non-SF novel (*Pattern Recognition*) after 9/11. When asked in an interview about this choice, Gibson remarked that, “contemporary reality is sufficiently science fiction for me” (Kazan). He continues, “I may not be done with the future but I have to figure out what it means to try to write about the future at a time when we are all living in the shadow of at least half a dozen wildly science fiction scenarios.” Certainly other SF writers have responded to this by narrating stories in the vicinity of the present day, but the examples above propose a greater difference than what we see in proleptic nostalgia fiction. One of the classic definitions of SF proposed by Darko Suvin revolves around the concept of the novum, or “fictional device . . . that focuses the difference between the world the reader inhabits and the fictional world of the SF text” (Roberts 1). These novum generate greater displacement between the reader and the storyworld—warp drive and teleportation, non-gendered or non-corporeal alien races—and prompt ontological interrogations.

In proleptic nostalgia fiction, however, the novum is the temporal jump itself. The storyworld is established as coterminous with the reader's, and the projected future remains familiar. For Groff, whose final section jumps into 2019, Bit and his daughter wait out a pandemic in Arcadia. But the apocalyptic element is undercut by the global death toll maxing out at 750,000, a figure that shouldn't strain the reader's credibility in a world familiar with epidemics of AIDS (1.7 million dead in 2012) and malaria (660,000 dead in 2012). Similarly, Egan's vision of 2021 involves network technology advances akin to Google Glass, nothing consumers couldn't find at their local Best Buy. Juxtaposed against more defamiliarizing nova like McCarthy and Slattery's unidentified apocalypses, Whitehead's zombie plague, Rogers's terrorist-engineered virus that kills pregnant women, or Vinge's avatar-like “overlays,” Egan and Groff are more interested in exploring a future very much like the present. To categorize them as near future SF would undermine the mimetic stakes of their narratives.

Of course, erecting rigid classificatory boundaries is counterproductive. Certainly near future SF is interested in making some parts of the world like the present—hence the need for its nearness. And certainly mimetic fiction must take liberties with how closely it matches the real world, or else it lapses into biography or history. Rather than thinking of proleptic nostalgia as a rigid category, then, we might more appropriately consider it in terms of a graph,

moving horizontally from past to future, and vertically from mimetic to defamiliarized. In this figuration, a novel like McCarthy's *The Road* that takes place fifty years in the future and is virtually unrecognizable from the world of the present falls in one corner, and a text like the *9/11 Commission Report* falls in the other. In the space between we find the proleptic nostalgia of Egan, Groff, and Carolyn See's *There Will Never Be Another You*, which lean toward the mimetic and the future. We might also extend the classification to texts like Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* or Will McIntosh's *Soft Apocalypse*, that stray toward near future fiction by imaginatively projecting a threatened viral outbreak and the consequences of economic upheaval, but gesture more greatly toward mimesis than a novum like Whitehead's zombie plague.

By familiarizing the future, proleptic nostalgia dialectically responds to the type of "state fantasy" construction Pease identifies as the constitutive element of national identities and exceptionalist narratives. Pease argues that the state is constructed by an affective relationship with—the fantasies of—its citizens. That is, national characteristics are not dictated by the sovereign nor do they predate the nation's formation; rather, they are generated by a people's relationship to the nation. Pease goes on to say that traumatic historical events like the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 are difficult to incorporate "within the normal order of things" and, as a result, "these national traumas demarcated the sites at which alternatives to [the state fantasy] became at once imaginable and desirable" (5). For Pease, attending to such moments challenges the exceptionalist fantasy, and it is in this space that the proleptic nostalgia's near future proposes alternatives. These alternatives—in which the world is decaying as a result of a gradual lowering of economic horizons (McIntosh) or increased governmental control (Shteyngart)—are desirable insofar as they respond to and participate in the construction of a national identity.

At the same time, this fiction often generates gaps that subvert efforts to establish a normal order of things, much less a teleological narrative of progress. The concluding chapter of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* narrates the promotion and performance of a concert by Scotty Hausmann, a high school friend of the now-washed up music producer, Bennie. Bennie describes the gig as the culmination of a life-long effort, and Scotty's music is characterized by its resistance to the future. He performs "ballads of paranoia and disconnection ripped from the chest of a man you knew just by looking had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a headset, who was part of no one's data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage, in a way that now registered as pure. Untouched" (336). The triumph of nostalgia that this passage indicates is quickly undermined, though, in that after the concert ends, Alex and Benny walk to Sasha's former apartment where their nostalgic reveries are held up for critique. Indeed, the narrator indicates that even the nostalgia for Scotty's music is a mirage to some degree: "And it may

be that a crowd at a particular moment of history creates the object to justify its gathering, as it did at the first Human Be-In and Monterey Pop and Woodstock. Or it may be that two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar” (335). That is, Scotty’s music possesses no intrinsic purity, no timeless exceptionalism toward which the listeners journey (according to the logic of Noble’s two-world metaphor). Rather, a community constructs its exceptional fantasy in the moment.

This is precisely what Bit suggests at the conclusion of *Arcadia* in 2019. Bit’s narrative cannot be contained within historical time, pushing forward into the reader’s unknown future. The narrator, however, describes Bit’s return to the commune to wait out a pandemic with his daughter and ailing mother. While we might read this return as a nostalgic relapse, Bit does not find resolution in this space. Bit narrates the conclusion with a renewed focus on the present:

Peace, he knows, can be shattered in a million variations: great visions of the end, a rain of ash, a disease on the wind, a blast in the distance, the sun dying like a kerosene lamp clicked off. And in smaller ways: an overheard remark, his daughter’s sour mood, his own body faltering. There’s no use in anticipating the mode. . . . Pay attention, he thinks, Not to the grand gesture, but to the passing breath. (289)

Even as the novel pushes into an imagined future, the protagonist admits the fruitlessness of such futurity. And in this final moment, readers may finally appreciate why the novel is narrated in the present tense; happiness cannot be found in a nostalgic reliving of the past, nor is it about anticipating some future: it is about living in the present. To this end, Bit concludes the novel by letting “the afternoon sink in. . . . In this moment that blooms and fades as it passes, he is enough, and all is well in the world” (289). Longing for a future that may or may not be only elides the present that is.

For both Groff and Egan, the near future promotes a reconsideration of temporality in an era that has come to see its future as unexceptional. America’s anxiety over its lost future necessitates new scenarios be constructed. While the ethos of an American nostalgia for the future is not confined to this emerging genre of proleptic nostalgia fiction, the important distinction is that the genre structurally embeds the consideration of futurity. As Brian Stableford put it, near future SF grapples with imminent conditions, and such fiction’s cross-pollination with mimetic fiction more acutely demonstrates this imminence. It also reinforces the fact that these temporal points—past, present, and future—are not isolatable moments, but rather exist within a dialectical relationship to one another. The future that Americans envision for themselves inevitably shapes the manner in which they live in the present (as well as how they shape their vision of the past).

Arising out of the Homeland Security State's reversal of the nation's temporal direction, proleptic nostalgia fiction should not be assumed to privilege the imperialism of American Cold War politics. As Egan and Groff demonstrate, the quest for purity, whether enacted globally in the National Security State or domestically in the Homeland Security State can lead to "paroxysms of violence" (Appadurai 8) directed at those who stand in the way of the exodus from the actual world to the exceptional world. Proleptic nostalgia fiction, then, promotes what might be considered a post-9/11 ethic of futurity, the Janus-face to Bush's doctrine of preemption. Where preemption seeks to anticipate threats and act beforehand, proleptic nostalgia texts pose alternative futures that complicate such actions. If Americans have, since the attacks, attended to the reconstruction of a glorious vision of the future, proleptic nostalgia fiction asks readers to consider not only the goal of that exceptionalist project, but the process by which it is attained.

## NOTES

The kernel of this idea began with an analysis of Ruskin's "Law of Ruins" and the Twin Towers in Don DeLillo's oeuvre, published in the *Don DeLillo Society Newsletter*. This work spawned an article on "nostalgia for the future" in alternate history and near future fiction in the anthology, *Narrating 9/11: Fantasies of State, Security, and Terrorism*. While much different, this article nonetheless bears the genetic code of its primogenitors and deserves acknowledgment. I would like to specifically thank John Duvall, Brooks Hefner, Sean Grattan, Jason Dodge, and the anonymous readers at *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*.

1. It is true that most of these interventions did not so much directly promote liberal democracy as they did undermine communism. Suffice it to say here that the cognitive dissonance Americans felt regarding these operations was more often than not rooted in the fundamental logic of liberation and expansion.

2. For critiques of Fukuyama's narrative, see Cohen; Pease; Huehls; and Engelhardt.

3. While Noble's two-world metaphor is not coterminous with Agamben's messianic/eschaton, for our purposes they identify the same thing: the coming into being of an exceptional state/state of being.

4. I consciously limit myself to this site. The Pentagon, as a military location, and United 93, as a site of heroism, do not fit into the cultural victimization narratives promoted over the past dozen years. Similarly, they don't carry the symbolic weight of the American liberal economic power as the WTC towers do.

5. Appadurai describes this process at work in the association with minorities of Muslim populations in the West (and in India) that become associated with a larger (more threatening) global Muslim majority.

6. This is true not only of Bush's Homeland Security State that revivifies the domestic as the target of purification, but also Obama's presidency, which similarly attempts to reestablish the promise of liberal democracy at home. Obama's 2008 presidential campaign attempted to suture together "three grand themes" that organize American "positionality": "the American dream, the perfectible Union, the land of promise" (Pease 209). The positionality this inscribes is a domestic project that promises to restore America's lost exceptionalism for those left out of the expansive liberal democratic project of the preceding generations. The mantra "Yes We Can" is a nostalgic return to the constitutional promise of a nation created by and for the people, and drops the pretenses of internationalism altogether. And this nostalgia is not limited to the political sphere; it has been recorded across a swath of American cultural productions. Scholars like David Simpson, Kristiaan Versluys, and Richard Gray have all considered the various ways in which Americans made sense of the attacks by returning to some sense of a stable past within the domestic sphere.

7. Amir Eshel similarly notes, "Facing a recent, traumatic past or imminent destruction, [places like post-9/11 New York] struggle with the sense of a world deprived of a future" (3).

8. See DeRosa.

9. The passage also exposes the confluence of art and terrorism that Don DeLillo identified in both *Mao II* and *Falling Man*.

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## **“Prey to Unknown Dreams”: Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves*, and the Exceptionalist Disavowal of History**

SUSAN STREHLE

But what is the difference between the influence of instinct upon a wolf and history upon a man? In both cases, justice is prey to unknown dreams.

—Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves*

No population has been more significantly harmed by American exceptionalism than the indigenous tribes their colonizers called Indians. To put this under-explored history at its simplest, as many as twelve million indigenous people, living in seven hundred cultural units on the North American continent, were subjected to various forms of “systematic extermination” by European colonizers (Baker 317–18). The cultures and histories of these “Vanishing Americans” were largely erased, leading John Carlos Rowe to call Native Americans “the repressed contents of an imperial cultural consciousness” (197). Indeed, the relationship between American exceptionalism and the repression of its victims’ histories is central to Donald E. Pease’s analysis. Interpreting the exceptionalist myth of America as a “*fantasy*” which attains its efficacy by “supplying its adherents with the psychosocial structures that permitted them to ignore the state’s exceptions,” Pease argues that “structures of disavowal” enabled the state’s exceptions “insofar as they sustained the attitude through which US citizens willfully misrepresented their history as well as their place in the world” (12). This massively subscribed fantasy has enabled citizens to “experience what was exceptional about their US national identity as the disavowal of US imperialism at home and abroad” and then, in a self-confirming strategy, to believe they had achieved the fantasized ideal nation: “After it defined America as the fulfillment of the world’s dream of an ideal nation, the fantasy of American exceptionalism eradicated the difference between the national ideal US citizens wanted and the faulty nation they had” (21–22). In relation to the indigenous peoples whose land they

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expropriated, these “structures of disavowal” enabled Americans to transmogrify a history of genocide into the benign practice of “Manifest Destiny” required for the continent-wide spread of American justice. Disavowal similarly permitted European colonizers to regard the continent they arrived on as *terra nullius* or empty land, to think of Indians as a single homogeneous group of savages, and to justify their own barbarous extermination of Native peoples.<sup>1</sup>

Native studies scholarship and creative work can be understood, in part, as a sustained critique of such disavowals of Native identities and histories and a necessarily political reclamation of tribal rights in America. Louis Owens, for example, argues that the word “Indian” was designed to disavow Native standing and indigeneity: “Native cultures—their voices systematically silenced—had no part in the ongoing discourse that evolved over several centuries to define the utterance ‘Indian’ within the language of the invaders” (7). Jace Weaver links the disavowal of Native indigeneity, coupled with the erasure of Native cultures, to a constructed fiction of the colonizers’ own original inhabitancy: “The declaration of indigenous cultures as vanishing or extinct becomes a means in settler colonies of establishing an uneasy illusion of indigeneity (indigenoussness) on the part of the colonizers” (228). Gerald Vizenor comments that an elision of Native presence was common in American writing before Jefferson: “the *indian* was an absence in histories. That absence has become a theme of romantic tragedy. Many Natives have turned that absence into a fugitive pose” (11). These examples could be amplified at length; recognition of and resistance against a sustained history of disavowal continues to engage Native scholars and writers.

My purpose here is to show that Louise Erdrich, a writer of Chippewa/Ojibwa and German American parentage, recovers in *The Plague of Doves* (2008) Native histories that were systematically disavowed by American exceptionalism and uses postmodern narrative strategies for political ends. Praised in 1999 as “one of the most important Native American writers of the past fifteen years and one of the most accomplished and promising novelists of any heritage now working in the United States” (Beidler and Barton 1), Erdrich was also famously criticized by Leslie Marmon Silko, in a 1986 review of *The Beet Queen*, for pursuing aesthetics at the cost of politics. Silko complained that Erdrich’s prose reflected “academic, post-modern, so-called experimental influences . . . no history or politics intrudes to muddy the well of pure necessity” (179).<sup>2</sup> Erdrich’s postmodernism can be traced to her studies at Johns Hopkins with metafictionist John Barth, whom she calls “a genius, a superb teacher” (Halliday; see also Scott); but in Vizenor’s view, postmodern narrative strategies have a longstanding place in Native storytelling. The separation of aesthetics and politics does not hold in Erdrich’s fourteen novels, which enlist a postmodern aesthetics in the service of a complex politics designed to resist and reverse the disavowal of Native culture. As Rowe puts it, when her texts refuse “to fit correctly the form of the novel,” Erdrich “forces her readers thereby to encounter a political history that

otherwise remains largely unconscious, unseen, unthought, and unfelt” (203). In fact, Erdrich believes that contemporary American Indian writers are called to recover Native histories and stories: “In the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe” (“Where” 48).

While *Plague* was recognized by reviewers as one of Erdrich’s best novels, and while it introduces the community and characters used in Erdrich’s National Book Award winner, *The Round House* (2012), it has not yet received much critical attention.<sup>3</sup> I will argue that this important novel uncovers the long but unrecognized reach of American exceptionalist history into the present. Indeed, *Plague* is especially significant for its exploration of the ways an exceptionalist heritage creates historical erasures, leaving specters of disavowed events and motives to deform relationships among Americans of European, Native, and mixed descent. The novel recovers the historical lynching of three Native Americans, hanged without trial for the murder of several members of a white family. As I will argue in a first section of this essay, Erdrich draws on historical accounts of this little-known event, recasting her sources to emphasize the innocence, generosity, and courage of the Native men and the racist assurance of the Euro-American lynch mob that the Indians are both guilty and expendable. Erdrich moves the event, which occurred in 1897, forward to 1911 in order to place one young victim (who survives) as an elderly member of the community in a fictional North Dakota town called Pluto in the 1960s. Adding to the irony of the lynchings, she adds a backstory, also drawn from history: some years before the hangings, Native guides lead a group of Euro-Americans west, enabling them to claim the land that later becomes Pluto.<sup>4</sup> The guides’ youngest brother will be one of the victims of the lynching, orchestrated by the very men whose colonization of western lands was enabled by the guides. Erdrich’s revisions of these two historical sources emphasize the violent racist logic informing the exceptionalist myth: when a white family is brutally murdered, “savage” Indians are assumed to be at fault, while savage white acts like lynching are held to constitute legitimate exceptions to the rule of law. Since the lynchers ask no questions before hanging the Indians, they can disavow the connections between their victims and the guides who saved their lives as well as their own linked assumptions about race and guilt. These events make visible a set of exceptionalist practices, as the “chosen people” make exceptions to their own laws while disavowing the injustice they apply in the name of justice.

In the relationships that emerge among the citizens of Pluto decades after the lynchings, Erdrich traces more ironies as the alternate face of the Euro-Americans’ racism expresses itself in exotic, Orientalized fantasies about the Natives. As I will show in the essay’s second section, Erdrich’s characters living half a century after the lynchings display complex aftereffects of the exceptionalist myth and the disavowals of history it has

required: Euro-Americans envision Natives and mixed-race characters as closer to nature, including their own physical nature and sexuality, than people of European descent and thus figures of an attractive vitality and depth. Native Americans and biracial characters look on those of European descent as sophisticated, cultured, definitive of American norms; they are attracted by the “American face” of these Euro-Americans (239). Disavowing the long series of liaisons and affairs that have generated complex interrelations between them, each set of characters responds to an imagined exoticism and is drawn by an imagined “otherness”; these attractions form the powerful “unknown dreams” shaping their behavior. The unconscious dreams and desires represent the return of the repressed, uncovering what the myth of American exceptionalism required to be disavowed. They baffle and drive the central characters until, in parallel movements, each of them comes to understand the traumatic history specific to their town, its relation to the colonization of Native peoples, and the particular relevance of history to their own choices. These characters discover that their choices have been guided, like the wolf who responds to instincts he cannot rationalize or explain, by the “unknown dreams” that have been repressed and disavowed.

The novel itself recapitulates the characters’ mystification and gradual awakening, functioning as a mystery whose resolution depends on the recognition of the exceptionalist myth of American identity. An understanding of American exceptionalism and its required disavowals clarifies the novel itself and Erdrich’s choice of postmodern narrative strategies that led reviewers to call *Plague* “maddeningly opaque” (Barcott), “a vast, fractured narrative” (Charles), and “an elliptical, jigsaw puzzle of a narrative” (Kakutani). While the story of an exceptional America takes on the simplicity of a fairytale, Erdrich’s narrative adopts instead a complex, discontinuous, plural form, as I will show in a third section. Erdrich camouflages the links between past and present, moving between decades in ways that conceal connections, withholding information as characters keep secrets from each other, and sketching only implicit relationships among the separate stories of the central characters. In this way also, Erdrich’s fiction illuminates American exceptionalism—its strategies for the erasure of Native peoples, its required burials of historical events, and its obfuscation of injustices committed in the name of the nation. Reading both together places the disavowal of Native American history among the central aims and practices of American exceptionalism.

### (RE)VISIONS OF AN EXCEPTIONALIST HISTORY

Erdrich has commented in an interview that the historical story of the lynching of three Native Americans “haunted me” for some time before she wrote *Plague*, but “I didn’t know how I was going to get to it” (Goodman). In another interview, she says that the “wrenching event” was appalling in part

because one victim was only thirteen: “You know 13-year-olds—they’re children. How can you lynch a child?” (Baenen). Historical archives contain accounts of the historical events: the murders of the Thomas Spicer family, the subsequent trials of the Indians, and the lynchings appear on the North Dakota “GenWeb” site (Fischer) and in an article on November 15, 1897 in the *New York Times* (“Mob Law”). These sources exonerate the lynch mob and justify their execution of the Indians. Both sources make bland assertions about the five Natives’ guilt in the slayings of four related white adults (Thomas Spicer and his wife Mary Ellen, her mother, their daughter Lillie Spicer Rowse) and Lillie’s twin baby sons. The account by William Fischer explains that the Indians went to the Spicer farm seeking alcohol and alleges that they mutilated two of the bodies, clubbed the elderly woman to death, and beat Lillie, who resisted, to death with a table leg before killing the twin babies. Two of the Indians—one named Paul Holy Track—confessed, a third was found guilty at trial, though a translator’s services were needed and later questioned, and a fourth trial resulted in a hung jury (Fischer). When the State Supreme Court ruled that the confessions of two were not adequate to convict all five men in the absence of other evidence, a group of “about 40 masked men appeared,” overpowered the jailor, and hanged the three Indians who were in the county jail (Fischer). Appearing two days after the lynching, the *Times* article carried a subheading, “The Courts Were Too Slow,” and praised the lynch mob: “The lynching apparently had been planned carefully, and was carried out without a break in the programme. . . . The lynchers were quiet but determined.” The first Indian to be executed was asked if the others were also guilty, and “He answered that they had been” (“Mob Law”). Participants in the lynching were not prosecuted.

When Erdrich comments on the murders and the lynchings, she does not invoke the term American exceptionalism, but her comments reflect an appalled awareness of the same underlying investment in Euro-American superiority. She tells an interviewer, “I think vengeance, rather than sitting back and allowing justice to be done over time, is really so much a part of our history. And unfortunately, it’s part of our present, as well” (Baenen). Both the anonymous reporter for the *Times* and Fischer, who in 1959 summed up historical sources reporting on the case in the *Emmons County Record* (North Dakota), imply that the lynching is a reasonable act committed by responsible men in the name of justice: in both accounts, the Indians were guilty because they were looking for liquor and because two of them confessed—though it is clear that some of the Indians did not speak English and that the confessions were the prosecution’s only evidence. As Fischer points out, “it became apparent that all the defendants would be freed at the next trial since no additional evidence had been uncovered.” The State Supreme Court granted a new trial to the one Indian convicted in the case, Alec Coudotte, because of the language gap between the Indians and the English-speaking court. From the exceptionalist viewpoint visible in the

historical accounts, the Indians are always already guilty for crimes against a people whose race and language they did not share. In the logic of exceptionalism, “American” men are right to make an exception to the rule of law when law itself fails (“the courts were too slow”), and under those circumstances they can claim to elevate vengeance to a superior kind of justice.

While the historical sources tell one story about the traumatic murders and their equally traumatic aftermath, Erdrich writes a significantly different—even a contrapuntal—story in *Plague of Doves*. Most importantly, she individualizes and exonerates the Indians, who are never given a trial and who insist on their own innocence in the face of a brutal indifference among the white men. Holy Track, thirteen like his namesake, his guardian Asiginak, Cuthbert Peace, and Seraph Milk (who survives to become “Mooshum”) discover the murdered bodies of the Lochren family, save the living baby girl, milk the cows, and try to alert the sheriff anonymously. Asiginak warns prophetically that, in the eyes of Pluto’s Euro-Americans, “We are no-goods, we are Indians, even me. If you tell the white sheriff, we will die” (63). And they do—with dignity, humor, and courage that Erdrich emphasizes. Cuthbert Peace jokes about his large nose: “they have rubbed off the worst of my nose. It is a pity to die now that I am handsome” (70). Asiginak praises Holy Track’s courage in giving himself up, and the men sing with “strength and power” a death song affirming the endurance of their spirits (77–78). While Erdrich also individualizes white members of the lynch mob, some of whom protest against the lynching, she characterizes the leaders as brutal, ignorant racists. Eugene Wildstrand shoots the sheriff’s horse, Hotchkiss rejects Cuthbert’s claim to be “just like you” and slams his rifle into the bleeding Indian, and Emil Buckendorf mocks others who want to spare the young Holy Track (74, 75, 78). In all these ways, Erdrich’s fictional account accentuates the injustice of the executions.

Erdrich also foregrounds the racism expressed in the lynching, made doubly ironic when the murderer of the Lochren family turns out to be a white man. Studies of lynching have commonly observed the disproportionate targeting of people of color for alleged crimes against whites, and they have observed a “negative exceptionalism” in the frequency and cruelty of racially charged lynchings in the United States (Berg x–xi). Like other legal and extralegal executions of American Indians, the lynchings in North Dakota form a coherent part of a generalized, racially motivated pattern of “genocidal colonialism,” as sociologist David Baker writes in his extensive study of Native executions: “The history of American Indian executions is clearly nested within a sociopolitical context of genocidal colonialism calculated to dispossess American Indians of their *Indianism* by removing them from their sacred tribal territories, disrupting their traditional cultures, and continuing their marginalized status in U.S. society today” (316–17). As part of their racial difference, the “sexualized perception of Native Americans” among white Midwesterners increased suspicion of Native men, according to Michael

Pfeifer: “a myriad of cultural sources identified indigenous men as . . . a libidinous threat to white women” (87). In *Plague*, Erdrich highlights the speed of the “rough justice” and the failure to consider any white suspects for murders that included white women (71). Lurking in demented hostility on the edges of the community, the real perpetrator, Warren Wolde—who “flew into disorderly rages and went missing, for days sometimes” (139), and whose “monologues always ended with ‘I’ll slaughter them all’” (229)—is neither questioned by authorities nor suspected by anyone until the final pages of the novel. Similarly, the historical reporters are so persuaded by the guilt of the Natives that they do not notice the absence of a broader investigation in the community or the lack of physical evidence in the Spicer deaths.

Another section of *Plague of Doves* is based on a historical source, also significantly reinterpreted and rewritten by Erdrich. “Town Fever,” originally published as a story in *North Dakota Quarterly*, draws on “a historical trip that ended up in Wahpeton,” Erdrich tells an interviewer, adding that Daniel Johnston “wrote the account” (Halliday). In his historical narrative, published as a chapter in a volume of the *Collections of the North Dakota Historical Society*, Johnston describes an overland trek he took in the winter of 1857 to claim land and map townsites along the Red River. As he explains, “we were after money, and the glamour of the ‘millions in it’ brightened all the difficult ways we had come” (421). Johnston writes in 1913, when he is eighty-one years old; he draws on his journal of the expedition fifty-six years earlier.<sup>5</sup> The intervening years enable him to look back with ironic hindsight on his own youthful optimism about the “opportunity [that] had knocked at my door” (411), while his age adds wistfulness to his memories of his own physical strength and courage. He concludes that the townsites they surveyed at such cost and risk “fell into ruins,” while the two hundred lots he was paid were “worthless even for tax purposes”; his experience “cured me of the townsite speculation fever so completely that I have never felt a touch of it since” (434). Johnston’s account focuses on the hardships suffered by the group: the intense cold, the effort to clear a path through deep snowdrifts, the sudden blizzards, and especially the constant experience of hunger and near-starvation. While he mentions the other men on the trip, his focus is on events and adventures. He notes the presence of two guides, “French and Chippewa half-breeds named Pierre and Charlie Bottineau,” whose knowledge of the northern plains saves the group on many occasions (411).

Erdrich’s story of the expedition taken by the fictional Joseph Coutts follows Johnston’s tale closely in its descriptions of the clothing and provisions taken on the expedition, the adventures with blizzards and cold, and the precarious closeness of starvation as the months go on. For example, Johnston describes “a comforter of wool, padded with cotton batting, about three inches thick and firmly quilted. . . . We slept with all our clothes on, and there was no chance to change or wash any of them short of the end of our journey. We slept spoon fashion, and when one wanted to turn the rest of us

had to turn also" (Johnston 414). Erdrich follows this lively account, echoing the same details: "Once they lowered the great woolen comforter over themselves, the men began to steam up under the batting, and they slept, though every time one rolled over so did the rest. . . . But this was only January and there wouldn't be a chance for any of them to bathe before spring" (*Plague* 100). Between blizzards, Johnston observes the sun rise with "a brilliant sun dog on each side of it, and a bright crescent swung down above it" (Johnston 416). Joseph Coutts, similarly, wakes to find "the sun had two dogs at either side and was crowned by a burning crescent" (*Plague* 101). Both Johnston and Joseph Coutts kill an otter and find it inedible; both parties suffer starvation as spring melts flood the plains and prevent the delivery of new supplies; when help arrives, it is only "half a biscuit" for Johnston (427) and, for Joseph, "a dozen hard biscuits" to be shared among the men. Even Johnston's wry conclusion, that he has been "cured . . . of the townsite speculation fever" (434) finds an echo in Joseph's concluding declaration: "'Well,' he said out loud, 'I'm cured of town fever'" (113).

Because Erdrich follows the Johnston source so closely, the alterations she makes in her fiction clearly reflect her vision and purpose. Most of the changes serve to develop characters; where Johnston is no more interested in his human companions than in the weather and the buffalo, Erdrich focuses on the human actors. Emil Buckendorf, for example, who will participate as a leader of the lynch mob in his later years, has a proto-Nazi paleness, with "fanglike teeth and eyes so pale that there seemed to be a light burning in his skull" (99). He has no sense of humor, taking quick offense at a joke made by one of the Chippewa guides (101); he displays a ready violence—"Emil beat his brothers awake" (103)—and later thinks seriously of cannibalism (111). The Indian guides themselves take on more important roles in Erdrich's account than they do in Johnston's, and she characterizes them as men of advanced civilization and extraordinary skill. To be sure, Johnston admires the two guides and reports positively their ability to read the weather and their success in hunting; but he focuses even more attention on his own moments of skill as a hunter (e.g., 430). For Erdrich and for her protagonist Joseph Coutts, Henri and Lafayette Peace are exemplary Native people. Lafayette, she writes, "was fine-made and superbly handsome, with a thin mustache, slick braids, and sly black eyes," while Henri is "sturdy" and has "an air of captivating assurance" (99). These men own and play a violin, which they treasure, with an artistry described as sophisticated and powerful; they are also "the most devout among the men" (106). Both their religion and their violin arrived with the French priest who colonized their people (214). While hunger and hardship brutalize the Buckendorfs, Lafayette retains his "scrupulous toilette" (107). Both Peace brothers remain civil and civilized—indeed, they bury the dead man whom the Buckendorfs want to eat (111). The Peace brothers laugh about the men's flatulence, sing and dance to celebrate their

survival, sympathize with the lovelorn man who decides to return to St. Anthony, and hunt so skillfully that they keep the men alive.

Erdrich's most significant alteration to her source is her characterization of Joseph Coutts as a man far more complex—indeed, far more transformed by his experience—than Daniel Johnston. While Johnston writes in the first person of his “cure” from town fever, Erdrich uses a third-person perspective limited to Coutts to establish his attunement to a Native view of life. Erdrich's narrative establishes that Coutts, the white grandfather of Antone Bazil Coutts, marries a Native woman because of the events of the journey—or more precisely, because of his own transformation through those events. Coutts begins the journey with fond memories of a lusty white widow who dislikes Indians (98), but returns to marry a niece of the Peace brothers, “a Metis Catholic whose family was very strict” (104). In the meantime, he has come to love and admire the Peace brothers and to respect their Catholic faith: “I envy your faith,” he tells Henri, and when Lafayette places his own crucifix on the starving Coutts, “Joseph felt his heart leap” (110–11). Their religion matters less to Coutts than what he perceives as their spirit, a closeness to non-material values; the near-death experiences of the journey lead him away from an interest in land and profits (the same “millions in it” that attract Johnston [*Plague* 97]) to a “startling awareness” of the precariousness of life (102) and the need for deeper riches than land and money (103). The early signs of his inward capacity appear in his attentiveness to people and animals, his appreciation for Marcus Aurelius, and his openness to moments of life-altering insight. When an injured ox goes down in the snow: “Joseph leapt toward the ox, hunched over the massive head, breathed his own breath into its foamy muzzle, and spoke in a calm clear voice until the animal groaned to its feet” (103). Like Johnston, Coutts kills an otter; but Coutts's otter has “regarded him with the curious and trusting gaze of a young child,” and Coutts, unlike Johnston, ends by “weeping helplessly over the gleaming and sinuous body” of the otter (108).<sup>6</sup> When he returns to St. Anthony, Coutts chooses love over wealth, marries the Peace girl, and becomes a lawyer, his grandson reports, in order to defend tribal rights and lands (115).

Erdrich incorporates the two historical sources in order to locate Pluto, a fictional town “named for the god of the underworld” and an apt metaphor for the repression of a shameful history, in a recognizable American history of exceptionalist relations to Native people (297). Indeed, the titular image of *The Plague of Doves* evokes European settler colonialism, in John Gamber's astute reading: “an excessively large, migrating, white mass of life clamping down on the American landscape, overusing the land and starving out the indigenous population bears some slight similarities to Native history” (Gamber 144; see also Noori 12). Euro-American settlers often resembled the Buckendorfs, virtually ignoring signs of cultured and complex intelligence in the indigenous people they encountered. For them, as for the national narrative of Manifest Destiny, Natives were invisible at best, rendered

threatening and savage at worst by the racist lens through which they were seen. By placing the same group of Buckendorfs at the head of the lynch mob, Erdrich characterizes the American exceptionalist as blind, irrational, and afraid, as well as racist, vengeful, violent, and cruel. By recalling a history of Native lynching that is as little known and seldom acknowledged in the factual United States as it is in the fictional Pluto, she underscores the disavowal of history that continues to enable the exceptionalist myth in America. Yet Erdrich does not create a story that is as oversimple as the stories the Buckendorfs would have told: in her history of westward exploration, Euro-American Joseph Coutts learns to respect and value Native culture as a result of his experiences with the Indian guides. In Erdrich's narrative of the lynching, Mooshum and Cuthbert are seeking alcohol (as the historic source indicates the Indians were), and Mooshum is spared because, drunk, he betrayed the others (251). While Frederic Vogeli is as savage as some other German immigrants, his son Johann weeps over the cruelty of the lynching and fights to stop his father's participation (76). Erdrich's fiction neither exonerates all Indians nor vilifies all whites; although many of their understandings of and interactions with each other are mistaken, flawed, and damaging, she also represents contacts between Euro-American and Native people that demonstrate the transformative potential for community between the races.

#### AN EXCEPTIONALIST INHERITANCE

Under the long shadow of an exceptionalist history, Pluto's inhabitants in the 1960s and 1970s view the "chosen" American as a person of European descent; this view is held by Indians on the reservation, Euro-Americans in town, and characters of mixed race who live in both places. While all of the characters share this historically conditioned perception, the Euro-Americans feel a compelling nostalgia for the intuitive connection to an exoticized and sexualized nature that they imagine characterizes Natives, while characters with Native ancestry imagine an exoticized and elevated culture in Euro-Americans. As a result, strong passions unite and divide the contemporary inhabitants of Pluto and damage their relationships. Among the attractions, liaisons, and marriages in the novel, many link Native or biracial people with Euro-Americans: children are produced from connections between Eugene Wildstrand and Junesse Malaterre's mother, John Wildstrand and Maggie Peace; marriages occur between Joseph Coutts and the Michif niece of the Peace brothers, their son and a Chippewa woman, Edward Harp and Clemence Milk, Seraph Milk and Junesse Malaterre, Billy Peace and Marn Wolde; and liaisons or attractions without issue occur between Antone Bazil Coutts and Cordelia Lochren, Evelina Harp and Nonette, Neve Harp Wildstrand and Billy Peace, and Neve Harp Wildstrand and Seraph Milk.

As Judge Coutts puts it, the community “is rife with conflicting passions. We can’t seem to keep our hands off one another, it is true” (116). In their attractions to one another, “unknown dreams” trouble Pluto’s lovers, as the community’s repressed history intrudes to warp their desires and loves.

The most vivid instance in *Plague* of history powering the desire for an exoticized Other appears in the relationship between Dr. Cordelia Lochren and Judge Antone Bazil Coutts. Called “C.” by the Judge, Cordelia makes her history clear only in the last pages of the novel; she is the grown up Lochren baby of the first page, miraculously spared by the murderer of her family. Through the Judge’s perspective, their sexual relationship appears obsessive, secretive, and even abusive, in that the adult doctor seduces a teen-aged Antone. The two carry on a decades-long affair involving sexual athleticism so sustained that both partners “have trouble with hunger while making love” (274). She refuses his requests to marry, claiming that her professional reputation and “the trust of her patients” render marriage to him impossible (279). In the end, blaming others, she explains that “I was allowed to believe that the lynched Indians had been the ones responsible” for murdering her family and, claiming “an unsteady weakness in their presence,” she refuses to treat Native people (307, 298). In the affair with Antone, however, she finds her own sexuality liberated by his Native blood, as if to demonstrate Pfeifer’s claim that Midwesterners have a “sexualized perception of Native Americans” (87). With Antone, Cordelia finds license to indulge her own physical desires, from which she perceives Euro-Americans as estranged by hypercivilization. The affair provides her a crucial benefit, identified at the end of the novel by Geraldine: it allows Cordelia to disavow her own racism. “They always need an exception,” Geraldine tells Antone (291); he perceives that the doctor’s relationship to him “was more than your garden-variety bigotry. There was history involved, said Geraldine. I understood, then, that I’d known everything and nothing about the doctor. Only later did I realize: . . . I’d always be her one exception. Or worse, her absolution. Every time I touched her, she was forgiven” (292). The affair with Antone grants Cordelia Lochren the exception she needs; she can disown her investment in the same racism that caused the executions of innocent Natives, while continuing to live inside the exceptionalist and racist values of the lynch mob. While she hides her relationship with Antone from the public, she hides from herself her own responsibility for racism: others are to blame for what she grew up believing, and she herself cannot be blamed for the “paralysis . . . beyond her control” (298) that prevents her from treating Indians. In this complex way, Cordelia Lochren demonstrates a refusal of history, including her own recapitulation of the disavowals and repressions intrinsic to American exceptionalism, even as she ironically assumes the role of president of Pluto’s historical society.

Billy Peace has a similarly evasive relationship with the traumatic history of his community and family. Descended from the Peace brothers who guided Pluto’s original settlers and from Cuthbert, lynched by some of those

same settlers, Billy turns the spirituality that characterized his ancestors into charismatic preaching. Vengeful and obsessed with power, he founds a cult called “the kindred,” composed of Euro-Americans whom he rules absolutely. He designs a religion that dispenses with God, but establishes a code of absolute obedience to himself (158). In this way he turns a history of American exceptionalism that has scorned his Indian ancestors on its head: he will be the leader of the “chosen people” and their messianic chooser as well, for he personally selects each member of “the kindred.” Early on, he seeks redress for the wrongs committed against Native people; as he takes over Marn’s family farm, for example, he observes, “This was my family’s land, Indian land. Will be again” (152). But as he assumes a cult identity, he seeks to abolish history altogether. He recapitulates exceptionalist practice, writing a “Manual of Discipline” but excepting himself from the laws that regulate his congregation. He decrees labors and punishments for his flock, procreates as he wishes with the women, forbids parents to raise their children, and appropriates the money raised by the group. He dominates Marn and their children: “You are mine. Your lives are mine. I will do with you as spirit wills” (162). In an essay focused on the links between patriarchy and nationalism in *Plague*, Gina Valentino observes that Billy “turns out to be a *windigo*,” while Erdrich shows “that the version of nationalism he embodies requires a kind of charismatic leadership that is dangerous” (131–32). Like Cordelia, Billy ignores the very history that has shaped his dreams and deformed his relationships, recapitulating the American exceptionalism that relies on and disavows the extended, systematic, and racist erasure of Native culture and peoples as necessary to the imperialist project.

The novel’s three primary narrators, Evelina, Antone, and Marn, awaken in the course of experience to the “unknown dreams” repressed by an exceptionalist legacy. Unlike Cordelia and Billy, these characters make significant changes because of what they uncover about the past. The novel establishes parallels among these characters’ dreams and awakenings, largely those expressing what Antone Coutts calls “the unbearable weight of human sexual love” (281). Each is mesmerized by a partner who is damaged and damaging, but who appeals to them precisely because of the exceptionalist legacy: attractive blue-eyed Euro-Americans seduce and confuse Evelina and Antone, offering an alternative to the cultural devaluation of Indians, while Marn responds to Billy’s charismatic promise to be the dark-eyed Native savior. Each of their dreams can be traced to the impact of Pluto’s history and to its required repression. All three stories culminate in similar awakenings, when the character experiences a “startling awareness” that makes the “unknown dream” visible and frees the character to pursue other, better dreams. These parallel recognitions establish links among characters who differ in age, race, gender, and experience, and they are echoed by awakenings in minor characters like Joseph Coutts and Corwin Peace.

Marn, for example, grows up shaped by the bitter aftermath of the hangings: though she doesn't know it, her uncle Warren has committed the mass-murders for which the Indians were lynched on the Wolde property. Marn finds a compelling escape in Billy, with "the face of Jesus leaning his head forward," (140), the "loud" and "ecstatic" sexuality of "a bull whale" (153), and the demand for her utter submission; at sixteen, "I was too young to stand against it," she reports (142). His heritage as a Peace makes her submission to him an ongoing atonement for the sins committed in the name of American exceptionalism, while his epic physical lusts attract her at first. When Billy begins to threaten and punish their children, however, she realizes that she has to rescue them and flee the marriage: "Awakened, things had changed in me" (176). She becomes aware that Billy's leadership has brought the kindred to "a discipline of the afflictions," full of self-punishments designed to hold members in perpetual thrall to their own guilt and thereby also in perpetual submission to Billy. While Billy never understands his own need to dominate and control, Marn recognizes the "unknown dream" that has led her to a husband who claims godliness and certainty.

Antone Coutts knows more about Pluto's history than Marn does; indeed, he serves as an important window into communal history. His attraction to the doctor reflects the shadows of American exceptionalism: he sees in Cordelia the all-American face of European descent, and her seeming choice of him redeems the hurt of that history. Antone records his attraction to Cordelia's hair ("sun-stroked blond" [282]), her eyes ("a direct blue, the shade of willow-ware china" [283]), and her bones (which "fitted marvelously beneath her nervous skin" [283]). Sixteen when she seduces him, he finds himself trapped: "once I started having sex with C., I couldn't leave sex, or leave her, or leave the town" (276). The affair goes on for decades, until his mother throws herself down stairs, winds up in a nursing home, and Antone has his first awakening: "All of a sudden I woke in blackness, alive to desolate knowledge. In that moment, I knew...I'd wasted my life on a woman" (286). The Judge's second awakening occurs after his marriage to Evelina's aunt Geraldine, who calls Cordelia "that doctor who won't treat Indians"; she treated Antone because "They always need an exception" (291). At this point Antone sees into the heart of American exceptionalism: Cordelia and he have both disavowed the assumptions at the core of their affair about what sort of Americans can be "exceptional." While Cordelia has used him as "her absolution" (292), he has unconsciously bought into the cultural devaluation of Indians and depended on her "exception" as a sign of his worth; both have disavowed the racism implicit throughout their affair.

Like the other two narrators, Evelina narrates an initiation shaped by the history of her people. Evelina is the novel's first, youngest, and primary narrator; she knows less than the others about the histories that link her family and the community. As the granddaughter of one victim of the lynchings and the great-granddaughter of one of the leaders of the lynch mob, she is

closely implicated in the tangled history through which American exceptionalism expressed itself in Pluto. Indeed, Evelina inherits mixed loyalty and outrage, together with a deep confusion about her identity, desires, and place in the social world. Like Erdrich the daughter of a Euro-American teacher and a French-Ojibwe woman, Evelina serves as the novel's primary narrator because her gradual awakening to her inheritance requires her to make sense of a conflicted legacy, one in which colonialism and American exceptionalism battle the forces of attraction and love.<sup>7</sup> The novel juxtaposes three parallel Bildungsroman tales, narrated by three main characters whose initiations in love and sexuality occur when they are sixteen; but Evelina's heritage leads her to confront the most troubling tangles in Pluto's history.

In the first section of the novel, Evelina learns several strands of history, both familial and communal. In fact, the first section consists largely of adults' narration to the Harp children, aged about ten and twelve, of histories that have been suppressed as too violent or frightening until this point in their lives. From their storytelling grandfather Mooshum, Evelina and her brother Joseph hear about the plague of doves in 1896, his marriage to Junesse and near-lynching in 1902, and the lynching of Cuthbert, Asiginak, and Holy Track in 1911. The children have not heard these stories before; Joseph, for example, asks about Cuthbert and Holy Track, "They lived to be old men, right?" (76). When Evelina asks "what happened to the men who had lynched our people" (82), Mooshum tells her that the Buckendorfs and Wildstrands prospered, and her mother complicates her picture of "our people" by telling her that her great-grandfather was Eugene Wildstrand (82, 85). Evelina identifies with the Native side of her heritage, but as she grows up, she sees her implication in histories that preclude easy judgments and simple loyalties. She understands that her classmates and friends have, like herself, lineages pointing to both perpetrators and victims. As the inheritor of these American stories, Evelina intuits complexities even before she can understand them.

The novel develops Evelina's adolescent confusion over the mixed legacies and histories it chronicles. She leaves Pluto for college, where she finds she doesn't "fit in with anybody," including white, Native, or mixed-blood girls (222). As if to disavow both her Native ancestors (and the Native heritage devalued in American culture) and her Euro-American ancestors (and the deadly legacy of their American exceptionalism), Evelina makes Anaïs Nin her model and Paris her goal. In this fantasy escape to a different history, Evelina does not seem to realize that she has chosen the land of the original European colonizers of her Ojibwe/Anishinabe ancestors. Ironically, each of her attempts to evade her history only immerses her more closely in it; for example, when she leaves college for an internship in a mental hospital, she finds Warren Wolde there as a patient. She forms a passionate relationship with Nonette ("I didn't know at the time women could kiss women in that way anywhere but in Paris" [235]) in hope that the affair has "set me outside the narrative" of Pluto: "None of the family stories could touch me. I was in

Anaïs's story now" (235). In fact, though, Nonette's attraction to her ("You're an Indian or something, aren't you . . . That's pretty cool" [233]) and hers to Nonette ("She looked French" [230]; and "She is beautiful as someone in a foreign movie, in a book, a catalogue of strange, expensive clothes" [236]) recapitulate the pattern through which Euro-Americans and Indians form attachments to exoticized Others in Pluto. After their sexual encounter, Nonette loses her foreignness as Evelina perceives the "American face" (239) she has had all along: "She looks more and more like a girl in a ski commercial. . . . Now her eyes are scary cheerleader eyes" (238). Evelina's attempts to leave America behind have instead led her through the same complex attractions that shaped her ancestors' histories—and thus led her straight back to the "scary cheerleader" for America, its exceptionalist myth.

Evelina's awakening, like those of Marn Wolde and Antone Coutts, occurs in stages. In the mental hospital, she literally awakens after days of depressed sleep and turns her attention to her family and to Pluto. She thinks "how history works itself out in the living," reflects on the perpetrators and victims of the lynching, and concludes, "Now that some of us have mixed in the spring of our existence both guilt and victim, there is no unraveling the rope" (243). When she returns to Pluto, she learns what her Mooshum has repressed and denied: that he got "stinking drunk" and "betrayed the others" in 1911; in effect, Mooshum triggered the hanging of his friends (251). This discovery further clouds the distinction between guilt and innocence, putting guilt on both sides of the rope of Evelina's inheritance. She responds by accepting what others have disavowed: the complex dualities and irresolvable contradictions of Pluto's history and her own, including those expressed in Corwin's music and those in her feelings: "'I can't leave here,' I say. And I walk out of that place" (246). She is content to leave her sexual identity undecided, her options open, and her future undetermined.

### DISRUPTING THE EXCEPTIONALIST NARRATIVE

As told by Emil Buckendorf or Eugene Wildstrand, the story of the land claims in Pluto and the lynchings in 1911 would not be complicated. Instead, the story would constitute a triumphalist narrative focused on the spread of Euro-American justice and power. While Erdrich has not written that story, she provides a brief glimpse of such an exceptionalist narrative in *Plague*, imagining the story Corwin Peace tells himself after he steals Shamengwa's violin: "There are two kinds of people—the givers and the takers. I'm a taker. Render unto Corwin what is due him" (207). An oversimple binary division of the world into those with power and those without it, Corwin's self-serving logic converts himself into Caesar, erases Christ's admonishment to render other treasure unto God, and legitimates theft. While Corwin's self-justification is a simple, secular version of the American exceptionalist narrative, it

illustrates the drive to create a coherent myth that consolidates power by the simple act of asserting it. Like the exceptionalist narrative, Corwin's also deliberately disavows the costs paid by "the givers": Shamengwa did not "give" the violin, any more than the indigenous Americans "gave" their land to Euro-Americans, but "the takers" in both cases rationalize their theft by asserting that the gain is their "due" by virtue of their identity.

The function served by the American exceptionalist narrative requires it to be clear and simple, as easily understood as a fairytale. Based on the Western teleological view of time itself as shaped by a divine force toward a coherent end, it also follows the nineteenth-century novel's beginning-middle-end structure. An instance of Lyotard's grand or meta-narrative, the exceptionalist story assumes a promise-fulfillment shape: after repeated failures in Europe to achieve just government and proper worship, God sends the chosen people to the New World to create the good society on earth. Erdrich's implicit rewriting of this exceptionalist narrative highlights all it would disavow and foregrounds Native American history, representing the culture of the Native guides, the intelligence and courage of Asiginak, Cuthbert, and Holy Track, the historical lynchings of these and other Natives, and the multiple fracturings of community left in the wake of a racist construction of America. In writing the counterhistory that was suppressed by the exceptionalist myth, Erdrich necessarily creates a narrative form that is far more complex and tangled, far less triumphalist and conclusive, than the fairytale version of American history. In *Plague*, as in all of her fiction, she deploys postmodern literary techniques for clearly political ends.

Erdrich's narrative design refuses any facile coherence, especially in its representation of time. While events are not dated exactly, the novel represents events from about 1884, 1897, 1901, 1911, 1928, 1963, 1972, and 1974. These various slices of time do not appear in order, nor are events fully told in the first narration; the uncertain relation between stories and parts of stories amplifies their mystery. The novel begins, for example, with a glimpse of the 1911 murder of the Lochrens (1); the story of the subsequent lynching of the Indians is told by Mooshum in about 1963 (54–79), then further clarified in about 1974 when Evelina learns of Mooshum's role (250–53). Cordelia Lochren adds a final revelation, unknown to other characters or to the community at large, when she blandly notes that Warren Wolde actually slaughtered her family (307–10). Not only does Erdrich scatter pieces of a single story, in this instance to emphasize the bitter irony of the execution of the innocent Natives, but she also obscures connections between different stories related by chronology, causality, or theme. Their arrival on North Dakota land, for example, links the Milk and the Buckendorf families, though the separation of their stories disguises the connections between them. Joseph Milk and his cultured Native family leave Saskatchewan for North Dakota in 1884 (21–42), and around that same time, the Peace brothers guide the coarse Buckendorfs to the same place (96–113). Because these arrivals of white land

speculators and Native people are widely separated and introduced by different narrators, their ironic coincidence is camouflaged (21). Early in the novel, Mooshum tells Evelina the comic story of his rescue from a near-lynching at seventeen: when a farm woman is murdered, “the neighbors disregarded the sudden absence of that woman’s husband and thought about the nearest available Indian. There I was, said Mooshum” (17). Thirty-eight pages later, making no mention of lynch-parties’ tendency to blame Indians, he begins to tell the story of his second lynching ten years later. As multiple characters tell seemingly unconnected stories, the collected narratives yield ironic discoveries, often unknown to the narrators, about damaging encounters between Native Americans and Euro-Americans. The disrupted chronology effectively highlights the hidden, erased, and disavowed linkages between events that leave characters unable to understand their lives and dreams.

Erdrich’s scattered references to a history of injustice, itself disavowed in the mythic chronicle of America, add emphasis to the repeated pattern of recovery and awakening among the primary narrators. Her use of plural points of view serves the same purpose as her dislocation of chronology; both postmodern strategies fracture the narrative surface while highlighting the political nature of the forgetting that is required by American exceptionalism. Her four narrators diverge in many ways: born in four different decades, two are Euro-Americans while two are mixed Chippewa and Euro-American. Cordelia and Antone are childless professionals, while Marn is a mother and waitress and Evelina is a college student. As members of the same community, they know and make occasional reference to each other, but they do not narrate to each other or know each others’ stories. Three of the four, however, share experiences of awakening and discovery, while Cordelia illustrates the costs of a refusal to become aware. Marn, Antone, and Evelina come to understand the impact of American exceptionalism on Native peoples, its distortions of human relationships in the long aftermath of contact, and its repeated impulse to bury and deny Native American history. Evelina, Marn, and Antone find what has been submerged: Evelina literally puts together the story of the lynchings; Antone discovers his lover’s racist use of him as an enabling exception; Marn finds poison at the heart of Pluto’s violent history and in her damaged Native lover. The novel’s mysteries all yield similar answers: American exceptionalism has both erased Native history and disavowed its sustained efforts to hide the traces.

*The Plague of Doves* can be understood as a complex representation of America’s exceptionalist history and its impact on the lives of an evolving American community. All of the stories in the novel probe the relationships between Native Americans, Euro-Americans, and biracial Americans, finding a legacy of privilege accorded to Euro-American descent and a damaging mixture of attraction, revulsion, and misconception distorting the relations between members of different ethnic groups. When Antone Coutts suggests an identity between “the influence of instinct upon a wolf and history upon

a man,” for in both “justice is prey to unknown dreams” (117), he points to the novel’s abiding concern: Americans are driven by history, not through an accurate understanding of the legacy of American exceptionalism, but instead through the “unknown dreams” generated by the disavowals, erasures, and repressions it requires. Erdrich’s fiction exposes the exceptionalist face of the American dream in an effort to awaken a more reflective America.

## NOTES

1. Godfrey Hodgson ironically observes that “Native Americans did not think of America as empty” (163). But their numbers were quickly and dramatically reduced by plagues of smallpox, measles, and other diseases, as well as war and murder. David Stannard reports that Europeans routinely slaughtered women and children, following a practice that was “flatly and intentionally genocidal” (119). The seizure of Native lands escalated as Americans moved west; Howard Zinn writes, “Indian Removal, as it has been politely called, cleared the land for white occupancy” (125). What David Baker calls “openly racist *official* policies of genocide” (319) emerged when political leaders and figures like L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wizard of Oz*, disavowed the humanity of Indians and issued public calls for their extermination (Stannard 126).

2. For an extended analysis of Silko’s criticism of Erdrich, see Stirrup (78–85).

3. *Plague* was shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize and praised by reviewers. Kakutani calls it “arguably [Erdrich’s] most ambitious—and in many ways, her most deeply affecting—work yet”; Charles calls it a “wondrous novel”; Barcott “often gorgeous”; and Frase evidence that Erdrich “gets better and better.” Philip Roth writes in a cover blurb that the novel is “her dazzling masterpiece.” Three essays on the novel appear in Madsen (see also Stirrup 153–58). *The Round House* begins about fourteen years after the end of *Plague* in the household of Antone Bazil Coutts, his wife Geraldine Milk Coutts, and their thirteen-year-old son, Joe.

4. Erdrich moves the western expedition from 1857, the year identified in her historical source, to an unspecified later year, so the twenty-something Buckendorfs who claim land are younger than seventy-something at the time of the hangings.

5. A footnote explains that Johnston read the account “at the monthly meeting of the Executive Council [of the Minnesota Historical Society], May 13, 1913” (411).

6. Rainwater reads this scene as an example of “the text’s decidedly non-Western conception of personhood” (164). I understand Erdrich, instead, as interested in dialogue between Western and Native ideas, so that productive exchanges are possible. Joseph Coutts is a Euro-American with an intuitive respect for nature and animal life that leads him to pity the otter and encourage the ox; he respects the values of the Peace brothers because he shares kindred assumptions.

7. Erdrich does not write autobiographical fiction, but she shares a birth in 1954 and a Catholic upbringing with Evelina. Erdrich’s father, like Edward Harp, taught in a reservation school. In an interview, she describes her grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, as “a persuasive man” who loved to talk, much like Mooshum, and notes that her father, “rightly, picked out a paragraph in *The Plague of Doves* as a somewhat autobiographical piece of the book” (Halliday).

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## **Ironizing Identity: Cosmopolitanism and Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” as Critique of Hispanicist Exceptionalism**

JOHN C. HAVARD

Readers of Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1855) who are sensitive to questions of identity and race have tended to focus on Amasa Delano’s view—funneled through free-indirect discourse—of black slaves (e.g., Karcher 109–59; Tawil 191–208). However, such studies are now supplemented by acknowledgement that Delano’s response to Benito Cereno reflects Anglo-American prejudices against Catholic Spain (Emery; DeGuzmán 47–67; Nelson, *Word* 112–14; Sundquist 143, 148). Such views emerged in the colonial period as the “Black Legend,” the common Northern European belief that Spanish colonizers were bloodthirsty conquerors whose stated aim of spreading Catholicism in the Americas was a pretext for exploiting indigenous peoples. These views toward Spain were replayed in the racist atmosphere of the antebellum United States, when US Americans construed Spain as a quaint but despotic nation whose (by now waning) power in the New World had to be curtailed by US expansion and influence.<sup>1</sup>

My essay makes two points that shed light on these issues. First of all, as Allan Moore Emery and Eric Sundquist indicate, the stereotypes upon which Delano relies do not simply construe Spaniards as the Black Legend’s violent despots. In Delano’s view, the Spanish are also languorous and inefficient (Emery 50–53; Sundquist 148). These characteristics were not as pronounced in the colonial typologies. I contend that Delano’s perspective thus reflects a nineteenth-century US evolution of Anglophone attitudes toward the Spanish. In what I describe as an exceptionalist discourse of *Hispanicism*, Delano self-reflexively imagines himself against Cereno as a US American who is particularly well-fitted for a managerial role in an emergent capitalist, liberal-democratic world. Delano thus voices antebellum imperialist beliefs that Hispanophone peoples—whether “off-white” Spaniards (DeGuzmán xxiv, xxvii) or Spanish Americans of mixed Hispanic, African,

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and/or indigenous ancestry—were racially incapacitated for the duties of sovereignty. My use of the term “Hispanicism” is extrapolated from Ed White’s discussion of “[t]he growing [antebellum] literary fascination with Latin America—an *Hispanicism* analogous in ways to European Orientalism” (77–78). White describes a fascinated exoticization of Hispanophone peoples through which US Americans self-reflexively constructed US identity. Although Delano’s views might seem to lean toward Hispanophobia more so than the patronizing part-aversion, part-romanticization suggested by “Hispanicism,” Hispanicist romanticization is indeed evident in Delano’s attitudes. Moreover, as a conceptual legacy of Orientalism and as comparable to Toni Morrison’s “Africanism” (the latter to which I will often refer in this essay), “Hispanicism” evokes the exceptionalist, self-reflexive quality of Delano’s views.

Delano’s attitudes toward Spaniards and Africans are distinct but inter-related. In both cases, the views are self-reflexive: contemplating Spanish and African difference, Delano imagines himself to be racially superior as an Anglo-American. Delano’s understanding of blacks as subhuman, though, specifically bolsters his sense of himself as possessing basic human capacities of free will, reason, and aesthetic sensibility. Such views, refracted through romantic-racist tropes regarding blacks, reflect what Morrison terms “Africanism,” the pervasive US discourse through which US Americans imagine cherished self-perceptions against a mysterious, demonized black presence (5, 17). On the other hand, in perceiving Spaniards as despotic and inefficient, Delano views himself as a member of a benevolent racial and national community that is exceptionally endowed to forge liberal-democratic social, economic, and political institutions. He thus believes himself entitled to usurp management of Cereno’s ship and slaves.<sup>2</sup>

My second point regards how Melville interrogates such discourses by writing literature. Some have described Melville’s approach, while good-intentioned, as overdetermined by the racialism pervading Melville’s white US American culture. Dana D. Nelson claims that while “Benito Cereno” subverts how Delano views blacks and Spaniards according to static types, the tale fails to imagine alternatives to these typologies (*Word* 109–30). More intent on examining the tale’s depiction of Spain, María DeGuzmán, too, contends that while Melville denaturalizes how Delano confirms his whiteness through reflection on the “off-white” Spaniard Cereno, this critique is undermined by what DeGuzmán reads as the tale’s damnation of Cereno and Babo (47–67). These claims inform my view that by ventriloquizing Hispanicism through Delano, Melville emphasizes how Hispanicism informs US exceptionalism. In doing so, Melville ironizes Delano’s sense of himself as the benevolent representative of an exceptional nation. Melville reveals how Delano’s perspective occludes the in fact rapacious Delano’s ability to realize that he and Cereno share much in common. However, I also part ways with Nelson and DeGuzmán; inspired by neo-formalist arguments for literature’s

socio-civic power,<sup>3</sup> I champion Melville's efficacy in thinking beyond exceptionalism. Proposing grounded alternatives to racist and imperialist policies was not Melville's aim, but his tale suggests formal alternatives to racialist exceptionalism by calling attention to the qualitative differences between manners of telling stories about relationships and identity. These opposed manners can be described as forms of cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, in contrast to the self-absorbed Spaniard Cereno, Delano self-reflexively identifies as a gregarious cosmopolitan who good-naturedly navigates the differences between cultures. Delano's cosmopolitanism thus reflects his Hispanicism. However, Melville implies another, non-exceptionalist form of cosmopolitanism, one premised on skepticism toward identity categories; the ability to revise preconceptions about identity; and sensitivity to context. The evocation of this more rigorous cosmopolitanism is a major achievement of the tale.

#### *PUTNAM'S MONTHLY*, "BENITO CERENO," AND HISPANICISM

The Hispanicist contexts Melville commented upon through his depiction of Delano are exhibited in articles about Spain and Spanish America appearing in *Putnam's Monthly* around the time of the journal's 1855 publication of "Benito Cereno." Such articles exhibited fascination with and prejudice against Hispanophone peoples. Melville's engagement with *Putnam's* is well-documented, particularly regarding the journal's slavery politics (Post-Lauria; Robbins). Melville's engagement with the material on Spain and Spanish America has also been noted (Emery 50; Post-Lauria 5). While such scholarship attests to the articles' broadly imperialist dimensions, I here emphasize their reflection of nineteenth-century US views about Spanishness. Anglophone prejudices toward Hispanophone peoples had always posited the moral superiority of British over Spanish colonialism, traditionally emphasizing Catholic Spain's cruel, duplicitous exploitation of indigenous peoples. Latter-day Hispanicism—referring both to Spain and Spanish America—had additional focuses. In the *Putnam's* pieces (typically ethnographies or travelogues reporting on the landscape, customs, politics, and wealth of Hispanophone locales), Hispanophone peoples are not only vicious and despotic but also lazy and lacking in economic individualism. This characterization contrasts with the author's identification with what he construes as modern US values of entrepreneurship in a liberal-democratic, capitalist world. Such texts comprised a stock Hispanicist narrative that informed the general nationalism of *Putnam's*.<sup>4</sup>

Articles such as "Annexation," which favorably compares US expansionism to prior forms of empire-building, attest to the demonization of Spanish colonialism. Attention to two other texts, though, will illustrate especially nineteenth-century US views of Hispanophone peoples. The second issue

of *Putnam's* includes "A Glance at Havana." In this unsigned travelogue, the author narrates his trip into the exotic Cuban port city, reporting on his entrance into the harbor on board a steamer and his experiences after land-fall. He writes in the first-person plural, evoking identification with his readers. As such, the article reflects how these texts construe consensus between author and US reading public regarding a Hispanophone world whose difference confirms the author's sense of US superiority. The article focuses on the inefficient management of human and natural resources in Cuba, a flaw construed as a product of the Spanish economic and political aversion to liberalism and the concomitant backwardness of its people. Upon arriving in the harbor, the author is immediately approached by a lethargic pilot, even though "[t]he entrance to the harbor of Havana is the plainest possible sailing." "Were it an American or an English port," he continues, "the offer to pilot a vessel into it would be regarded as a patent swindle." In Havana, though, things work differently, as "a corps of pilots has been established by the Spanish government, and a neglect to employ one is sure to be resented as a slight offered to the authorities" (186). Indeed, "The Captain of the Port . . . has absolute power over every vessel that enters it. . . . The vessel, therefore, which should enter the harbor unpiloted would be pretty sure to find herself ordered into the most inconvenient position which his ingenuity could possibly discover" (186). The situation affronts the author's free-market sensibilities. He views the Captain's arbitrary power as indicative of the invisible operation of power in Cuba in contrast to the transparency favored by US liberal democracy.

This piece continues in the following issue under the title "How They Live in Havana." Picking up where he left off, the (presumably same) author walks the reader through Havana. As the title suggests, this article describes Havanese social and domestic customs—what the hotels and food are like, what the inhabitants do at their leisure, what social etiquette is expected, etc. Although not explicitly focused on economic and political matters, the discussion again self-reflexively represents Cubans as less fitted for life in a liberal democracy than US Americans. Nineteenth-century US liberal discourse assumed a separate-spheres model in which the wife, hearth, and home provided the moral suasion necessary to cultivate men's virtuous behavior in a market-driven public sphere that encouraged cutthroat behavior. The article is at pains to show that this is not happening in Cuba. The hotels are "nothing more or less than . . . boardinghouse[s]"; the author puns that in them "bed and board" become one, "the bed being in fact a board" (288). More to the point, he comments that in Havana, "The man whose *volante* and harness have a thousand dollars' worth of silver worked into their decorations, and whose *calesero* (coachman) carries enough of bullion about him to purchase his freedom, will not have so much, or so expensive furniture in his house as the New-Yorker who considers himself in very moderate circumstances" (289). The passages ridicule the contrast between exterior and interior,

construing a telling inversion between the customs of Havana and the United States: in the States, the home space welcomes and refreshes, while the exterior is rugged, enterprising, and productive; in Havana, the exterior is foppish and wasteful, the interior inhospitable and enervating. A similar equation is implied in passages noting the lack of privacy in Havana (290). While privacy might seem a simple matter of etiquette, separate-spheres ideology accorded it great importance, positing that a safe haven from the outside world was necessary for the moral suasion offered by the private sphere. The author's perception of Cuba's failure to maintain this necessary division further suggests his view of Cuba's illiberality.

#### “BENITO CERENO” AS METAFICTIONAL COMMENTARY ON HISPANICIST INCONSISTENCY

These and similar *Putnam's* articles offer warrant for a discourse of US imperial management that “Benito Cereno” examines. As Nelson explains, the tale stages a drama of managerial identity in which Delano seeks recognition of his prerogative as a white, managerial man through identification with fellow captain Cereno. When Cereno does not provide that recognition (*National Manhood* 2), Delano becomes suspicious that Cereno is some form of imposter to his captaincy and decides to appropriate Cereno's ship (*National Manhood* 16). Delano fails to recognize the true state of affairs—black revolt—because he blindly believes that white men of the managerial class monopolize power. However, as Nelson briefly acknowledges elsewhere, Delano's perception is complicated by his sense that Cereno is not exactly white (*Word* 112). Cereno is Spanish, an important distinction given that Melville added to the real-life Delano's account a number of details playing up Delano's attitudes regarding Spaniards (Emery 51–52, 53, 57–59, 61, 66).<sup>5</sup> As DeGuzmán elaborates, Delano's ambivalence toward Cereno reflects the equivocal place of Spanish-ness in Delano's Anglo-American perspective. White and not white, modern and medieval, representing a nation that tried to build an empire in the New World but failed, the Spaniard limits exceptionalist Anglo-American self-conception.<sup>6</sup> As such, Cereno's behavior triggers Delano's wariness about Spaniards (Nelson, *Word* 112). Indeed, Delano has as much riding on believing that Cereno is *not* of his caste as he does on believing that Cereno is—if, per Nelson, Delano confirms his managerial aptitude when he condescends toward blacks, he also does so through interactions with Cereno. The following section recounts the self-reflexive, obfuscating roles played by Delano's Hispanicism and Africanism, emphasizing how they exhibit complementary but particular functions.

Melville begins to reveal Delano's Hispanicist perspective from the moment Delano sees the ship, a sight that reminds him of “the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot, and the sort of stories, at that day, associated with

those seas" (47). The stories inflecting Delano's perspective here may be romances of Spanish pirates, narratives commonly associated in the Anglo-American imagination with the seas off South America, even though pirates were typically Northern Europeans plundering Spanish gold. These associations trigger apprehension in Delano, although he characteristically sheds his fears by power of his "good nature." As he gets a closer look at the boat, he continues to view it in light of his attitude toward Spain. Emery describes the boat as "symboliz[ing] . . . a 'tottering' Spain" and "stand[ing] . . . for Spain's Western empire" (52). In this sense, the boat's decrepit appearance reminds Delano of what he imagines to be its romantic, illustrious past. Delano sees in it what was "in its time, a very fine vessel" that "under a decline of masters, preserved signs of former state" (48). He fixates on an exotic "stern-piece, intricately carved with the arms of Castile and Leon, medallioned about by groups of mythological or symbolical devices; uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" (49). Here, Spanish and gothic figures articulate in Delano's eyes: "the arms of Castile and Leon" are juxtaposed with a frightening mythological image. These impressions color Delano's engagement with the *San Dominick*. What thus emerges is a metafictional demonstration of how such stories shape experience.

As should already be clear, in addition to Spanish piracy, tropes regarding Spanish aristocratic languor also underpin Delano's perspective. (Although these tropes are conjoined, an analytic distinction will prove useful.) As Delano offers assistance to Cereno, he notes Cereno's "grave and ceremonious . . . national formality [which was] dusked by the saturnine mood of ill health" (51). Delano further perceives a "sour and gloomy disdain . . . not unlike . . . his imperial countryman's, Charles V" (52–53). Delano's attitude toward Cereno here hearkens back to the traveler's appraisal of the inefficiency of Havanese aristocratic trappings in *Putnam's*. To Delano, Cereno's "ill-health" marks Cereno's incapability to command, which Delano generally associates with Cereno's Spanish identity. Viewing Cereno as "at once a genteel courtier . . . and an impotent master" (Sundquist 148), Delano, while contemplating "Don Benito's small, yellow hands" (note the perception of racial difference), "easily inferred that the young captain had not got into command at the hawsehole, but the cabin-window; and if so, why wonder at incompetence, in youth, sickness, and gentility united" (58). This ready inference reflects Hispanicist perceptions of Spanish aristocratic languor. Delano eventually becomes pre-occupied with the notion that Cereno is a poor manager. Delano's particular concern is the apparent disorder of the blacks, which he ascribes to Cereno's "strengthless style of command" (Emery 52) but which, of course, reflects successful mutiny. Although Delano acknowledges that "long-continued suffering seemed to have brought out the less good-natured qualities of the Negroes" (51), he believes the central problem is that the "San Dominick wanted . . . stern superior officers," as

“not so much as a fourth mate was to be seen” (54). Delano thus frequently patronizes Cereno with advice regarding proper command, for instance suggesting that Cereno “keep all [his] blacks employed, especially the younger ones, no matter at what useless task” (59) after witnessing a black boy attack a white one.

Melville uses Hispanicism as an aesthetic mechanism to produce the suspense experienced both by Delano and by the first-time reader who sees through Delano’s eyes without knowing the tale’s conclusion. (Accounts of this suspense, such as that of Edward S. Grejda [136], typically neglect the pertinence of Hispanicism.) Delano eventually becomes uncertain regarding what is happening on the *San Dominick*, sensing that something is amiss but unable to discern what. As he regards a seemingly stereotypical Spanish ship, Delano perceives himself to be embroiled in a gothic romance with an ambiguous captain and crew. Rather than recognizing black rebellion, Delano, as Sundquist explains, “vacillates between dark suspicion and paternalistic disdain for the Spaniard” (148). Is Cereno a piratical Spaniard who will betray Delano, or a languorous, inefficient Spaniard who needs direction?

It must here be mentioned that Delano is blind to black rebellion partly because he sees blacks as inevitable servants. As Nelson observes, Delano persistently “denies the slaves Subjectivity” (*Word* 112)—he is unable to recognize their desire for freedom. Delano, after all, takes “to negroes . . . genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (84); this human-animal analogy betrays Delano’s belief in innate African childishness and fawning sub-humanity. This view’s impact on his perception is frequently apparent. For instance, in one passage, Delano contemplates a Spanish sailor’s attempt to give Delano a hint about the mutiny, an attempt that Delano mistakes as a possible sign about Cereno’s treachery. Delano speculates that Cereno and the blacks are working together, but he quickly concludes, “But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguin in against it with negroes?” (75). Here, Delano’s racist view of black intelligence (note the polygeneticist reference to “species”) makes it impossible for him correctly to read the sailor’s attempted signal. The state of affairs on the boat—a brilliantly orchestrated slave mutiny—is, indeed, unfathomable to him.

Compounding his inability to recognize black rebellion, Delano finds the interpretations suggested by Hispanicist tropes preferable to what he views as the impossibility of black humanity. As Sundquist puts it, when Delano confronts black revolution, that reality is “conceal[ed] . . . behind the shadow play of the contest between the American and the European” (151).<sup>7</sup> For instance, in the well-known Gordian knot scene, when the sailor gives Delano the knot, one of the blacks comes to them, tells Delano the sailor is a fool, and takes the knot and inspects it, clearly suspicious (76). Despite witnessing this evidence of black rebellion, Delano ponders Hispanicist alternatives. Upon seeing his

whale boat returning to the *San Dominick*, he complacently says to himself, “I to be murdered here at the ends of the earth, on board a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard?—Too nonsensical to think of!” (77). Shortly afterward, Babo returns and bids Delano go to speak with Cereno, who has recovered from a coughing fit. Delano decides he has been mistaken in his suspicions, laughingly thinking to himself, “What a donkey I was. This kind gentleman who here sends me his compliments, he, but ten minutes ago, dark-lantern in hand, was dodging round some old grind-stone in the hold, sharpening a hatchet for me” (77). In rejecting the signs of black rebellion because of his Africanism, Delano first decides that Cereno is not the piratical, vicious Spaniard. Then, given evidence by Babo that Cereno was simply ill, Delano comforts himself in the belief that Cereno is a “kind gentleman” who is physically incapacitated to manage a ship. Robert S. Levine claims that Delano ascribes the ship’s disorder to how Cereno is “deficient as a leader because he is not ‘Spanish’ enough” (*Conspiracy* 204). Delano is certainly preoccupied with Cereno’s managerial capacity, but the despotic Spaniard is not the only Hispanicist trope available to Delano. That of the languorous, inefficient Spaniard is just as, if not more, appealing to him. He prefers both options, in any event, to the *San Dominick’s* reality.

In the deposition, it becomes clear that Babo orchestrated affairs on the *San Dominick* in order to deceive Delano (109). Babo does so, in part, by playing upon Delano’s Hispanicism. Babo relies on Delano’s Africanism, too, of course, by acting the part of the faithful, submissive servant that Delano finds appealing, as well as by correctly gambling on Delano’s inability to see black capability (Nelson, *Word* 111). Babo also, though, stages the inefficient Spanish ship to Delano. Babo has instructed the Spanish sailors to occupy themselves with odd, useless tasks, oftentimes undertaken by more men than necessary. He has also apparently instructed Cereno to fake sick anytime there is a need for Cereno and Babo to conference in private, playing to Delano’s proclivity to believe that Cereno is not fit for the hardships that have supposedly occurred. (Certainly, Cereno’s actual fear and debility figure here, too.) Particularly telling is how Babo has Cereno dress in a gaudy outfit that Delano perceives as typical of South American aristocratic, despotic trappings (57). In the conclusion, it is revealed that Cereno finds it particularly distressing that this “dress . . . had not willingly been put on. And that silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not, indeed, a sword, but the ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty” (116). Cereno is horrified at the memory partly because Babo has made a “travesty of Don Benito’s former Subject-status by *forcing* him to assume the role he once *commanded*” (Nelson, *Word* 120). However, Cereno’s feelings likely also reflect his recognition of having been forced to lower himself in Delano’s sight by performing a stereotypical form of Spanish mastery. Delano views the scabbard as a sign of lawless Spanish despotism, but Babo has made Cereno simulate this form of virility while symbolically castrating

him. In any event, Babo presents Delano with a state of affairs conforming to Hispanicist tropes, tropes Babo correctly hopes Delano will prefer to the truth.

That Delano holds tightly to his views until the truth is forced upon him during the tale's climax reflects those perceptions' centrality to his sense of self. Crucial to that self-perception is the difference between how Delano understands blacks and Spaniards. When observing blacks, Delano confirms what he perceives as the humanity that undergirds his "singularly undistrustful good nature" (47). In one illustrative example, Delano, during one of Cereno's absences, comes upon "a slumbering negress . . . lying . . . like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock"; upon waking, the woman "delightedly . . . caught [her] child up, with maternal transports, covering it with kisses." The "sunny sight" pleases Delano, and he thinks to himself, "There's naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love" (73). This passage does not appear in the real-life Delano's narrative; Melville invented it to exhibit Delano's racial views. Coming shortly after Delano has had an equivocal encounter with a sailor that has aroused his suspicions, the sight helps Delano conjure up his "undistrustful good nature" and to become confident in his safety. As Andrew Delbanco explains, "Melville knew that in America the dignity of whites depended on the degradation of the blacks" (156). In this light, Delano perceives the woman through an animalistic simile to a "doe." Melville here associates Delano with antebellum romantic racialism. While construing blacks as embodying positive natural forces in contrast to more virulent racisms that emphasized black savagery, romantic racialism viewed blacks as less human than whites.<sup>8</sup> In finding something beautiful and "pure" in her "naked nature," Delano exercises an intellectual, aesthetic capacity through which he elevates himself above the woman, who is figured as part of nature (Nelson, *Word* 124). Once satisfied in this capacity, he complacently dismisses the notion that anything untoward might happen to him.

Delano's Hispanicism informs his self-conception differently. A commonality must first be noted, though: Delano is comforted whenever the blacks and Cereno conform to his preconceptions. For instance, in an early passage in which Delano and Cereno pace the deck, "Don Benito, with Castilian bows, solemnly insisted upon his guest's preceding him up the ladder leading to the elevation." Delano experiences a twinge of fear as he ascends the ladder after seeing that "two of the ominous file [of blacks] . . . one one on each side of the last step, sat for armorial supporters and sentries." However, "when, facing about, he saw the whole file, like so many organ-grinders, still stupidly intent on their work, unmindful of everything beside, he could not but smile at his late fidgety panic" (59). Delano's fear of a potentially treacherous Cereno and crew, which he figures as medieval "armorial supporters" and "sentries," is assuaged as he comes to believe that the two blacks are "stupidly intent on their work." Delano is calmed by what he perceives as characteristic black intellectual inferiority combined with the typical inefficiency of Hispanic management; the "stupidity" in the work he thinks

the blacks have been instructed to perform points him to both stereotypes. Such moments that adhere to his prejudices bolster his sense of security as a man who controls his situation.

The difference between the roles Hispanicism and Africanism play for Delano is that whereas he confirms his humanity through Africanism, he confirms his aptitude for liberal management through Hispanicism. In viewing Cereno as nationally incapacitated to lead his ship and slaves, Delano projects his own capacity to do so. A particularly illustrative passage occurs shortly after Cereno asks Delano how well-armed Delano's ship is. Babo has put Cereno to this task in consideration of possibly overtaking *The Bachelor's Delight*, and it puts Delano on guard. Delano, though, decides the questions are just further evidence of Cereno's weakened mind, "good-naturedly explain[ing] away [his fears with] the thought that, for the most part, the poor invalid scarcely knew what he was about." This realization convinces Delano that "for the present, the man was not fit to be entrusted with the ship. On some benevolent plea withdrawing the command from him, Captain Delano would yet have to send her to Conception." Delano believes that "the sick man, under the good nursing of his servant, would probably, by the end of the passage, be in a measure restored to health and with that he should also be restored to authority." Musing upon the wisdom of this "tranquillizing" plan, Delano self-congratulates himself with the thought that "[t]here was a difference between the idea of Don Benito's darkly preordaining Captain Delano's fate, and Captain Delano's lightly arranging Don Benito's" (69–70). Delano's decision that Cereno's odd behavior is a product of Cereno's incapacitation coheres with the general tenor of Delano's Hispanicism. Delano believes that Cereno's ostensibly aristocratic, Spanish initiation into his captaincy has not prepared Cereno for the hardships of his voyage. This decision prompts Delano's feelings of prerogative as a man upholding liberal, capitalist values, feelings through which he presumes the duty to commandeer the *San Dominick* until Cereno can do so himself.

Just as Delano considers undertaking this duty, "'With pleasure' would Melville's confident countrymen have similarly taken upon themselves the responsibility for a 'spellbound' Spanish America" (Emery 53). Delano's Hispanicist feelings of prerogative embody the nationalist imperialism of *Putnam's*, which construed self-interested imperialism as beneficence. As Louis A. Pérez, Jr., explains, the United States "was singular in the degree to which it so thoroughly obscured the distinction between selfless purpose and self-interest" (174).<sup>9</sup> In this vein, *Putnam's* articles such as "Annexation" suggested that due to political and economic illiberality, Spanish America was incapable of achieving on its own the modernization the United States could bring. As such, the United States should feel not shame but pride in its imperial ambitions. US imperial discourse thus provided cover for the territorial and pecuniary benefits produced by US expansion and the concomitant terror experienced by Spanish America.

Melville scrutinizes the Hispanicism of *Putnam's* by revealing Delano's motivations to be complicated and equivocal, despite his sense of innocence and entitlement.<sup>10</sup> Although Delano thinks of himself as "lightly arranging" the affairs of the *San Dominick* out of altruism, his offer of assistance is after all a "business transaction" (Melville 91), and the final counter-revolt "is prompted not by any wish to 'redeem' the oppressed but by a simple desire for material gain" (Emery 54). After deciding in light of the advice of his officers that he should not personally participate in the attack, Delano appoints his chief mate to lead the charge, and "[t]he more to encourage the sailors, they were told, that the Spanish captain considered his ship as good as lost; that she and her cargo, including some gold and silver, were worth more than a thousand doubloons. Take her, and no small part should be theirs" (100–01). Far from being disinterested, Delano and crew are willing to make capital of their deeds, significantly on pretext of a self-interested interpretation of Cereno's plea that they leave the ship to its fate.<sup>11</sup>

These passages suggest another inconsistency: Hispanicism construes the United States as exceptional to Hispanophone nations when that exceptionality is equivocal. Delano understands his managerial aptitude against that of Cereno, but Melville not only shows that Delano is not exactly what he thinks he is but also that Delano is much like what he views Cereno to be. As Delano commands his men to retake the *San Dominick*, he "appoint[s] his chief mate—an athletic and resolute man, who had been a privateer's-man, and, as his enemies whispered, a pirate—to head the party" (101). The mention of piracy recalls that Delano's perspective on Spain is conditioned by tales of the Spanish Main. Confirming this point, at the narrative's climax when Cereno desperately leaps into Delano's whale boat, a frenzied Delano, still unaware of what is actually happening, yells to his men to "give way for your lives . . . this plotting pirate means murder!" (98). Through his Hispanicist lens, Delano misinterprets Cereno's actions as piracy in contrast to his own self-conception as a benevolent captain. Yet Delano's chief mate is a reputed pirate, a fact which undermines Delano's self-differentiation from Cereno. Delano's failure to disarticulate himself from Cereno suggests their shared guilt as exploitative, violent, racist captains. More broadly, as Emery explains, Melville "was . . . conscious of America's mimicry of Spain" as a nation that sought through appeals to religious and racial hierarchy to impose a moral order on the Western hemisphere (56). What Delano and the US Americans Delano represents take to be different and particular to Spain is, in fact, common to both the United States and Spain.

### IRONY, COSMOPOLITANISM, AND "BENITO CERENO"

Melville's depiction of Delano serves to comment not only on how imperialists constructed US national identity as liberal and managerial but also

cosmopolitan. What did “cosmopolitanism” mean in Melville’s world? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “cosmopolitan” in its adjective form as follows: “1. Belonging to all parts of the world; not restricted to any one country or its inhabitants. 2. Having the characteristics which arise from, or are suited to, a range over many different countries; free from national limitations or attachments.” These definitions were established by the antebellum period. As John Bryant explains, in Melville’s day, the cosmopolitan was “an easily recognizable cultural type. For eighteenth-century European *philosophes*, the cosmopolitan ideal had expressed the liberal longing for a political, economic, and spiritual communion of all races and nations. Thus, the true cosmopolite was ‘at home’ wherever he traveled—London, Paris, Rome, Leipzig, even Philadelphia” (“Citizens” 21). The cosmopolitan, Bryant writes elsewhere, “is a ‘man of feeling,’ a humorist, a gentleman traveler and a ‘citizen of the world’” (“Nowhere” 276). As Bryant elaborates, this figure was at times viewed suspiciously in the antebellum United States. The line between a genial cosmopolitan and a rootless confidence man appeared narrow; a cosmopolitan might seem more a “chameleon than a gentleman, more a satirist than a humorist” (“Nowhere” 279). For the moment, I will work with the first sense in which Bryant discusses the concept, but I will later touch on the latter.

Although cosmopolitanism ostensibly promoted questioning national traditions and identities, some US nationalists paradoxically figured the United States as an exceptionally cosmopolitan nation. The second *Oxford* definition listed above gives as an example a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson that attests to this view. In “The Young American,” Emerson stated that, considering the influx of immigrants into the United States and their dispersal over the nation’s expanses, “it cannot be doubted that the legislation of this country should become more catholic and cosmopolitan than that of any other. It seems so easy for America to inspire and express the most expansive and humane spirit; new-born, free, healthful, strong, the land of the laborer, of the democrat, of the philanthropist, of the believer, of the saint, she should speak for the human race” (217). Emerson, elsewhere, expressed qualms about cosmopolitanism, for instance in his contrast between traveling and self-culture in “Self-Reliance” (277–79). In “The Young American,” though, he calls for his listeners to build a cosmopolitan nation with the most “generous sentiment, whose eminent citizens [are] willing to stand for the interests of general justice and humanity” (226). Emerson’s exhortation reflects a broader nationalistic view of a progressive, inclusive United States. In Hispanicist texts, this cosmopolitan national identity was celebrated against what was perceived to be a provincial, exclusive Spanish identity. For instance, the *Putnam’s* articles “Cuba” and “Annexation” posit that the United States, in contrast to Spain and Spanish America, offers benevolence to all, regardless of identity and history. “Cuba,” indeed, states that US “nationality” is “the practical realization of cosmopolitanism” (16). As such, US empire-building

projects such as the annexation of Cuba promise a time when “all the nations of the earth shall be as one people” (16), a utopia in which petty prejudices will no longer impede the individual’s pursuit of happiness.

Several aspects of Melville’s characterization of Delano signal Delano’s self-understanding as a cosmopolitan. Delano exhibits bourgeois sympathy and racist benevolence in his reaction to the scene aboard the *San Dominick*, expressing paternalistic concern for those he perceives to be his racial and social inferiors. These attitudes intersect with cosmopolitanism as forms of cross-difference sentiment. What particularly distinguishes Delano as a self-imagined cosmopolitan, though, is his sense of himself as a congenial man of the world who is at home anywhere he goes. He takes heart in his “singularly undistrustful good-nature” (47) and sees himself as “benevolent” (47) and “humane” (52). He is “genial,” with a “good, blithe heart” (84). Delano views himself as well-traveled, as revealed by the confidence he feels at being able to “converse with some freedom” in Spanish, and more generally by his assumption of familiarity with African and Spanish natures. He is a man of ready “sympathies” (51) and “charity” (53) toward members of cultures other than his own. To an extent, he even makes an effort to see himself in Cereno; while pondering how “the very word Spaniard has a curious, conspirator, Guy-Fawkish twang to it,” he concludes that “Spaniards in the main are as good folks as any in Duxbury, Massachusetts” (79).

As his associations with the term “Spaniard” suggest, though, Delano construes his cosmopolitanism not only through fellow feeling for but also through self-differentiation against Cereno. A man who enjoys making “gay and humorous expression[s]” (67), Delano frequently takes offense to what he views as Cereno’s unfriendly affronts to Delano’s own gregariousness. Delano’s resentment is most evident after Cereno refuses to join Delano for a pleasant visit aboard the *Bachelor’s Delight* shortly before the tale’s climax (94). Earlier, Delano perceives in Cereno an “unhealthy climax” of the need for captains to at times manage their ships with a cold lack of “sociality” toward their crews (53). Delano, in turn, thinks of himself as having balanced sociability and authority. Delano’s assumption of a sympathetic outlook also reflects this tendency to construe his cosmopolitanism against Cereno. He frequently expresses pity for Babo, whom he believes Cereno does not properly appreciate. Delano, here, takes pride in extending his sympathy to the downtrodden slave (Tawil 200). What becomes apparent is that Delano’s cosmopolitanism takes shape within the Anglo-Hispanic-African triangle that informs Delano’s perspective. The power relationships he perceives in that triangle limit his cosmopolitanism; identities are not truly level in his view. Delano’s benevolence toward Babo only persists while Delano believes Babo is a willing slave. Once that belief has been exploded, Delano loses all good will toward Babo, leading a brutal counter-revolt. Delano’s cosmopolitanism does not go so far as including a willingness to recognize the legitimacy of Babo’s desire for freedom, to see the world

through Babo's eyes. Delano's cosmopolitanism is hierarchical, too, in that Delano defines himself as a cosmopolitan in contrast to Cereno. His sociable regard for Cereno is counterbalanced by his sense of superiority. As we have seen, though, Delano's sense of difference is mistaken.

Here again, Delano's disavowal of Spanish identity blinds Delano to his failure to measure up to the standards he sets for himself. Delano, thus, exemplifies what Donald E. Pease terms the "structures of disavowal" of US exceptionalism. As Pease writes, "the relations between US citizens' belief in US exceptionalism and the state's production of exceptions to its core tenets might be best described in psychosocial terms as structures of disavowal." These structures, Pease argues, "enabl[ed] US citizens to disavow . . . measures . . . which violated the anti-imperialist norms that were embedded within the discourse of American exceptionalism" (19). The United States, in exceptionalists' view, is on the one hand exceptionally benevolent, on the other the bearer of exceptional duties that make its violations of its norms somehow different than similar actions performed by other nations. To extend Pease's claim to "Benito Cereno," through Hispanicist- and Africanist-funded exceptionalism, Delano disavows the rapacity of his actions and confirms his identity as a benevolent American. Delano represents a US type whose chief characteristic is his reflexive ability to employ exceptionalism to refashion questionable actions as innocent, his opportunism as disinterestedly volunteering his managerial expertise. As Melville depicts Delano as representative of pernicious tendencies in US politics and life, Melville's position reflects that of Pease in that Melville suggests that exceptionalism makes it difficult for US citizens to face up to the nation's guilt.

However, DeGuzmán and Nelson express dissatisfaction with the tale as a critique. While Nelson acknowledges the work's subversive insight into racism's "dehumanizing force" (*Word* 110), she points out that it offers "neither explicit criticism nor alternative action" (*Word* 128). She further argues that "the narrator *participates* in the sentence and the gaze of the Lima Court at the same time he makes it possible for his readers to do the same" (*Word* 128)—as DeGuzmán summarizes Nelson's point, "the narrator dehumanizingly turns Babo into an art object" (50). Despite seemingly good intentions, the tale's irony is an end in itself rather than a means of change, a phenomenon Nelson finds typical of socially engaged writing by authors from privileged backgrounds (*Word* 127–28). DeGuzmán echoes Nelson. Melville has a "keen sense of the inhumanity of monomaniacal whiteness," she explains, but "[t]he fact that all the characters are typed (and most definitely in a racializing, if not overtly racist, manner) and that the typing is configured in . . . a way . . . that . . . leads to not only re-cognizable but pre-cognizable doom for certain characters [Babo and Cereno] and, if not salvation, then survival for others [Delano] constitutes the real . . . dead end of the story" (52). As such, the tale presents no "serious critique" of racism or imperialism (52).

There is a basis for such arguments. Melville was not particularly concerned with advocating specific policy proposals such as anti-imperial foreign relations (Delbanco 155). His concerns are intertwiningly epistemological and literary as opposed to political per se. Hispanicism and Africanism interest Melville, in part, as fertile aesthetic grounds, as the blinding quality of such discourses offers an engine for suspense. To the extent that his work has an ideological import, I would describe that import as pre-political. Melville is interested in what happens before political proposals are made. He focuses on the frame as much as on the content, on how stories told about political issues are structured by assumptions about identity as opposed to what such stories tell regarding how to judge specific political programs.<sup>12</sup> He asks readers to engage political questions with an attitude between reflection and activity. Instead of answering political questions related to liberalism and imperialism, Melville's ironic, perspectival commentary on how imperial sociopolitical forms structure (and obscure) Delano's perception is an injunction to slow down and linger on how such questions are approached.

To say that the tale engages the pre-political, though, is not to say that it is not politically valuable. Indeed, in subverting Delano's perceived certainties, the tale opens a space for discussing political alternatives. Melville's tale highlights how Hispanicism convinced the US expansionist that his imperialism was just, the chauvinist that he was cosmopolitan, the exploitative manager of his benevolent liberality. In a milieu in which such discourses seemed natural, it was impossible to judge the relative validity of political proposals because assumptions about identity clouded such discussions. How could a proposal be judged when the evidence in favor of it was an obfuscating notion of US-Hispanic hierarchy? Focusing on the pre-political, in such contexts, is of as much political importance as evaluating specific policy options. Sacvan Bercovitch illustrates this challenge when he explains how, when writing *The American Jeremiad*, he was motivated by his sense that in American traditions of dissent, "the remedy for American abuses was the American promise." The problem here is that "nay-saying . . . framed within the America-story . . . close[s] out alternatives to the culture" (xix). Options outside the consensus around liberal democracy are off the table. As such, recognizing one's entrapment within the culture is "the indispensable first step in opening vistas of political transformation" (xxiii). Melville may not advocate for the radical, non-liberal-democratic measures Bercovitch ponders, but the two concur in suggesting that political dialogue is limited if structured around questions of what is most American, most Spanish, most African. Such structures divest dialogue of substance, inhibit innovation, and uphold rapacious power relations. Realizing the limitations set by these structures is thus a precondition for discussing policy alternatives.

In this context, Melville's artistry is a powerful tool. One senses in dismissals of Melville's politics a dissatisfaction with high literature's distanced complexity. "Benito Cereno," indeed, exhibits memorable literary complexity by

raising perspective to the level of a multilayered, ironized verbal texture. However, Melville's construction of literature out of how political questions are framed by perspectives comprises precisely his tale's pre-political import. Literary complexity is thus Melville's political point of entry. It is as a literary work of art that "Benito Cereno" devastatingly defamiliarizes Hispanicist exceptionalism. What is more, just as Bercovitch calls for "a scholarly-critical enterprise that might eventuate in a different frame-story for the national narrative" (xxxiii), Melville, while offering no policy alternatives, provides alternative narrative frames, alternatives premised on the kind of literary complexity valued by perceptive critics. Revealingly, T. Walter Herbert claims that in *Typee*, "Melville's treatment . . . preserves critical ambivalences that draw him into deeper and deeper efforts to fathom what his own position truly is. . . . he finds the concept of civilization coming to pieces in his hands; yet he has no alternative concept with which to replace it" (156). An analogous point can be made for "Benito Cereno"; in examining Delano's viewpoint, Melville draws attention to US exceptionalism's instabilities and misperceptions. Yet in "Benito Cereno," a mature Melville offers a radical reconception of how stories about identity and relationships can be told, of how answers to such questions can be approached. This reconception is seen in the pre-political, literary aspects of the tale, which are distinguished from the simplicity of the stock narratives upon which Delano's self-conception relies.

This alternative frame is cosmopolitan, but not Delano's blinding, exceptionalist cosmopolitanism. Another non-hierarchical cosmopolitan manner of describing relationships among identities is available, one that contests how identity-based discourses violently sever human commonality in their construction of types that are, in the end, fictions, even if fictions that tangibly effect our world. This more rigorous cosmopolitanism is premised on a sense for irony, here understood as the ability to denaturalize identity. As Bryant elaborates, Melville's texts and his writing process exhibit a "cosmopolitical awareness" that entails using writing to put identities into play against one another, to be always aware that there are multiple perspectives ("Cosmopolite" 122). With such awareness, one recognizes that one's identity might be viewed differently by someone else than it is by oneself. This nose for irony involves recognizing that things are not always what they seem, that meanings vary with perspective. While this view might seem to threaten an anarchical groundlessness, it in fact grounds a revolutionary process of identity constitution. In this process, rigorously considered change and revision are always on the table when interactions suggest that one's identity does not work. As Bryant writes, cosmopolitical awareness "is a form of critical thinking designed to familiarize ourselves with three fundamentals: 1) identities evolve . . . 2) texts also evolve because writers and readers revise them; they are fluid texts; and 3) we revise cultural identities as we revise textual identities" ("Cosmopolite" 124). "Revision" here is key. For the skilled writer, a text is never final, as another perspective can always provide a fresh

view on the writing. Similarly, for the cosmopolitan, identity is conditional; frictions of identity can demonstrate the need for reflection on one's beliefs, customs, and attitudes toward others, potentially demonstrating that they need alteration. The cosmopolitan, as such, has an ear for productive dissonance that signals a need to revise.<sup>13</sup>

As said, to many antebellum US Americans, a radical cosmopolitan seemed suspiciously rootless, perhaps because such an individual's orientation to the world upset stock perceptions of US superiority. Melville, though, found this aspect of radical cosmopolitanism appealing. He perceived that a cosmopolitan in this sense "challenges our apathetic being. . . . He confronts us with an invitation to trust and yet reminds us of the necessity to doubt" (Bryant, "Citizens" 30). The cosmopolitan, in this sense, is a far cry from Delano, whose "singular guilelessness" makes him "a man of such native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony" (Melville 47, 63). Delano has abundant evidence that suggests that his perspectives on identity—his belief in inefficient Spanish despotism, black irrationality and servility, and his own benevolence—warrant doubt. For instance, Delano often nearly recognizes that the roles of master and slave have been reversed with Cereno and Babo. Yet, Delano is unable to think outside his stereotypes. So inured is he in his self-understanding that he is "oblivious to the end of the meaning of Babo's terror and to the murderous satire contained in Melville's symbolic gesture" (Sundquist 137). Indeed, in the concluding exhortation to Cereno, he brushes off his experience with clichés: "the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves" (116). Such failures to learn from experience exemplify a complacency that is antithetical to cosmopolitical awareness.

A major aspect of cosmopolitical awareness is skepticism. Some readings of skepticism and "Benito Cereno" suggest that, through Delano, Melville thematizes humanity's inability to escape its benighted, limited ability to know.<sup>14</sup> As such, does Melville present cosmopolitical awareness as a pretense? If such awareness involves recognizing the flexibility of identity, skepticism may deny the possibility of recognition per se. However, "Benito Cereno" presents skepticism not as an aspect of the human condition embodied in Delano but as an orientation to the world opposed to that of Delano. A man whom Melville implies has less "than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception" (47), Delano is characterized by a Hispanicist- and Africanist-funded complacency at odds with the skeptic's rigorous attention to context and contingency. If Delano was less self-satisfied and had more of the skeptic's drive to self-question, he might have reacted differently while on board the *San Dominick*. The falsity of his self-understanding as cosmopolitan is cast against a skepticism that shares much with cosmopolitical awareness. Far from being paralyzed by epistemological limitations, the skeptic can put her/his acknowledgement of those limitations to work. That

self-awareness can lead to a willingness to revise one's identity and one's conceptions about others.<sup>15</sup>

The relevance to "Benito Cereno" of this more rigorous, skeptical cosmopolitanism is exhibited by the fact that the narrative relies on its existence. Delano's Hispanicist- and Africanist-funded complacency in his self-conception as a benevolent, optimistic cosmopolitan propels the suspense that forms part of the tale's aesthetic interest by keeping him from seeing what has happened on the *San Dominick*. In that "Benito Cereno" more concerns a man with such an incapacity than it does slave mutiny per se (Tawil 197), there would be no "Benito Cereno" if Delano were capable of cosmopolitical perception. The tale thus highlights such perception's relevance to Delano's experience.

Melville's literary, pre-political approach here becomes most apparently political. Uncomfortably experiencing suspense while inhabiting Delano's perspective, readers are invited to realize that perspective's dangers by comparing what the story is to what it might have been. As such, in tethering US exceptionalism to Delano's point of view and questioning that perspective's interpretative validity, Melville promotes cosmopolitical awareness as an approach to the world that is qualitatively superior to exceptionalism. For one thing, skeptical cosmopolitanism is more practical than Delano's complacency. The reader is apprised of the usefulness of being the absent skeptical cosmopolitan in a "perpetually immigrant world" (Bryant, "Cosmopolite" 120). The ability to rethink one's self and how one relates with others would likely have served Delano well aboard the *San Dominick*. Being willing to see Cereno as something other than a despotic, inefficient manager and to see Babo as something other than a slave might have helped Delano understand what had happened aboard the ship before that knowledge is forced upon him. Of course, Cereno has reason to suggest that more precise knowledge would have killed Delano (Melville 115), but perhaps the inability to revise preconceptions is more dangerous. Delano nearly dies many times while on the *San Dominick*—for instance, when he threatens discipline to the unruly blacks as they attempt to take the food that Delano's crew has brought aboard. As usual, both Africanism and Hispanicism inform how Delano reacts to this situation; both suggest to him that the blacks need the discipline he threatens, his Africanism because they are infantile servants, his Hispanicism because of Cereno's failures in management. Luckily for Delano, his preconceptions do not cost him his life, but cosmopolitical awareness might have braced him with the wariness necessary not to leave the case up to chance.

In highlighting how Delano might have taken a more active role in protecting himself in the tale, Melville may be warning his audience about the dangers of Delano's imperialistic attitudes. DeGuzmán suggests that as a "morality tale" regarding what Melville "envisioned as the potentially horrific consequences of becoming an empire," the tale emphasizes in particular "the part played by slavery as a stain on the aspirations of Anglo-American

manifest destiny” (66). Yet whereas DeGuzmán sees a US American author fretting over whether US imperialism is sufficiently exceptional, I would suggest that the tale’s pre-political, cosmopolitical aspects comprise a critique of US imperial attitudes per se. Melville shows how complacent manners of understanding identity hinder recognition of “the unoriginality of American expansionism” that portends “its nonsuccess” (Emery 63). His cosmopolitical frame is an alternative to thinking about questions of empire that suggests not that US Americans seek to build an exceptional empire but rather that they recognize the distorting, insidious nature of seductive calls to do so.

The most salient value of cosmopolitical awareness, though, is that it is just. Delano’s misconceptions regarding US liberality and benevolence, Hispanic despotism, and African servility inhibit his ability to treat others justly. Here, Babo’s role is illustrative. Babo may seem to pose a problem for my reading. If Melville is suggesting an identity of non-identity, an identity in which identities are always at play against one another, is Babo not the limit case of this logic, in that he is void of identity? And is a silenced slave really what Melville wants to propose as a model? I would contend, though, that rather than presenting Babo as a model for what an identity of non-identity looks like, what is most notable about Babo’s identity is how he serves as a blank slate. For Delano, Babo serves as a proving ground through which Delano can self-construct his cherished fantasies about what it means to be a cosmopolitan, managerial US American. Through paternalistic sympathy with Babo, Delano imagines himself as a man of feeling in contrast to what he views as the heartless, despotic Cereno. Through suppression of the slave revolt, Delano leagues with Cereno against Babo to act out his self-conception as a stern, if genial, commander against savage disorder. In both cases, Delano interprets Babo’s actions in terms of Delano’s self-conceptions, misperceiving Babo by unjustly treating him as a means to an end of self-construction rather than as an end unto himself.

The fact that Babo is void of identity figures large in Nelson’s reading; she suggests that the narrative “objectifies Babo as fully as the sentence of the Lima Court,” offering no insights into “Babo’s motives and goals, and ultimate humanity.” This “necessarily limited portrayal” is a product of Melville’s privileged, benighted vantage (*Word* 130). Leaving aside the fact that Melville seems to have identified with Babo as much as any character in the tale (both, after all, are storytellers), I conclude by asking, would Babo be void of identity if he was not part of a world in which rigid notions of identity played such a dominant, oppressive role? What if Delano—who treats not just Babo but everyone as a tool of exceptionalist identity formation—took a more skeptical attitude toward identity categories and sought to view others outside his own cherished self-conceptions? In such a world, Babo would not serve as a blank slate through which Delano could act out his desires and preferences for self-identification. He could offer Babo an authentic form of sympathy. In this sense, Babo’s identity of non-identity is a limit case not so much in that Babo serves as a negative model, but in that this identity exemplifies the results of

how Delano views others. The value of cosmopolitical awareness and skepticism toward identity categories, the tale suggests, is that such literary sensibilities provide the basis for making a different world possible.

## NOTES

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1. The term “Black Legend” was coined by Spanish journalist Juderías in 1914, but it refers to a much older tradition. It was originally only vaguely tied to race, but with the rise of more systematized racialist views in the antebellum period, it took on specifically racialist overtones that emphasized the Iberian peninsula’s history of racial intermixture and pervasive intermixture in the colonies (50). On the Black Legend, see further DeGuzmán; Gibson; Greer, Mignolo, and Quilligan; and Retamar. On the evolution of racial understandings of difference in the nineteenth century, see Horsman; and Jordan.

2. Compare Emery, who argues that “Benito Cereno” is more concerned with expansion and its relationship to slavery than with slavery per se; and Sundquist, for whom historicizing Melville requires recognizing that “slavery was hemispheric” and that it must be interpreted in terms of “several cultures, several nations” (136).

3. For an overview, see Levinson on “activist formalism” (559). For specific approaches, see, e.g., Castiglia and Castronovo; Levine, *Dislocating*; and Otter.

4. See Robbins 548–51 on the magazine’s (literary) nationalism.

5. The real-life Delano’s account reveals little regarding Anglophone attitudes toward Spain (318–53). See Newman 98–100 for a breakdown of Melville’s alterations to the original.

6. See Norton 4 on the function of the liminal figure in national identity construction.

7. Compare Fiedler on how Delano’s stereotypes of Spaniards and blacks work hand in hand (400).

8. On Melville and romantic racialism, see Robbins as well as Tawil (191–208), both of whom view “Benito Cereno” as responding to Stowe.

9. Compare Pérez’s claim that “the efficacy of metaphor” in the context of US-Cuban affairs “resided precisely in its capacity to obscure its function” (37).

10. Robbins views Melville’s engagement with *Putnam’s* as tacit acquiescence to its slavery politics (547, 548–51, 551–52, 555). *Putnam’s*, Robbins points out, distanced itself from the romantic-racialist antislavery espoused by *The National Era* and Stowe, instead preferring a more hard-nosed, ironic mode of engagement. Melville published in *Putnam’s* partly because “Benito Cereno” fit *Putnam’s* vision, with the depiction of Delano serving as an ironic denunciation of sentimental antislavery. However, while racially progressive, *Putnam’s* often took nationalist stances, including on the issue of US imperial prerogative in the Hispanophone world. Here, I argue, Melville parted with the magazine. I would also disagree with Post-Lauria, who argues that Melville joined forces with *Putnam’s* on both its critique of slavery and imperialism (5). *Putnam’s* regularly published pro-imperialist work, as seen with “Annexation.”

11. See further Nelson on Delano’s pecuniary motivations (*Word* 116–17).

12. Compare Herbert on how *Typee* emphasizes how Americans experience encounter with Marquesans more so than anything concrete about Marquesans themselves (21).

13. Compare Herbert on how “Melville’s art reanimates the self” by “prompt[ing] interpretative efforts and reveall[ing] new qualities as the identities of interpreters shift” (179); and Michael’s discussion of Frederick Douglass’s frictive cosmopolitanism (201–34).

14. Halpern argues that “Melville’s irony riddles any ground that we might have hoped to stand on” (559) as readers, which means “we cannot assume even the most basic thing about it, such as its status as an antislavery text” (561). Going a step further, Arsić writes that *The Piazza Tales* “all relate something about the possibility of leaving the [platonic] cave. More often than not this possibility will turn out to be a failure. . . . Captain Delano will remain a hostage in his cave, reading only what is written ‘black

on white.' By the force of the law, Babo will be turned into the absolute silence of the beheaded body" (9). While these stories, Arsić argues, may ironize the natural and reveal the constructed character of the epistemological orders they investigate, they also thematize the impossibility of escaping the cave.

15. Compare Herbert's assertion that Melville champions a "tolerance for ambiguity sufficient to permit anomalous experience to be made available to consciousness, however inconsistent the resulting attitudes and feelings may appear to be." His work teaches that in "social interactions we do not find an unchanging absolute logos," but rather "an inexhaustible discourse, a drama without conclusion" that requires constant attention to context (207–08).

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## **The Uses of Tragedy: *A Thousand Acres* and American Exceptionalism**

MARY VERMILLION

We've always known that America's reign as the world's greatest nation would eventually end. But most of us imagined that our downfall, when it came, would be something grand and tragic.

—Paul Krugman, *New York Times* (2010)

Jane Smiley notes that her 1991 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres* “exists in a cultural soup” (“Shakespeare” 175). Key ingredients? Ecofeminism, the farm crisis, and, of course, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Ingredients that have received less scrutiny are the generic conventions of tragedy itself. Madelon Sprengnether maintains that Smiley’s novel questions the meaning humanist critics invest in tragedy when they emphasize the “hero’s exemplary character and tragic dignity” (17) and the “unproblematized restoration of moral order” (11). According to Sprengnether and other readers, Smiley’s rewriting of *King Lear* demonstrates the sexism inherent in tragedy and much of its critical history.<sup>1</sup> I contend that Smiley’s critique of tragedy also performs other important cultural work. Her novel reveals the ways in which tragedy—as a literary genre, a vernacular term, a sensibility, or an idea—is used to support American exceptionalism.<sup>2</sup> As Smiley depicts the rise and fall of her Midwestern Lear, farmer Larry Cook, *A Thousand Acres* explores the construction and decline of American exceptionalism. Conflating Shakespearean tragedy with domestic realism, the novel undercuts the ways in which exceptionalists attempt to aggrandize their mythology and its decline.<sup>3</sup>

Before I examine Smiley’s novel itself, let me first clarify my use of the terms *tragedy* and *American exceptionalism*. I focus my discussion of literary tragedy on theories that seem to have shaped Smiley’s distaste for *King Lear*, theories that Terry Eagleton calls traditionalist (21). Key to such theories is A. C. Bradley’s highly influential *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Bradley’s definition of tragedy, like Aristotle’s, emphasizes a superlative lone male hero “of high estate.” This hero’s actions trigger “exceptional calamity” punctuated by his

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own death. Because his “beauty and greatness only tortures itself and throws itself away,” the audience is both humbled and inspired.

Although Eagleton savages this view (133–36), he and Bradley agree on one important element of tragedy. Both critics, like most theorists of the genre, emphasize tragedy’s potential for exploring the interplay between freedom and fate. More important, both Eagleton and Bradley are concerned about how this interplay is represented. Both take great pains to distinguish themselves from others who discuss the relationship between freedom and fate in tragedy as “a simple antithesis” (Eagleton 106). Bradley disparages Wordsworth for depicting “poor humanity’s afflicted will struggling in vain with ruthless destiny.” Eagleton similarly eschews the “simplistic ‘free hero versus determining cosmos’ ideology” (143). He attacks theories of tragedy that “thematize the contest between freedom and fate” (119). Not surprisingly, Eagleton’s mode of challenging this contest differs sharply from Bradley’s. What I find significant is the fact that two radically different theorists of tragedy both seek to complicate the contest between freedom and fate. Their shared concern suggests that the freedom-versus-fate antithesis has a strong hold on the imagination and a prominent place in a range of discourses that define or appropriate tragedy and the tragic.

Rita Felski implies that “popular politics” favors a freedom-versus-fate binary, which she labels melodrama: “To portray one’s own side as helpless and virtuous and one’s opponent as powerful and evil is to harness a rhetoric geared toward triggering outrage at the spectacle of injustice” (12). I maintain that such melodrama is sometimes dressed up in the trappings of tragedy by those who seek to enhance their cultural cachet. Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* portrays the high cost of this masquerade—especially as it relates to American exceptionalism.

Of course, the masquerade would never work if American exceptionalism had nothing in common with tragedy. For champions of American exceptionalism, America is the hero at the height of his powers: an exceptional and exemplary leader, both mightier and wiser than other entities, and thus their provider and protector. Opponents of exceptionalism tend to emphasize this hero’s hubris and inevitable fall. For opponents, America’s “greatness,” like that of a tragic hero, both defines and destroys. Shakespeare’s tragedies feature “characters whose greatness is inextricable from the things that undermine it” (Danson 117). So, too, America’s wealth and symbolic power—its image as the anticolonial leader of the free world—rests upon a history of imperialism, slavery, and genocide. Denying this tension, America falls prey to a dangerous exemplarity, a “State exceptionalism” or “exemptionalism,” in which it exempts itself from the example it claims to set.<sup>4</sup>

Fraught with contradictions, American exceptionalism resembles the version of tragedy that disturbs both Bradley and Eagleton. American exceptionalism, like this tragedy, exalts both freedom and fate—glorifying the quest for freedom while magnifying, externalizing, and mystifying whatever threatens it. Consider this tension between freedom and fate in two quotations from

*King Lear*. Gloucester emphasizes threats to freedom, insisting that we have no control over our lives: “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’gods; / They kill us for their sport” (4.1.37–38). His son Edgar, in contrast, emphasizes human freedom. He implies that our actions—for better or worse—determine our fates: “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us” (5.3.169–70). “This brace of quotations,” according to Ralph Berry, “props up the tragic spectrum like bookends” (14). Tragedy, he observes, explores “that mysterious realm between the poles, where intelligent and conscious people, with some control over their lives, encounter a dark and hostile Fate that ultimately overthrows them. For Shakespeare, it is this middle realm that is the arena of contending forces” (14). And for Shakespeare and many other tragedians and theorists of tragedy, it is this middle realm—a balance between hubristic action and fatalistic passivity—that we should seek in our own lives. As Eagleton maintains, tragedy

highlights what is perishable, constricted, fragile and slow-moving about us, as a rebuke to culturalist or historicist hubris. It stresses how we are acted upon rather than robustly enterprising, as well as what meagre space for manoeuvre we often have available. This recognition, indeed, is the positive side of a mystified belief in destiny. What for some suggests fatalism or pessimism means for others the kind of sober realism which is the only sure foundation of an effective ethics or politics. (xvi)<sup>5</sup>

*A Thousand Acres*, however, suggests that American exceptionalism accentuates and glamorizes the poles of freedom and fate, disguising melodrama as tragedy, and robbing tragedy of its ethical power, its ability to help Americans form a soberly realistic view of themselves and their place in the world. In Smiley’s novel, the polarity between freedom and fate is most obvious in Larry and his oldest daughter, Ginny, the novel’s narrator and Goneril figure. At the novel’s beginning, Larry believes he can and should control everything and everybody while Ginny believes she can control nothing. With Larry, the novel critiques uses of tragedy that magnify its celebration of the human will; with Ginny, the novel attacks uses of tragedy that romanticize fatalism. With Larry and Ginny together, *A Thousand Acres* thus investigates two facets of American exceptionalism: Larry embodies the State’s double standards and worst excesses while Ginny demonstrates its citizens’ disempowered response.<sup>6</sup>

Larry dominates what Lori Ween calls the “nationalization” of *A Thousand Acres* (116). Several critics argue that he represents various aspects of American culture and identity: the American pastoral dream, Jeffersonian agrarianism, mastery over nature, manifest destiny, Whitman’s “grandiose individual,” an “ethic of ownership,” and the rags-to-riches success story of the self-made man.<sup>7</sup> These concepts and stories all contribute to American exceptionalism, yet no one has explicitly discussed exceptionalism itself in Smiley’s

novel. This omission is striking given that American exceptionalism faced strong challenges both in 1979, when the novel is primarily set, and in 1991, when it was published. In 1979, Smiley's characters face a looming farm crisis, an oil crisis, and the aftermath of the Vietnam War. America was losing its agrarian mythos, its sense of independence, and its belief in its moral superiority and military might. In 1991, the novel's first readers were adjusting to the end of the Cold War, an ending that forced the United States to redefine its exceptionalism—in part by redefining external threats to its freedom.<sup>8</sup> It is in these contexts that I examine Larry Cook, who represents American exceptionalism and who more than threatens his own family's freedom.

At the start of the novel, Larry resembles Aristotle's tragic hero, "highly renowned and prosperous." When eight-year-old Ginny describes Larry in 1951, we encounter an understated and naïve view of American exceptionalism. Ginny listens to her parents compare their farm to other farms, saying, "I nestled into the certainty of the way, through the repeated comparisons, our farm and our lives seemed secure and good" (5). In the next chapter, when the novel jumps to 1979, it is clear that Larry's power and sense of moral superiority stem from his land and know-how. Ginny says, "we lived on what was clearly the best, most capably cultivated farm. The biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer" (19–20). Larry sees himself as the ultimate provider: "A farmer is a man who feeds the world" (45). According to his "catechism," his expansionist duty is clear: "To grow more food"; "To buy more land" (45). Larry is liberal individualism incarnate. He believes in discipline, hard work, and self-sufficiency: "luck is something you make for yourself" (132). Like a tragic hero before his fall, Larry seems impervious to disaster: "Everyone respects him and looks up to him. When he states an opinion, people listen. Good times and bad times roll off him all the same" (104–05). When people do criticize Larry, he dismisses them: "Envy likes to talk" (23). Believing "home was best" (64), Larry, like Northrop Frye's tragic hero, is "exceptional and isolated at the same time" (38). He is also a scaled-down version of Bradley's hero, a man whose fate "affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire."

The novel situates Larry as an exemplar of a group that will not take no for an answer. Early in the narrative, Ginny notes that her neighbor Loren Clark was "feeling a little *heroic*, just as the men around our place were feeling" (6; emphasis added). This heroism stems from their triumph over forces much larger than themselves. First, the weather: "the spring had been cold and wet, and no one had been able to get into the fields until mid-May" (6). Second, national and international politics: during the wet weather, "all the men were sitting around . . . worrying that there wouldn't be tractor fuel for planting. Jimmy Carter ought to do this, Jimmy Carter will certainly do that, all spring long" (7). Readers sense the farmers' feelings of powerlessness, their dependence on oil cartels and on a peanut farmer who surely doesn't know as much as they do. Yet when the fields dry, hard work wins the day: "all the

corn in the county had been planted in less than two weeks" (6). Larry and his fellow farmers are nearly defeated by forces beyond their control, but not quite. They outwit and outwork nature; they are captains of their fate. The end of the novel more explicitly associates farmers with the tragic hero's indomitable will: "The harvest drama commenced then, with the usual crises and heroics. Men against nature, men against machine, men against the swirling, impersonal forces of the market" (317).

Yet the novel ultimately subverts these "heroics" via the damage caused by Larry. At best, he is self-righteous and shortsighted; at worst, violent and rapacious. When his wife attempts to stop him from beating young Ginny, Larry says, "There's only one side here, and you'd better be on it" (183). Such dangerous ego inspires Smiley's feminist critique of traditionalist tragedy. Her novel endorses Linda Bamber's claim that "Lear's demands are obviously unreasonable, yet he is only expressing the unreasonable demands implicit in tragedy as a genre. The tragedy of our individualism lies in our efforts to make the whole world turn around us. . . . In tragedy we are invited to share in the hero's fantasies of his own centrality" (23–24). With Larry's abuse of his land and his daughters, *A Thousand Acres* depicts the sad implications of these fantasies—for both a family and a nation.

Larry perceives the natural world and his daughters as limitless resources existing solely to meet his needs. He repeatedly raped Ginny and her sister Rose when they were teenagers, but if readers are shocked by this incest, they shouldn't be. Larry's abuse of his daughters is the "logical" consequence of his strong sense of entitlement. As Ginny says, "he thinks he has a right to everything. He thinks it's all basically his" (179). Such beliefs prompt Larry to revel in waste—perhaps a humorous jab at Bradley's comment that the central feeling of tragedy "is the impression of waste." In Bradley's view of tragedy, we confront "a world travailing for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste." An alcoholic, Larry gets "wasted" every night. He buys \$1,000 cabinets only to leave them outside in the rain. He and his neighbor Harold can "eat a whole pie, wedge by wedge" at one sitting, leaving none of the "pie" for anyone else (10–11). Larry, whose self-proclaimed duty is to "feed the world," does not care about even his nearest neighbors. He buys their land when they can no longer afford it, pretending to assist them, yet his motto—"what you get is what you deserve" (35)—reveals his disdain for them. Larry does not simply mean that you reap what you sow (in his neighbor Cal Ericson's case, farm failure); he also implies that you deserve anything you can buy or take. Larry's land-grabbing obviously represents empire-building, one of the novel's many representations that challenge the American exceptionalist view of the United States as anti-imperialist. With Larry, Smiley's novel shows that America is far from remedying the "corruptions" of "Old World" colonialism. This point is further emphasized by the many characters and towns Smiley names after "early explorer/exploiters"

who were European (Alter 155)—and by the fact that Larry Cook himself is the grandson of two white English Protestant immigrants. As David Noble and many others argue, a belief in the superiority of such a pedigree is central to American exceptionalism and its legacy of imperialism (xxiv, xlii).<sup>9</sup>

Larry's land management further exhibits the imperialism at the heart of American exceptionalism. Larry uses the water beneath his land to bolster his reputation and sense of entitlement. He does not care about the environmental impact of his tiling any more than he cares about the Native Americans (and later his white neighbors) who were displaced so that he could acquire his thousand acres. For Larry, "time starts fresh every day" (216). He perceives his land as "new, created by magic lines of tile" he "would talk about with pleasure and reverence" (15). From Larry's perspective, his drainage system not only displays his ingenuity and his "rightful" dominion over the earth, but it also fuels his own God-like status: he "created" the earth. Yet Larry is also responsible for the poisons that flow through his fields and his family. His culpability subtly surfaces when Ginny equates her father with threatening underground water: "I feel like there's treacherous undercurrents all the time. I think I'm standing on solid ground, but then I discover there's something moving underneath it, shifting from place to place" (104). Ginny's description of this subterranean water reverses the imagery usually associated with the pilgrims' safe arrival in the New World. Her description ironically echoes a foundational text of American exceptionalism, *Of Plymouth Plantation*. William Bradford writes that God brought the pilgrims "over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the periles and miseries therof, againe to set their feete on the firme and stable earth, their proper elemente" (126). Although Larry takes pride in creating "stable earth," he resembles the poisonous water he has generated. The water thus calls to mind Donald E. Pease's understanding of American exceptionalism: it is touted as a grand accomplishment, thus allowing Americans to "disavow" the violations that sustain it (34). "American exceptionalism," Pease writes, "is a transgenerational state of fantasy, and like a family secret it bears the traces of transgenerational trauma" (38). Such trauma flows through Ginny's story and through the water beneath her feet. It is responsible for her many miscarriages and for her sister Rose's early death from breast cancer. This water symbolizes Larry's abuse of power and his unexamined guilt.

Larry never even acknowledges his guilt. His loss of power does not lead to *anagnorisis* or tragic recognition: he is too hubristic to learn anything. Unlike Shakespeare, Smiley refuses to grant the self-destruction and downfall of her Lear an aesthetic dignity. I borrow the phrase *aesthetic dignity* from Harold Bloom, who argues that characters such as Richard II, Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth maintain an "aesthetic dignity" after they have lost their "human dignity" (268–69). In other words, their language, their artistry, and their complexity make them compelling even after they have committed atrocities. In "the tragic tradition," these characters evoke what R. A. York calls "reverence,"

prompting us to see “some questionable grandeur in the suffering of the powerful” (137). Eagleton goes one step further, arguing that traditional theories of tragedy lend “a glamorous aura to suffering” in general (28). *A Thousand Acres* steadfastly objects to this use of tragedy.

With Larry’s death, Smiley completely subverts the lengthy death scenes that close most tragedies. To better appreciate the significance of her rewriting, consider Michael Neill’s theory that tragedy helps us battle “the horror of indistinction” (33). The fear that tragedy addresses is not simply that of our own mortality, but that of our expendability, the fear that our existence does not matter because nothing sets us apart from other people and creatures. In tragedy, Neill argues, death, the great equalizer, “paradoxically becomes a powerfully individuating experience, the supreme occasion for the exhibitions of individual distinction” (34). For instance, Lear’s protracted death is witnessed by every character that has managed to stay alive. His passing reinforces their loyalty, their regret, and their sense that he and his generation are exceptional. As Edgar states in the play’s final lines, “The oldest hath borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long” (5.3.324–25).

Smiley reverses this deathly inflation of the tragic hero with Larry’s heart attack at the grocery store. She condemns the notion that one can seek distinction at any cost—that one can live as if the ends justify the means and be rewarded for it. She lambastes tragedy’s implication that one can engage in any hubristic act and still be forgiven, mourned, and revered.

The only character present during Larry’s death is Ginny’s sister Caroline. Readers experience it third-hand when Ginny gets a letter from Rose months after the fact. Ginny describes the death and her reactions to it with some of the novel’s shortest and simplest sentences: “He was pushing the cart; she [Caroline] was guiding it down the aisles. He had a heart attack in the cereal aisle. I imagined him falling into the boxes of cornflakes. The funeral had been a small one. Rose had not gone” (334–35). More attention is lavished on the suicide of a character that barely appears in the novel, Larry’s rival Bob Stanley (339). Larry is merely one failed farmer out of many. He loses all authority and dignity as his youngest daughter Caroline guides his shopping cart and as Ginny imagines him dying amidst breakfast food that Larry, an eggs-and-bacon man, disdained. Larry’s rolling cornfields are reduced to boxes of cornflakes. Stripped of grandeur and distinction—his hubris utterly de-glamorized—Larry’s death serves to critique American exceptionalism and those who romanticize its decline.

But Larry’s obvious lack of aesthetic dignity is always strikingly at odds with his inflated self-perception. The novel provides several early clues that Larry is not as powerful and savvy as he thinks. In the opening chapter, as Larry drives the family’s new Buick, eight-year-old Ginny observes “the farms passing every minute, reduced from vastness to insignificance by our speed” (5). Any reader familiar with Midwestern history recognizes Smiley’s darkly playful use of the word *passing*. She foreshadows the “passing” of farms,

not from father to son, but from farmer to banker, to large corporation. Even before we recognize the novel's Shakespearean subtext, we know that Larry's good fortune cannot last forever. Our sense of foreboding deepens when Ginny states, "In spite of the price of gasoline, we took a lot of rides that year" (5). For the novel's first readers, Ginny's words likely called to mind the energy crisis, the Iranian hostage crises, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, and the Persian Gulf War. For post-9/11 readers, Ginny's words summon even more painful memories and fears when we consider the United States' dependence on foreign oil. We may feel like Ginny: "a passenger in a car . . . going out of control" (59). Larry's Buick, once a symbol of his wealth and success, soon signals his downfall as he drives drunkenly about the countryside.

In American culture, the automobile symbolizes individualism, mobility, and freedom—key concepts of American exceptionalism—but in *A Thousand Acres*, cars and trucks primarily represent entrapment and fatality. Pete kills himself by driving his truck into the quarry that is polluted with debris from a gas-guzzling culture: "hubcaps, tin cans, bashed-in oil drums" (247). After one of Mary Livingstone's sons is killed in Vietnam, the other is killed in a car accident. Ginny is sometimes captive in her father's vehicles. When she is six or seven, she is alone in his truck playing with her dolls. "Possibly," she says, "Daddy didn't know I was there" (106). Then she and her parents are off to rescue their neighbor Harold, who is pinned under his truck in some ooze. "[C]lareening across fields," Ginny is "huddled down, bouncing in the corner of the box" (106). When they stop, Larry asks her to walk across a six-inch plank above the ooze to deliver whiskey to Harold. Although Ginny seems to remember this event fondly because her father praises her, she later says, "I could not drive with Daddy . . . without a looming sense of his presence" (170). When she chauffeurs him to a chiropractor's appointment, he insists that she wait in their stifling hot car.

This unreasonable demand is, sadly, only one of many ways that Larry crushes Ginny's freedom and spirit. After she remembers his incest, she is literally trapped in a dressing room listening to him erase her own history while he talks with Caroline. Ginny compares herself to a horse "haltered in a tight stall, throwing its head and beating its feet against the floor, but the beams and the bars and the halter rope hold firm, and the horse wears itself out, and accepts the restraint that moments before had been an unendurable goad" (198). Not surprisingly, Ginny longs to escape "the trap that was our life on the farm" (307). The word *freedom*, she says, "always startled and refreshed me. . . . I didn't think of it as having much to do with my life, or the life of anyone I knew" (109).

Larry quashes the freedom, the ambitions and individuality, of nearly everyone in his family. Of her brother-in-law Pete, Ginny says, "That laughing, musical boy, the impossible merry James Dean, had been stolen away" (32). Ginny's mother, like Ginny herself, was afraid of Larry, afraid to laugh: "She had a great laugh when she let it out" (91). Rose forces her two daughters

to attend a boarding school in order to keep them safe from Larry. Even Larry himself fears captivity. At the Fourth of July church potluck, he broods about nursing homes: “Terrible conditions. Their children put them there” (214).

Images of psychological and actual entrapment also proliferate beyond the Cook family. Ty’s father died in a hog pen. Mary Livingstone is mired in depression over her dead sons: “I could hardly move” (92). Jess once faced the threat of prison because he avoided the draft, and shortly after he returns to Iowa, he complains that his father wants to keep him on their farm. The novel’s most prominent pet, the ironically named parrot, Magellan, lives in a cage that is often covered to silence the bird.

These images of confinement are deeply ironic given the ways in which American exceptionalism and traditionalist theories of tragedy construct freedom. It is the *sine qua non* of American exceptionalism. With its exemplary freedom, America has the duty to protect and promote freedom everywhere, and when its own freedom is threatened, so goes the exceptionalist myth, it is always by some external force or (racialized) Other: communists, jihadists, or, in earlier days, Native Americans.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, traditionalist views of tragedy feature an external force at odds with the hero’s freedom. According to A. W. Schlegel, “Internal freedom and external necessity . . . are the two poles of the tragic world” (qtd. in Koelb 276). “The tragic hero,” writes Frye, “is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these” (207). Even Bradley, who resists Wordsworth’s “ruthless destiny,” cannot help but brood about a “system” that may be “called by the name of fate or no.” This system, Bradley reluctantly admits, “does appear as the ultimate power in the tragic world.” Oscar Mandel calls this power “inevitability” and maintains that it is “the *sine qua non* of tragedy” (24).

*A Thousand Acres* reveals Smiley’s distaste for such tragic inevitability. It is not some nebulous fate that destroys Larry and his family. Nor is it some external force or racialized Other that rapes his daughters and decimates his way of life. It is Larry himself.

With Larry’s incest, *A Thousand Acres* not only disputes theories of tragedy that emphasize fate, but the novel also completely inverts a genre that has long bolstered American exceptionalism, the captivity narrative. This narrative, like American exceptionalism and traditionalist views of tragedy, fixates on threats to freedom and sometimes tends toward melodrama. In Indian captivity narratives, a white Christian woman is stolen away and held captive by “heathen” natives. She then comes to represent goodness and innocence in need of white male protection. More recent “captivity narratives” similarly demonstrate the ways in which the United States relies on a vilified Other in order to define itself as the preeminent protector of freedom. In an article published the same year as *A Thousand Acres*, Susan Jeffords

argues that the phrase *the rape of Kuwait* was used to justify the first Gulf War. The phrase created a “rescue” scenario in which Kuwait was the violated victim, Iraq was the villain, and the United States was the hero (204). In the 2011 collection *American Exceptionalisms: Winthrop to Winfrey*, Sara Humphreys similarly argues that “formulaic characters, such as the female captive and the exploited child”—specifically white ones—embody a “threatened national purity” and promote “a brand of righteous, moral American identity” (207).

Ginny Cook is such a character, a white female captive and a raped child. But it is, of course, her father who raped her, and his ideology that holds her captive. *A Thousand Acres* reveals that the main threat to American freedom is not external, but internal—not some racialized Other, but its own dominant mythology. This rewriting of the Indian captivity narrative becomes more apparent when we consider three other elements of the novel. First of all, the novel calls attention to its own relative silence about Native Americans (a topic I will return to later). Second, there are no people of color in the novel—an unrealistic absence even for rural Iowa in 1979. Still more unrealistic, the novel’s characters never even mention people of color. When suffering is discussed, it is always white suffering—a key component of Indian captivity narratives and American exceptionalism itself. Lastly, the novel’s rewriting of captivity narratives is evident in its many images of entrapment, particularly its strange allusions to Indian captivity narratives. Ginny feels herself “hook onto” Jess Cook’s smile “the way you would hook a rope ladder over a windowsill and lower yourself out of a burning house” (217). This passage calls to mind Mary Rowlandson fleeing her burning home after it was set ablaze by her Indian captors. Yet Ginny longs to escape a home that has been made intolerable by her own father. Pete, “stolen away” (32), tells a story that also challenges the captivity narrative’s construction of evil as external. When he is a young musician hitchhiking, a rancher picks him up and feeds him a steak dinner. Then in “the middle of the night,” the rancher, along with his two brothers and wife, hold Pete down and “shav[e] his head and beard” (77). With this quasi-scalping, the ranchers resemble Larry. They masquerade as providers and protectors, but function as predators. Opening their home to Pete, the ranchers are not external threats, but “domestic” ones. Yet there is a key difference between the ranchers and Larry. Their victim is not a female child, but an adult male. In *A Thousand Acres*, captivity is pervasive and complex, refusing to confine itself to any sort of binary. The novel thus suggests that American society itself is captive, imprisoned from within, constrained by its own ideology.

This broad cultural commentary remains relevant even if we focus on Ginny as an individual character and as a victim of rape and incest.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, as many readers have argued, Ginny represents America’s raped and polluted land. Yet this interpretation, informed by Smiley’s own ecofeminism,<sup>12</sup> does not do justice to her complex portrait of Ginny or to the full range of symbolism that our culture attaches to sexual victims. According to Sharon

Lamb, sexual victimization evokes “almost archetypal images . . . of victim and perpetrator. The victim is pure, innocent, helpless, and sometimes heroic. The perpetrator is monstrous and all powerful” (118).<sup>13</sup> In a review of *A Thousand Acres* and some fifteen other novels that depict incest, Katie Roiphe writes, “Because of the nature of the crime, the characters tend to be separated in crude shorthand: father, evil; daughter, innocent” (69). This “shorthand” echoes binaries that are central to the Indian captivity narrative, American exceptionalism, and melodrama. Roiphe, I believe, misses the fact that Smiley’s novel ultimately complicates such binaries. Certainly, many of the novel’s characters crave moral absolutes and a sense of innocence—desires that fuel both American exceptionalism and America’s fascination with sexual abuse victims. Yet, near the novel’s end, Ginny attempts to shed these desires, and with her struggles, *A Thousand Acres* challenges America’s desire to see itself as innocent, to believe that evil exists only outside its borders.<sup>14</sup> Ginny’s struggles also convey the difficulty of moving past American exceptionalism.

Of course, Ginny’s struggles are so difficult because her abusive father trained her to see herself as a victim—someone with no power or freedom. Larry cast himself as an omnipotent fate in control of Ginny’s destiny. It is inevitable that Ginny embraces a sense of tragic inevitability, at least for a time. Yet just as the novel refuses to lend aesthetic dignity to Larry’s hubris, so too does it withhold such dignity from Ginny’s fatalism.

This is not to say that *A Thousand Acres* minimizes Ginny’s suffering. The novel creates empathy for Ginny (and Rose and other victims of sexual abuse) even as it participates in a debate about victimhood. This debate, which peaked around the time the novel was published, is especially relevant to American exceptionalism after 9/11, when, as Godfrey Hodgson observes, America often casts itself as “uniquely hated” (113). A key text in the debate about victimhood is Shelby Steele’s controversial book, *The Content of Our Character*, published in 1990, one year before Smiley’s novel. As Steele warns his fellow African Americans against identifying as victims, he explains the allure of this identity. It offers a moral authority based on the victims’ innocence. “Innocence is power,” but, Steele insists, it is a power that individuals seek at the cost of their own personal power (5). Other writers (perhaps less attuned to the reality of oppression than Steele) bemoaned what they called the culture of victimization. According to Charles J. Sykes, author of *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character*, 1991 was a banner year for articles that decried the culture of victimization (13). This “culture” includes a refusal to take responsibility for our actions and attitudes, a tendency to blame others for our problems, a stake in our identity as victims, and a focus on our childhood grievances. For example, in a 1991 *Harper’s* article, David Rieff writes, “if we were to use a new Jungian archetype to characterize our time it would be the wounded child” (51). In a *New York Magazine* cover story also appearing in 1991, John Taylor states, “In their rush to establish ever more categories of victims, lawyers and therapists

are encouraging a grotesquely cynical evasion of the ethic of individual responsibility" (28).

Although Smiley, unlike Taylor, acknowledges that real victims (like Ginny and Rose) exist, and although she details the toll that incest takes on its victims, her novel also rejects a culture of victimization. Smiley creates extremely unflattering portraits of characters that seek innocence via victimhood. When Ginny leaves the farm, Ty plays the martyr: "I gave my life to this place!" (330). Jess often sounds like the quintessential "wounded child" of pop-psychology, blaming his parents and their generation for all his problems: "Can you believe how they've fucked us over, Ginny? . . . they have aimed to destroy us, and I don't know why" (55, 196). Larry himself tries to play the victim, and after he succeeds, a "look of sly righteousness" spreads over his face (219). Rose says of Larry and Harold, "When they suffer, then they're convinced they're innocent again" (234).

*A Thousand Acres* makes it clear that there are no winners in the battle for righteousness or innocence. In an essay, "Shakespeare in Iceland," Smiley writes,

As the lawyer for Goneril and Regan, I proposed a different narrative of their motives and actions that casts doubt on the case Mr. Shakespeare was making for his client, King Lear. . . . The goal of the trial was not to try or condemn the father, but to gain acquittal for the daughters. The desired verdict was not "innocent," but rather "not guilty," or at least "not proven." One thing I learned from *Hamlet* is that none of us are innocent. (172–73)

Insisting that no one is innocent, *A Thousand Acres* indicts America's love affair with its own "innocence."

By showing that Ginny has more in common with her father than she realizes, the novel also establishes a close kinship between American exceptionalism and a culture of victimization: both foster false perceptions about individual agency. Like Lear, Larry and Ginny know themselves "but slenderly" (Shakespeare 1.1.300). While Larry overestimates his agency, Ginny underestimates—or even denies—hers. Ginny's passivity is obvious early in the novel when she goes along with the land transfer despite an "inner clang" (18). She is critical of her own passivity, her tendency to wait. Pondering her miscarriages, she says: "Who would stay with a mother who merely waited? Who accepted things so dully" (147). Although she tells Larry, "It's boring to wait," she waits throughout the entire novel (173). During the storm scene, she is "waiting for the catalyst" (186). Later, with a halfhearted attempt to poison her sister, Ginny "wait[s] for Rose to die" (316). At the novel's end, after Rose has died from cancer rather than Ginny's poison, Ginny "waits" tables and claims to be free from "the burden of having to wait and see what was going to happen" (367).

We may think we understand Ginny's passivity and fatalism midway through the novel when we discover the incest, but even after we learn about this abuse, many of Ginny's fatalistic statements still seem exaggerated—their language too inflated for domestic realism, their sheer quantity far exceeding that of most tragedies. In fact, as the novel progresses, Ginny's expressions of powerlessness seem less realistic—and more obviously vehicles for the novel's satiric treatment of tragic inevitability. At the novel's beginning, Ginny's worst habit is “entertaining thoughts of disaster” or “expecting the worst” (65, 66). While these habits caricature our expectations of a tragic plot, Ginny's words also sound like that of any pessimistic Midwesterner, as do her comments about the land transfer: “We didn't have any choice” (98). But consider the following exchange between Ginny and Jess:

I [Ginny] said, “Remember this day. This is the day when everything I was worried about came to pass.”

“Really?”

I could tell by his face that he didn't know what I was talking about. I said, “. . . Just remember that I knew it all ahead of time.”

“If you say so.” (100)

Here Smiley's writing has a mock-heroic edge. Ginny's first comment—with its repetition and its inflated language (“came to pass”)—seems odd in the mouth of an Iowa farmwife. Jess seems to think so too: “Really?” He is a surrogate for the reader, who (even with an awareness of the *Lear* subtext) finds Ginny's blend of fatalism and prescience over the top.

Nor is this mock-heroic moment an isolated instance. After Harold humiliates Ginny and Rose at the Fourth of July picnic, Ginny notes that they went “straight home, as if there were no escape, as if the play we'd begun could not end” (219–20). This allusion to tragedy calls attention to itself, as do the many times when Ginny sounds like a Greek chorus, the doom-saying prophet Tiresias, or a brooding tragic hero about to meet his demise. At the quarry, the last time that Ginny sees Rose's husband, Pete, before he kills himself, Ginny alludes both to Shakespeare's “mortal coil” and to the Greek image of the three fates: “The rope of my life, coiling into this knot, then out of it, seemed again more like a thread, easily broken” (249). The sober image of the fates measuring the threads of our lives and then cutting them off is quickly deflated with Pete's decidedly undignified death: drunk, he drives *himself* into the polluted quarry. The concept of fate is further diminished by the scene's darkly comic and heavy foreshadowing. Pete, for instance, glances at the quarry and says, “I suppose you might swim here if you were ready to take your life in your hands” (248).

Tragic inevitability continues to take a comic beating as Ginny's references to it grow more inappropriate. When she plots to murder Rose with

canned poisoned sausage (a comic murder weapon if ever there was one), Ginny muses,

Certainly, I thought, this is what they meant by “premeditated”—this deliberate savoring of each step, the assembly of each element, the contemplation of how death would be created, how a path of intentional circumstances paralleling and mimicking accidental circumstances would be set out upon. . . . The perfection of my plan was the way Rose’s own appetite would select her death. (312, 313)

Smiley references the inevitability of the tragic plot and the *hamartia* of the tragic hero (“Rose’s own appetite would select her death”) as Ginny temporarily assumes the role of tragedian, creating her own revenge tragedy. Yet Ginny does not acknowledge her own creativity or agency: “One thing, I have to say, that I especially relished [about the poisoning] was the secrecy of it. In that way, I saw, I had been practicing for just such an event as this all my life” (312). Ironically, when Ginny finally resolves to exercise her will (albeit, in a typically passive fashion), she feels fated or destined to do so.<sup>15</sup> She similarly erases her own agency when she decides to leave her husband. Instead of detailing her thoughts or feelings, she describes her cooking: “The contained roar of the gas and then, a minute later, the first sizzling of meat juices, took on the volume and weight of oracular mutterings, almost intelligible” (329–30). Ginny’s most active assertion of will is seemingly out of her hands—determined by a quasi-Macbethian cauldron of pork chops. With such dark humor, *A Thousand Acres* interrogates uses of tragedy that promote fatalism and foster America’s culture of victimization.

This interrogation continues with the novel’s portrayal of tragic catharsis: purification via purgation. Often associated with bloodletting, purgation was designed to remove excess fluids and thereby temper excesses in a person’s character. The goal was moderation and, according to Martha Nussbaum, clarification (388–90). *A Thousand Acres* suggests that Americans cannot achieve this sort of catharsis because we seek a more extreme sort of cleansing. Enticed by the culture of victimization and American exceptionalism, we mistakenly believe that we can completely cleanse ourselves of guilt, a guilt symbolized by the novel’s poisoned water. Just as this water beneath Larry’s farm represents his guilt and America’s guilt, it also represents the repressed guilt of all Americans who refuse to examine their own sense of entitlement and their own acquisition of wealth.<sup>16</sup>

The desire to purge or remove such guilt is satirized with the novel’s most clearly comic character, banker Marv Carson. With an “innocent” smile, Marv foolishly details his obsession with toxins (30). “My main effort now is to be aware of toxins and try to shed them as regularly as possible. I urinate twelve to twenty times a day, now. I sweat freely. I keep a careful eye on my bowel movements” (29). Marv believes that such purging protects him from

“[n]egative thoughts” and “[f]ailure of hope” (29). This toxin-shedding regimen parodies tragic catharsis. And it is ultimately ineffective: Marv constantly worries about the toxins in his body and “things at the bank” (29).

The novel also critiques the desire for catharsis and purification via Marv’s love affair with bottled water. He is seldom without a bottle, and it is always a different type. After the storm, Marv arrives with “a six-pack of little green bottles of Perrier water from France that he’d ordered from a distributor” (200). The last time he appears, he has “tall bottles of three different kinds of mineral water on his desk, one from Italy, one from France, and one from Sweden” (364). Ironically, Marv seeks pure water from other lands while he funds farmers who poison Iowa’s water. Perhaps he believes he can avoid the consequences of his actions. Certainly, he reveals a desire to deny his own complicity in the creation of toxins. With Marv’s wide-ranging attempts to find the purest water, Smiley satirizes America’s attempts to believe in its own invulnerability and innocence.

Marv’s obsession with pure water is also a comic version of Ginny’s desire for cleansing. Both characters devote the bulk of their attention to outside forces that they perceive as threats. Just as Marv wages battle with toxins, Ginny struggles with household grime. There is a relentless inevitability to her housecleaning, a sort of domestic fatalism: “On a farm, no matter how careful you are about taking off boots and overalls, the dirt just drifts through anyway” (120). Ginny keeps “busy seeking perfect order and cleanliness,” and she approaches her psyche in a similar way (308). As a victim of incest who has not yet come to terms with her past, Ginny continually struggles to feel clean and pure. Always attracted to water (the river, Mel’s pond, the swimming pool), she naïvely yearns for a sort of baptism that will wash her father and all her problems away. When she heads to the quarry, she thinks, “only water, only total, refreshing immersion, could clear my mind” (246). But the quarry is polluted, and the water that Ginny drinks, poisoned. Purification is not an option.

Although Ginny’s desire for purification is poignant and understandable, it also signals her denial—not only of her abuse, but also of her complicity with her father’s value system. For a large portion of the narrative, her financial security and her sense of self rest upon Larry’s worldview. As she reflects on the twenty-five years it took Larry and his father to build their drainage system, she notes that she “was a beneficiary of this grand effort, someone who would always have a floor to walk on” (15). That Ginny also suffers from this “grand effort”—her womb poisoned, her sister Rose taken by cancer—does not erase the fact that she participated in it, admired it, and benefited from it. Her victimization does not guarantee her innocence.

Ginny’s complicity largely stems from her narrow perspective—her failure to look much beyond her own sorrow and loss. She rightly claims that her father’s point of view overshadows her own, but it is also true that she seldom seeks other points of view. Nowhere is her lack of curiosity more

obvious and more self-destructive than in her ignorance about the water under her feet. Jess once again serves as a surrogate reader when he explodes at her: "People have known for ten years or more that nitrates in well water cause miscarriages and death of infants. Don't *you* know that the fertilizer runoff drains into the aquifer?" (165). Ginny is shockingly uninformed about her immediate environment, and she knows and cares even less about the world beyond it. She claims that the farm's underground water teaches her "a lesson about what is below the level of the visible," but this is only partially true (9). When she begins excavating her family history, she recognizes the ways in which the American dream silenced and marginalized her female ancestors (Amano), yet, like her father, Ginny seems unaware that this same history damaged Native Americans. Even though she constantly broods over the destruction of the land, her narrative never includes the phrase "Native Americans." The word "Indian" appears in the novel only once when Jess uses it as an adjective to describe a type of grass (247). In fact, Ginny makes only one oblique reference to Native Americans: "It seemed to me when I was a child in school, learning about Columbus, that in spite of what my teacher said, ancient cultures might have been onto something. No globe or map fully convinced me that Zebulon County was not the center of the universe" (3). With the de-racialized phrase "ancient cultures" and her silence about Native American history, Ginny shows that she has yet to move past the Eurocentric view of history she learned as a child. Even though she comes to understand that her family was destroyed by Larry's belief that he is "the center of the universe," she fails to understand that "ancient cultures" in America were destroyed by a similar belief.

"Ancient" peoples are explicitly mentioned only one other time in the novel: in the title of the essay from which Smiley takes her epigraph, "The Ancient People and the Newly Come." The author of the essay, Meridel Le Sueur, was a champion of Native American rights, and her essay devotes a great deal of space to Native American history. Le Sueur depicts white guilt when she portrays her own pioneer family: "The severity of the seasons and the strangeness of a new land, with those whose land had been seized looking in our windows, created a tension of guilt and a tightening of sin" (40). In *A Thousand Acres*, none of the characters acknowledge such faces outside the window, but Smiley makes their presence felt with Ginny's thoughts about what lies beneath the surface of the earth. These thoughts resonate with a story that Le Sueur relates about the Plains Indians: "They had lived inside the mother earth and had come upon huge vines into the light. The vines had broken and there were some of her people still under the earth. . . . the government could not stop the Indians from prayer and the dances. They would take them underground with the unborn people" (44–45). Like Ginny's resilient tomatoes and like her last unborn child, a painful past will make its way to the surface, demanding attention. Ginny's frequent musings about the "sea beneath her feet" indicate mixed feelings about such knowledge. She wants

to understand herself and her world better, but she is afraid of being overwhelmed. She is drawn to the subterranean water, but she also imagines that it is “ready at any time to rise and cover the earth again” (16). Likewise, our nation’s buried past—the parts of our history at odds with the exceptionalist myth—threatens to engulf America as long as we push it beneath the surface.

How much of Ginny’s past remains beneath the surface? How are we to interpret the ending of *A Thousand Acres*? Critics are divided on this last question, and that division reflects the novel’s stance on tragic closure: even the most ambiguous endings are too tidy. In a 1993 essay, Smiley criticizes

the grand gesture of tragic death that ends so many masterpieces. There is, in western literature, what has to be interpreted as a refusal to go on, a willingness on the part of the larger heroes to vacate the mortal world through conflict, suicide, or a failure of the will to live. Need I add that there’s always a mess to be cleaned up afterward that is not the concern of the dead tragic hero? (“Can” 13)

*A Thousand Acres* implies that some messes cannot be cleaned up, some sins cannot be forgiven, and some mistakes have lasting consequences.

Such consequences color the novel’s end. Even after Ginny leaves home, and even after she indicts American exceptionalism in the oft-quoted speech she makes to Ty—“You see this grand history, but I see blows”—she remains entrenched in its belief system and damaged by her father’s legacy (342). Ginny works at Perkins, a restaurant chain that flies huge American flags, obvious symbols of American exceptionalism. Vivian H. Brooks, who works in Public Affairs for Perkins, tells a story about the flags that replicates the language of American exceptionalism:

Since our humble beginnings as a single Pancake shop, our loyal patrons have repeatedly told us that the presence of the American Flag above our restaurants not only stirs their innermost emotions, but instills in them a sense of pride, a community bond, an unspoken sense of thanks for being able to enjoy the freedom, and share in the wealth of this great country.

Waitressing at Perkins, Ginny is more passive and isolated than ever. Earlier in the novel, she recognizes that her ignorance about nitrates cost her five children, and she tells her husband, “We never even asked about anything like that, or looked in a book, or even told people we’d had miscarriages. . . . What if there are women all over the county who’ve had lots of miscarriages, and if they just compared notes—” (259). But at the novel’s end, three years after she leaves him and the farm, Ginny shuns information just as religiously as Marv shuns tap water: “News was what I didn’t want. I didn’t own a television or a radio. It didn’t occur to me to buy a newspaper” (334). Even

though Ginny is going to college, she forms no community, no bonds with other women. She makes no connection between rural poisons and city poisons. Just as Ginny starts the novel in her father's car, watching farms "passing" by (5), she ends it on I-35, where "you could hear the cars passing" (333), where "life passed in a blur" (336). Despite the unceasing passage of cars and trucks on the interstate, Ginny doesn't understand that she is still part of the same oil-dependent system—the same vicious cycle in which she feeds people who poison the earth, ostensibly in order to feed other people. She sees no irony in the fact that one of her nieces wants to work in "vertical food conglomerates" (369). More important, when Ginny disposes of her poisoned sausages—a potentially liberating gesture—she chooses a method that echoes her father's poisoning of the land: "I ground them up, I washed them away with fifteen minutes of water, full blast. I relied, as I always did now that I lived in the city, on the sewage treatment plant that I had never seen. I had misgivings" (366–67). With this final parody of catharsis, we see how little Ginny has learned. She still ignores her own misgivings, she trusts others when she should not, and she still seeks a quick and easy cleansing.

Yet Ginny is the character who comes closest to achieving *anagnorisis* or tragic recognition. Of the three Cook sisters, Ginny is the only one who gains any insight from her family's history and downfall. The differences between the sisters may, in fact, suggest various ways of responding to the complex and painful legacy of American exceptionalism. Caroline chooses nostalgia and disavowal, and Rose embraces anger. Ginny alone seeks perspective. In the novel's final paragraph, as she recalls her jar of poisoned sausage, Ginny insists on the importance of remembering and attempting to understand the past:

I can't say that I forgive my father, but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember—the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed, when he wandered around the house late at night after working and drinking, like the very darkness. This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all the others. (370–71)

Ginny recognizes that her father was not as powerful and free as she thought, and she thus frees herself from the Larry of earlier pages, the larger-than-life figure "never dwarfed by the landscape" (20). She pays more attention to her inner landscape, to her own impulses and choices. As she considers the poisoned sausages, she acknowledges a connection with her father, a shared capacity for evil. To be sure, this insight is disturbing, but it is also empowering. Ginny now sees herself as more than a passive onlooker, and certainly as more than a victim. In short, Ginny develops a more nuanced and realistic understanding of both her father and herself.<sup>17</sup>

Ginny plans to "safeguard" this fledgling perspective as she would a "gleaming obsidian shard." Obsidian—a stone that Native cultures used for

weapons, tools, and ceremonies—also represents a part of America’s past that Ginny does not yet acknowledge. This volcanic shard demonstrates the power of things long buried: it signals America’s need to look beneath the surface. Just as Ginny probes her family’s secrets and history—and just as Smiley examines our uses of tragedy—our nation needs to excavate its collective past and look beneath the surface of its mythologies. *A Thousand Acres* urges us to abandon both our hubris and our fatalism and to explore the questions that tragedy demands we ask: How do we exert our wills and exercise our freedom without hurting others? How do we acknowledge our limits without succumbing to apathy and despair?

## NOTES

I would like to thank James Grove, Benjamin Thiel, and Carol Tyx. Their insights helped me refine my ideas in this essay.

1. See Aguilar; Alter; Brauner; Keppel; Leslie; Mathieson; Schiff; and Strehle, “Daughter’s.”
2. My thinking on the various meanings and uses of tragedy has been shaped by Eagleton; Felski 2-5; and Pirro, “Remedying” and “Tragedy.”
3. I make this claim despite Smiley’s essay “Taking It All Back,” in which she espouses a less “political” interpretation of *King Lear* (391). In that same essay, she also wisely tells readers that *A Thousand Acres* “is more your book now than mine” (392).
4. *State exceptionalism* is John Carlos Rowe’s term (15). *Exemptionalism* is Hodgson’s (154), but similar concepts are discussed by many writers who have shaped my view of American exceptionalism. See, for instance, Pease 9; Söderlind 3; and the sources cited in notes 9 and 10.
5. For a sampling of other sources that explore tragedy’s ethical potential, see Euben; Kottman; Nussbaum; and Pirro, *Hannab*, “Remedying,” and “Tragedy.”
6. In discussing Cornel West’s thoughts on tragedy and African American life, Pirro explores a binary relevant to my reading of Smiley’s novel: “unreflective activity (defective agency)” and “unmotivated passivity (deficient agency)” (“Remedying” 158). Larry exhibits defective agency while Ginny exemplifies deficient agency.
7. Many of these aspects of American identity are interrelated. Nevertheless, it is worth noting representative readings of Larry related to each aspect. On the American pastoral dream, see Alter 155; and Farris. On Jeffersonian agrarianism, see Kirby. On mastery of nature, see Carden, “Remembering” and *Sons*; Carr; and Mathieson. On manifest destiny, see Carr 133. On “Whitman’s grandiose individual,” see Doane and Hodges 73. On an “ethic of ownership,” see Nakadate 165. On the rags-to-riches story and the self-made man, see Amano; Carden, *Sons* 121, 127; Strehle, “Daughter’s”; and Weatherford.
8. My understanding of this redefinition is primarily shaped by Pease, but many scholars discuss the ways in which American exceptionalism depends upon Othering. See, for instance, the sources cited in notes 9 and 10.
9. For a selection of writers who analyze the connections between American exceptionalism, imperialism, and racism, see Bacevich 1–14; Dawson and Scheuller 1–21; Hodgson; Kaplan, *Anarchy* 15–16 and “Left Alone;” Noble; Pease; and Rowe 16, 23, 45, 50–51. See also the sources cited in note 10.
10. See Hodgson 92–93. My ideas about this Othering have also been shaped by Strehle (“I Am” and “Chosen”) and writers who explore various types of captivity narratives: Humphreys; Jeffords; and Sayre. I have also benefitted from Pease and the other sources cited in note 9.
11. When referring to Ginny, I use the word *victim* instead of the more empowering term *survivor* because of the passivity and learned helplessness she exhibits for most of the novel. The concept of victimhood is also central to the novel’s exploration of tragedy and American exceptionalism.
12. Some readers who emphasize Smiley’s ecofeminism include Carden, “Remembering” and *Sons*; Carr; Høgås; Ozdek; Mathieson; and Slicer.
13. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges also influenced my view of the importance American culture assigns to sexual victims and their stories (63–78).

14. My thinking about the externalization of evil has in part been shaped by Grove.

15. Surprisingly few readers note the humor of this poisoning scene. Exceptions include Cooperman 89; Eder; and Olson 29. However, Olson interprets Ginny's disposal of the poisoned sausages much more optimistically than I do (29–32).

16. In “pre-Platonic texts,” words associated with catharsis often referred to “water that is clear and open, free of mud or weeds” (Nussbaum 389). The water in Smiley's novel has inspired a range of interpretations. Doane and Hodges link the water to “horrific repressed memories and unexamined economic pressures” (75). For Marinella Rodi-Risberg, the water conveys “secret family trauma” (197). York sees it as “a symbol of concealment and moral threat” (136). Mary Paniccia Carden takes a more feminist approach, seeing the water as “a specifically maternal space, a forgotten, alternate landscape and discourse that undermines the foundation of the father's authority” (“Remembering” 185). Almila Ozdek similarly sees the water as a “matrilinear heritage” (68).

17. The novel subtly reinforces the connection that Ginny makes between herself and her father with the word *goad* (and to a lesser extent, *pricking*). In the novel's final paragraph, Ginny uses these words to describe her father, but she also often uses them to describe herself (87, 160, 198, 210, 247). My reading of Ginny's new self-knowledge was influenced by Leslie 47–48; Olson 32; and Rozga 28–29.

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## **Redeemer Nation and Apocalypse: Thinking the Exceptionalism of American Exceptionalism**

WILLIAM V. SPANOS

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword.  
His truth is marching on.

—Julia Ward Howe, “*The Battle Hymn of the Republic*”

How can thought collect Debord’s inheritance today, in the age of the complete triumph of the spectacle? It is evident, after all, that the spectacle is language, the very communicative and linguistic being of humans. This means that an integrated Marxian analysis should take into consideration the fact that capitalism . . . not only aimed at the expropriation of productive activity, but also, and above all, at the alienation of language itself, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings, of the *logos* in which Heraclitus identifies the Common. The extreme form of the expropriation of the Common is the spectacle, in other words, the politics in which we live. But this also means that what we encounter in the spectacle is our very linguistic nature inverted. For this reason (precisely because what is being expropriated is the possibility itself of a common good), the spectacle’s violence is so destructive; but for the same reason, the spectacle still contains something like a positive possibility—and it is our task to use this possibility against it.

—Giorgio Agamben, “Marginal Notes on  
*Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*”

In the wake of the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2011 by al Qaeda, the George W. Bush administration unleashed its spectacular “War on Terror.” Taking its directives from the aggressive policy statement of the neoconservative Project of the New

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American Century (PNAC), misleadingly entitled “Rebuilding America’s Defenses,” this presidency 1) tacitly established the state of exception as the norm; 2) justified the concept of “preemptive war”; 3) unilaterally determined what constitutes “rogue states” and authorized “regime change”; and 4) employed the tactics of “shock and awe” to achieve these violent ends—and the global *Pax Americana*—in the name of America’s exceptionalism, that is, its belief in its manifest destiny as history’s *telos*. To rejuvenate and mobilize a recidivist American public, moreover, the Bush administration, invoking the perennial ritual of the American jeremiad, 5) represented its essentially imperialist project as a spectacular threat to the American homeland. It thus rendered the United States’ offensive “defense,” in the terms of President Bush’s State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, as the historical “calling” of a recidivist American people:

We can’t stop short. If we stop now—leaving terror camps intact and terror states unchecked—our sense of security would be false and temporary. History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom’s fight. . . . None of us would ever wish the evil that was done on September 11. Yet after America was attacked, it was as if our entire country looked into a mirror and saw our better selves. We were reminded that we are citizens, with obligations to each other, to our country, and to history. We began to think less of the goods we can accumulate, and more about the good we can do. For too long our culture has said, “If it feels good, do it.” Now America is embracing a new ethic and a new creed: “Let’s roll.” In the sacrifice of soldiers, the fierce brotherhood of firefighters, and the bravery and generosity of ordinary citizens, we have glimpsed what a new culture of responsibility could look like. We want to be a nation that serves goals larger than self. We’ve been offered a unique opportunity, and we must not let this moment pass.

There is, of course, nothing *radically* different about this modern American exceptionalist initiative. Though President Bush’s rhetoric, unlike the resonantly austere prose of his Puritan predecessors, exudes the ideology of “political expertise” rather than religious conviction, it nevertheless reiterates in secular terms, and on a global scale, the essential ontological, cultural, and political principles that were intrinsic to the American Puritans’ redemptive narrative of the founding of the “New World.” I mean the ritual narrative, epitomized by John Winthrop’s sermon to the covenantal people on board the flagship *Arabella* prior to disembarkation in the New World, that, in the course of the following centuries, came to saturate the canonical literary, cultural, and political discourse of the United States:

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the counsel of Micah: to do justly, to love mercy,

to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together in this world as one man. . . . So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness, and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when He shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: "The Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world: we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak the evil of the ways of God and all professors for God's sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us, till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going. (83)

Both early and late narratives, to be more specific, represent the people they address as exceptional ("Chosen" and "Covenantal" people), their exodus from the decadent and tyrannical "Old World" as a divinely ordained "errand in the wilderness" of the New World; their vocation (or "calling") as an imperative to "build a [God's] city on the hill"; their "Word"—their spectacular and powerful rationalizing knowledge—as the agency of achieving this civilizational end; and, not least, their "vulnerability" to a brutal and merciless enemy (the jeremiad) as the means of unifying and rejuvenating their covenantal community. What *is* novel—and disclosive—about the Bush administration's narrative, as we shall see, is not a matter of essence, but of degree: Whereas the violence against their others committed by Americans of the past in the process of fulfilling their divinely or historically ordained errand could be overlooked or represented as the (mere) collateral damage justified by the exceptionalist errand's visibly progressive practical achievements, the Bush administration's violence, manifesting itself at the liminal point of the progressive logic of the American exceptionalist ethos, comes to be seen as a contradiction that delegitimizes this exceptionalist logic.

If President Bush's speech to the American Congress in the wake of 9/11 is lacking in specific reference to the Puritan founders and their narrative, this absent specificity is made manifestly visible in a book significantly entitled *Who Are We?: Challenges to the American National Identity*, published in 2004 to revitalize the Bush administration's flagging "New American Century" project by Samuel P. Huntington, one of its most prominent neoconservative intellectual deputies. Indeed, Huntington answers the question he poses rhetorically in the subtitle at the outset of his defense of the Bush administration's preemptive foreign policy against the "outlaw nations" of the Islamic world by

identifying the Puritans as the founders of the American national identity and thus their Anglo-Protestantism as “the core culture” of the United States:

The settling of America was, of course, a result of economic and other motives, as well as religious ones. Yet religion still was central. . . . Religious intensity was undoubtedly greatest among the Puritans, especially in Massachusetts. They took the lead in defining their settlement based on “a Covenant with God” to create “a city on a hill” as a model for all the world, and people of the Protestant faiths soon also came to see themselves and America in a similar way. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Americans defined their mission in the New World in biblical terms. They were a “chosen people,” on “an errand in the wilderness,” creating “the new Israel” or the “new Jerusalem” in what was clearly “the promised land.” America was the site of a “new Heaven and a new earth, the home of justice,” God’s country. The settlement of America was vested, as Sacvan Bercovitch put it, “with all the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual appeal of a religious quest.” This sense of holy mission was easily expanded into millenarian themes of America as “the redeemer nation” and “the visionary republic.” (64)

That this inaugural reference to the Puritan founders is not simply historical description, but also an ideological representation intended to support the Bush administration’s “War on [Islamic] Terror” is made fundamentally manifest by Huntington’s virtually overt (as opposed to Bush’s indirect) appeal to that powerful strategic—usually overlooked—cultural aspect of American exceptionalism that has come to be called “the American jeremiad.” By this term, I do not simply mean, with Sacvan Bercovitch, that pervasive discursive national ritual, derived by the Puritans from the Old Testament Israelites, that preempts “backsliding”—the return to the decadence or overcivilization it is the purpose of the covenantal community to always transcend—by way of projecting their errand as *always already* fraught with peril, that is to say, by representing the “wilderness” as a perpetual frontier (or enemy) the function of which is to rejuvenate (by violence) and mobilize the covenantal people. I also mean that exceptionalist principle of national sovereignty that, in representing the present as an *always threatening crisis* (of security), renders the spectacular state of exception the rule, or, to put it alternatively, normalizes the hyperbolic condition that ensues from the annulment of the law in the name of preserving it. Typical of the American jeremiad as it has been articulated in the canonical literature and cultural and political discourse of the United States, Huntington’s text thus stages its extended argument on behalf of America’s modern errand in the global wilderness in the dramatic context of America’s perpetual need for a new frontier or enemy. Following his invocation of the Protestant culture as the “core [covenantal] culture” of America, Huntington names the sudden demise of the Soviet Union, the enemy that had sustained the American covenant throughout the years of

the Cold War (aided and abetted by the emergence of what he calls degradingly “subnational cultures” by way of the “deconstruction of America” during the Vietnam War), as the agent that “challenged” the American national identity prior to the attacks on September 11, 2001. “Democracy,” this foreign policy expert writes in a section tellingly entitled “The Search for an Enemy,”

was left without a significant secular ideological rival, and the United States was left without a peer competitor. Among American foreign policy elites, the results were euphoria, pride, arrogance—and uncertainty. The absence of an ideological threat produced an absence of purpose. “Nations need enemies,” Charles Krauthammer, a neoconservative policy expert, commented as the Cold War ended. “Take away one, and they will find another.” *The ideal enemy for America would be ideologically hostile, racially and culturally different, and militarily strong enough to pose a credible threat to American security.* The foreign policy debates of the 1990s were already over who might be such an enemy. (262; emphasis added)

It is not the peace following the implosion of the Soviet Union that Huntington celebrates. On the contrary, this peace, according to his exceptionalist narrative, brings “uncertainty”: the disturbing absence of a national enemy. Confronted by this resonant absence, Huntington, like all the literary, cultural, and political American Jeremiahs before him faced with a receding frontier, willfully *produces* this reunifying and rejuvenating civilizational enemy by appropriating the al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 to his jeremiadic project. And as in all American jeremiads, it should be noted, it takes the inflated form of a calculated staging for effect: the spectacle that is intended to rob the spectator of speech—and thus of a polity. After dismissing a number of candidates proffered by other anxious policy experts (Russia, Serbia, Iraq, and China) as too “creedal,” Huntington focuses in on those global political states and cultural constituencies whose threat is appropriately “civilizational”:

Some Americans came to see Islamic fundamentalist groups, or more broadly political Islam, as the enemy, epitomized in Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Afghanistan under the Taliban, and to a lesser degree other Muslim states, as well as Islamic terrorist groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and the Al Qaeda network. . . . Five of the seven states the United States listed as supporting terrorism are Muslim. Muslim states and organizations threaten Israel, which many Americans see as a close ally. Iran and—until the 2003 war—Iraq pose potential threats to America’s and the world’s oil supplies. Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons in the 1990s and at various times, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have been reported to harbor nuclear weapons stockpiles, intentions, and/or programs. (263)

Having set the stage, Huntington then announces, as if it were the annunciation of history's Gabriel, the spectacular denouement of his jeremiadic narrative, the appearance of Protestant America's new rejuvenating enemy:

The cultural gap between Islam and America's Christianity and Anglo-Protestantism reinforces Islam's enemy qualifications. And on September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden ended America's search. The attacks on New York and Washington followed by the wars with Afghanistan and Iraq and the more diffuse "war on terrorism" make militant Islam America's first enemy of the twenty-first century. (264–65)

Earlier, I noted that there was nothing fundamentally new in the discursive structure of President Bush's declaration of the United States' War on Terror, that, as the example of Huntington's modern American jeremiad makes manifestly clear, it follows, in an uncannily analogous way, the polyvalent rhetorical and practical imperatives of the logic of the American exceptionalist ethos as it was inaugurated and practiced by the founding Puritans. What *is* new about the discursive structure of the Bush administration's Project for the New American Century, however, *as the extremeness* of Huntington's contemporary discourse also resonantly testifies, is the *liminality* of its American exceptionalism. By this term I mean something analogous to what Martin Heidegger meant, when, in characterizing the history of the Western (ontotheo-logical) tradition, he wrote that "philosophy has come to its end" in modernity ("End of Philosophy" 373–92). This, according to Heidegger, was the age of *Anthropo logos* and its panoptic eye (thinking "*meta ta physica*": from after or above the things themselves), in which the dynamics of the temporality of being became totally reified; or, as Heidegger puts it to underscore the perceptual agency of this reduction, in which the historical world became a totalized "world picture" (*Weltbild*). At this liminal or threshold point, when its dynamics have been coerced by the spatializing logic of the metaphysical *logos* into world picture—Heidegger also tellingly refers to it as the appearance of "the gigantic" ("Age" 129–30)—the temporality of being becomes an absolute spectacle that strikes the spectator dumb. It is paradoxically at this liminal point, too, that the nothingness of being, which is ontologically prior to its thingness, unconceals itself.<sup>1</sup> In other words, at this threshold point in the itinerary of the "march of Western civilization," "philosophy comes to its *end*" in both senses of the word: its fulfillment and its demise. The nothing (*das Nichts*)—or, what is the same, radical temporality, the difference time always disseminates—is *dis-closed for positive thought*. In the interregnum precipitated by its coming to its completion, to put it alternatively, the truth of the Western tradition self-de-structs: that which it has always disavowed and rendered "invisible" (or "inaudible") by structuration—that specter which, in fact, has always haunted it—manifests itself, *contrapuntally* in Edward Said's term, as the Other that its somethingness has repressed by violence.

As my reference above to counterpoint suggests, however, the liminality that I am stressing by way of characterizing the Bush administration's over-termination of the discourse of American exceptionalism in the wake of 9/11 is not limited to the sites of ontological representation. It extends indissolubly into the sites of culture and sociopolitics. This can be shown clearly and resonantly by invoking the unlikely but remarkably analogous example of Said's enabling contrapuntal diagnosis of the culminating moment of the Western imperial project—or vocation, to recall his resonant invocation of Disraeli's "the East is a career"—in *Culture and Imperialism*. I quote at length to underscore the indissoluble relationship between the ontological nothing and its cultural and sociopolitical allotropes that disclose themselves when the exceptionalist logic of the West arrives at its liminal end, when, in Said's words, the fulfillment of the imperial project (the "voyage out") precipitates "the voyage in" (to the metropolis):

For surely it is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, and vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order for their intransigence and obdurate rebelliousness. *And insofar as these peoples exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.*

There is a great difference, however, between the optimistic mobility, the intellectual liveliness, and the "logic of daring" described by the various theoreticians on whose work I have drawn [Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Paul Virilio], and the massive dislocations, waste, misery, and horrors endured in our century's migrations and mutilated lives. Yet it is no exaggeration to say that liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, *has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages.* From this perspective then all things are indeed counter, original, spare, strange. From this perspective also, one can see "the complete consort dancing together" contrapuntally. (332)<sup>2</sup>

In the contrapuntal light shed by Said's demonstration of the arrival of the imperial metaphysical logic of the West at its self-destructive limits, American exceptionalism not only comes to be seen as a myth that has concealed the

United States' ultimate identity with the exceptionalist metaphysics (logocentrism) of the Old World (the West). More important, its incremental self-de-structive historical itinerary, from its Puritan origins to the present post-9/11 occasion, becomes manifest. This allegedly benign itinerary, which the discourse of American exceptionalism has perennially represented as the redemption of the condition of America's Others, comes to be seen as a fundamentally continuous, and cumulative, however uneven, history of depredations against America's inferior but threatening Others that in the end, as in the post-9/11 exceptionalist discourse of President Bush's State of the Union speech and Huntington's *Who Are We?*, manifests itself unequivocally as violence. To put the paradox more precisely, in the unerring process of fulfilling its redemptive "errand," the American exceptionalist ethos discloses the dark underside that the spectacular rhetoric and practice—the "shock and awe"—of relentless "progress" ("improvement," "betterment," "settlement," in the language of the early settlers) had hitherto enabled Americans to disavow (or represent by the euphemism, "collateral damage") in the pursuit of their errand's "end" (the Promised Land).

In short, at the liminal point of the logic of American exceptionalism, the state of emergency (exception), which, as I have shown by way of underscoring the exceptionalism—the extremeness—of the American exceptionalist ethos, is inherent to the American jeremiadic tradition, becomes the rule. But at the same time, it discloses what Walter Benjamin called the "real state of emergency": the appearance of the radically new (257). To put it alternatively and to anticipate, when the exceptional logic of the spectacle—the visualization of historical being that functions to awe the spectator into speechlessness—arrives at its fulfillment in the age of the shock-and-aweing spectacle, it also paradoxically breaks the spell that strikes us dumb. That is, in disclosing the spectator's dumbness, it precipitates his/her desire to speak, which is to say, to retrieve the political in the here and the now.

In the wake of 9/11, according to Donald Pease, the Bush administration inaugurated a radically "new American exceptionalism" that abandoned that which informed the "myth of the Virgin Land" in favor of establishing the state of exception as the rule:

With the enemy's violation of the rules of war as rationale, the state suspended the rules to which it was otherwise subject and violated its own rules in the name of protecting them against a force that operated according to different rules. In order to protect the rule of law as such from this illegality, the state declared itself the occupant of a position that was not subject to the rules it must protect. Congress's passage of the Patriot Act into law effected the most dramatic abridgment of civil liberties in the nation's history. The emergency legislation subordinated all concerns of ethics, of human rights, of due process, of constitutional

hierarchies, and of the division of power to the state's monopoly over the exception.

The Emergency State is marked by absolute independence from any juridical control and any reference to the normal political order. It is empowered to suspend the articles of the Constitution protective of personal liberty, freedom of speech and assembly, the inviolability of the home, and postal and telephone and Internet privacy. In designating Afghanistan and Iraq as endangering the homeland, Operation Infinite Justice and Enduring Freedom simply extended the imperatives of the domestic emergency state across the globe.

Following 9/11 the state effected the transition from a normalized political order to a state of emergency through its spectacular enactments of the violence that the Virgin Land had normatively covered over. Whereas 9/11 dislocated the national people from the mythology productive of their imaginary relation to the state, Bush linked their generalized dislocation with the vulnerability of the Homeland, which thereafter became the target of the security apparatus. Bush endowed the state of emergency that he erected at Ground Zero with the responsibility to defend the Homeland because foreign aggressors had violated Virgin Land.

Bush exiled the people from their normative nationality so as to intensify their need for home. (Pease 167–68)

What Pease says about the post-9/11 United States as a state in which the state of exception has become the norm is undeniable. But in my reading of "Ground Zero," this condition does not constitute a mutation in governmentality. It signals, rather, the *fulfillment* (and demise) of the essential logic of the American exceptionalist ethos.<sup>3</sup> This becomes patently evident, when, as I have done in examining Huntington's post-9/11 rhetoric, one takes into account the inexorable imperative to *excess*, the *hyperbolic*, that has been intrinsic to the binarist logic of American exceptionalism and its practice from its origins. To maintain its exceptional status indefinitely, as the Puritan Jeremiahs knew so well by way of the recidivism inherent in their civilizational progress, a chosen people with a vocation must, by definition, *always already* produce crisis, that is, must always force the ordinary into the extraordinary (exceptional)—render it increasingly *spectacular*. This, in turn, means eventually reducing the witness to the status of a mere spectator alienated from his/her polyvalent humanity. In short, it means enchanting, striking dumb, bereaving one of speech, the *sine qua non*, as Hannah Arendt has remind us, of the political life. This stunning totalization of the spectacle, as I will suggest in the following section by way of telling instances from American literary and cultural production, has been the "end" of the civilizational "march" of the American nation under the aegis of its exceptionalist ethos.

To validate this hypothesis about the apocalyptic end of American exceptionalism, I will invoke five well-known but hitherto unrelated passages from five texts of the American cultural archive produced between the

mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1850) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857), Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977).<sup>4</sup> Spanning two centuries of American cultural history, centrally addressing the question "what it is to be an American?," and attuned in some essential degree to America's exceptionalist opposition between the New World and the Old World, these resonantly representative texts, I believe, collectively, in synecdochical form, demonstrate the determining presence in American cultural and political history not only of the American exceptional ethos but also of the increasing, however uneven, complicity of this exceptionalist ethos in the staging of the spectacle and, each in its particular way, their uncanny imaginative anticipation of the liminal post-9/11 global American cultural-political occasion.

The first passage from this imaginative cultural archive I want to consider is from chapter 41 of *Moby-Dick*, in which Ishmael, anticipating his own (and Melville's) antithetical (and heretical) understanding of the whiteness of the white whale—its unpresentable sublimity—recalls the origins of the *naming* of the white whale (Moby Dick) and of Captain Ahab's unerring "fiery pursuit" of "him." It comes, significantly, almost immediately after Captain Ahab stages the spectacular oath-taking that galvanizes the Pequod's motley crew of "isolatoes" into a singular weapon aimed at the heart of the white whale:

His three boats stove around him, and oars and men both whirling in the eddies; one captain, seizing the line-knife from the broken prow had dashed at the whale, as an Arkansas duelist at his foe, blindly seeking with a six inch blade to reach the fathom deep life of the whale. The captain was Ahab. And then it was, that suddenly sweeping his sickle-shaped lower jaw beneath him, Moby Dick had reaped away Ahab's leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the field. No turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him with more seeming malice. Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, until they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity, which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the east revered in their statue devil;—Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were *visibly*

*personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick*. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it. (184)

Acutely attuned, unlike his contemporaries, to the continuity between the early American Puritans' exceptionalist theological errand in the New World wilderness and the exceptionalism of the more secular America of his own ("Emersonian") age and the violence against the Other this history of expansion perpetrated, Melville, through his narrator Ishmael, as I have argued elsewhere (Spanos, *Errant Art* 114–31), against the American grain, represents the Pequod as the symbol of a diverse America having become a totalitarian state in which the state of exception has become the rule; its captain as the secular heir of the Puritans, an American Adam; and his "fiery pursuit" of the white whale, as the unrelenting imperative of his redemptive exceptionalist Adamic vocation. Whereas Ishmael comes increasingly to distrust the exceptionalist *logos* as enabling a naming of the *be-ing* of being that is also a destructive will to power over its diversity and thus the recuperation of the tyranny that American exceptionalism ostensibly opposes, Captain Ahab unerringly pursues the "benign" (ethical) logic of his Adamic exceptionalism to its spectacular limits. Personifying the white whale (rendering "its" unrepresentable and intangible mystery spectacularly visible) and interpreting its reaping away of his leg as a deliberately malicious assault not only on him but on mankind at large, Ahab's "naming" of the mysterious (sublime) whiteness of the whale, which, in its earlier stages, signified the redemption—the benign domestication and fructification of the wilderness—is pursued to its annihilating, apocalyptic limits. In the absolute certainty of its ethical cause, Ahab's Adamic exceptionalism, which in its origins (as in the Puritan interpretation of Adam's naming of the beasts in Genesis) and early manifestations seemed ameliorative of the human condition, becomes, at this imagined liminal point, a monomania—a paranoid will to power over being, which would reduce its discomposing multiplicity to a spectacular oneness that renders "it" "practically assailable" on behalf of all of humanity. Earlier, Ishmael had been converted to Ahab's fiery cause—had been struck dumb as it were by Ahab's spectacular *staging* of the oath-taking of the motley crew. At the liminal point of Ahab's exceptionalist logic, however, Ishmael, now "appalled" by Ahab's spectacular naming, begins to sense—to be affected by—the apocalyptic violence that the unerring (monomaniacal) American exceptional ethos relies on, but must necessarily disavow, to fulfill its redemptive vocation. And this discomposing liminal insight precipitates his *errant* search for an alternative (*errant*) language to the whiteness (sublime *be-ing*) of being.

The second passage I want to invoke on behalf of my argument that the logic of American exceptionalism leads inexorably in the end to the

destructive violence of the spectacle is from Melville's proto-postmodern masterpiece, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, published in 1857 in the wake of the age's cultural custodians' national call to "freeze him into silence" (Peck 446–54).<sup>5</sup> More specifically, it appears in the section of the novel that expounds on "the Metaphysics of Indian-hating," where the author, in a prophetic gesture anticipating Michel Foucault's Nietzschean genealogy in the parodic mode, "allows" the historical narrative of the American exceptionalist historian (in this case Judge James Hall<sup>6</sup>) to self-destruct: to "unrealize" us by way of proffering an "excessive choice of identities" (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 161).<sup>7</sup> The passage, it is important to point out, follows an extended, apparently celebratory account of the American "backwoodsman," which, echoing James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo figure as "pathfinder"—"foremost in the band of pioneers, who are opening the way for the march across the continent" (Cooper 456)—recapitulates the exceptionalist history of American westward expansion. In this liminal and contrapuntal passage, the westerner, who is quoting the Judge to the ironic Cosmopolitan, inadvertently underscores the *essence* of American Indian-hating in general by way of distinguishing the "diluted Indian-hater"—"one whose heart proves not so steely as his brain. Soft enticements of domestic life too often draw him from the ascetic trail"—from the "Indian-hater *par excellence*," the backwoodsman who fulfills the unsentimental (i.e., practical) exceptionalist logic of pioneering at the (liminal) frontier:

The Indian-hater *par excellence* the judge define to be 'one who, having with his mother's milk drawn in small love for red men, in youth or early manhood, ere the sensibilities become osseous, receives at their hand some signal outrage, or, which in effect is much the same, some of his kin have, or some friend. Now, nature all around him by her solitudes wooing or bidding him muse upon this matter, he accordingly does so, till the thought develops such attraction, that much as straggling vapors troop from all sides to a storm-cloud, so straggling thoughts of other outrages troop to the nucleus thought, assimilate with it, and swell it. At last, taking counsel with the elements, he comes to his resolution. An intenser Hannibal, he makes a vow, the hate of which is as a vortex from whose suction scarce the remotest chip of the guilty race may reasonably feel secure. Next, he declares himself and settles his temporal affairs. With the solemnity of a Spaniard turned monk, he takes leave of his kin; or rather, these leave-takings have something of the still more impressive finality of death-bed adieus. Last, he commits himself to the forest primeval; there, so long as life shall be his, to act upon a calm, cloistered scheme of strategical, implacable, and lonesome vengeance. Ever on the noiseless trail; cool, collected, patient; less seen than felt; snuffing, smelling—a Leatherstocking Nemesis. In the settlements he will not be seen again; in eyes of old companions tears may start at some chance thing that speaks of him; but they never look for him, nor call; he knows he will not come. Suns and

seasons fleet; the tiger-lily blows and fall; babes are born and leap in their mothers' arms; but the Indian-hater is good as gone to his long home, and "Terror" is his epitaph. (150–51)

The analogy between the Ahab of the previously quoted passage and Judge Hall's Indian-hater *par excellence* is self-evident. In both, the apparently benign exceptionalism of the original errand in the wilderness has become at the liminal point of its development (into its *par excellence*) a paranoid monomania, in which the self-righteous exceptionalist will to reduce the anxiety-provoking many in the name of the (avenging) "American peace" to the all-encompassing one, takes the shock-and-awing form of imperial annihilation: "an intenser Hannibal," this "Leatherstocking Nemesis" "makes a vow, the hate of which is a vortex from whose suction scarce the remotest chip of the guilty race may reasonably feel secure."<sup>8</sup> But there is a significant tonal difference in the second passage, one signaled by Melville's emphasis on the excess—the hyperbolic—implicit in the distinction the Judge draws between the "diluted Indian-hater," whose vestigial sentiment renders him errant on occasion, and the absolutely unerring "Indian-hater *par excellence*." Despite his critical attitude, Melville portrays Captain Ahab's destructive exceptionalist will to power over being (the white whale) as vestigially tragic. In pointing to the difference between the "diluted Indian-hater" and the "Indian hater *par excellence*," or, to put it more accurately, in underscoring the logical continuity of their difference in this later portrayal of the Adamic exceptionalist figure, Melville represents him as bordering on the comical (self-parodic), a simulacral caricature of its prior manifestation. This is clearly suggested by the hyperbolic reference to the Indian-hater as "an intenser Hannibal" and to the incongruous analogy that identifies him with a "Spaniard turned monk," both of which, not incidentally, seem to allude to the exaggerations of the American Western tall tale. Like Marx, Melville's contemporary, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* vis-à-vis the French history embodied in Napoleon I and Louis Napoleon (III), Melville, no longer willing to attribute dignity to the United States' imperial violent practice in the West (the Mexican War and the genocidal war against the Native Americans), reads the repetition of the American exceptionalist history embodied in the figures of Ahab and the Indian-hater *par excellence* as a repetition of history "first as tragedy, then as farce."

This shift of the affective register of representation—from the awe of the tragic to the critically disengaging comedy of farce—that is precipitated by the arrival of the logic of American exceptionalism to its liminal point is fully enacted (*though not intentionally by the author*) in the third end-of-the-century passage I wish to invoke. I am referring to the celebrated climactic moment of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, when, so reminiscent of the passages quoted above from Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man*, Hank Morgan, whose American exceptionalist "errand"

in the feudal wilderness is resisted by the benighted people he would liberate from superstition and tyranny, exterminates them with the spectacular (“magic”) nineteenth-century technological weapons of mass destruction (electric wire that instantly electrocutes on touch and Gatling guns) at his command.

Hank Morgan, it will be recalled, introduces himself decisively at the beginning of this quintessentially American late-nineteenth-century time-travel novel as an “American . . . a Yankee of the Yankees—and practical; yes, and nearly barren of sentiment, I suppose—or poetry, in other words” (8). Remarkably like Melville’s Indian-hater *par excellence*, that is, he is not simply a practical Yankee, but a Yankee at the extreme limits of Yankee practicality, its essence. As such an essential American exceptionalist, he, like Captain Ahab and the Indian-hater (and their historical Puritan ancestors) is on an “errand in the wilderness,” which is to say, he is committed to a redemptive “humanitarian” vocation to rationalize an untamed world. Having returned to sixth-century England (the “Dark Ages”), where he finds the people acting like lunatics, this modern enlightened American exceptionalist assumes that he has been called by a higher cause to redeem this benighted world. Specifically, he understands his task as a noble struggle against the base tyranny of superstition embodied in the figure of Merlin the magician who undergirds the feudal system. He thus undertakes to transform this superstitious and tyrannical feudal England into an American-style techno-industrial capitalist republic. And the means of achieving this redemptive “humanitarian” vocational end—this “regime change,” as it were—will be the “magic” made available to him by his superior modern American scientific knowledge. It is a calculated tactics of “staging for effect” (similar to Captain Ahab’s), not incidentally, that was the trademark of his author’s fiction. In the process, however, the Yankee finds that the British aristocracy and the Established Church on which its superstition and tyranny is founded, resist his American enlightenment project and that the multitude he would raise up from degradation in his (biopolitical) “freedom factories” are too far gone in their abjectness. Nevertheless, he, like Ahab and the Indian-hater *par excellence*, is so certain of the transcendently ordained righteousness of his exceptionalist calling that he pursues its spectacular logic to its spectacular limits:

I sent a current through the third fence, now; and almost immediately through the fourth and fifth, so quickly were the gaps filled up. I believed the time was come, now, for my climax; I believed that the whole army was in our trap. Anyway, it was high time to find out. So I touched a button and set fifty electric suns aflame on the top of our precipice.

Land, what a sight! We were enclosed in three walls of dead men! All the other fences were pretty nearly filled with the living, who were stealthily working their way forward through the wires. The sudden glare paralyzed this host, petrified them, you may say, with astonishment;

there was just one instant for me to utilize their immobility in, and I didn't lose the chance. You see, in another instant they would have recovered their faculties, then they'd have burst into a cheer and made a rush, and my wires would have gone down before it; but that lost instant lost them their opportunity forever; while even that slight fragment of time was still unspent. I shot the current through all the fences and struck the whole host dead in their tracks! *There* was a groan you could *bear*! It voiced the death-pang of eleven thousand men. It swelled out on the night with awful pathos.

A glance showed that the rest of the enemy—perhaps ten thousand strong—were between us and the encircling ditch, and pressing forward to the assault. Consequently we had them *all*! And had them past help. Time for the last act of the tragedy. I fired the three appointed revolver shots—which meant:

“Turn on the water!”

There was a sudden gush and roar, and in a minute the mountain brook was raging through the big ditch and creating a river a hundred feet wide and twenty-five deep.

“Stand to your guns, men! Open fire!”

The thirteen gatlings began to vomit death into the fated ten thousand. They halted, they stood their ground a moment against that withering deluge of fire, then they broke, faced about and swept toward the ditch like chaff before a gale. A full fourth part of their force never reached the top of the lofty embankment; the three-fourths reached it and plunged over—to death by drowning.

Within ten short minutes after we had opened fire, armed resistance was totally annihilated, the campaign was ended, *we* fifty-four were masters of England! Twenty-five thousand men lay dead around. (254–55)

Just as Captain Ahab and the Indian-hater are driven by their exceptionalist ethos to annihilate their respective “evil” enemies in the name of its redemptive *telos*, so the Yankee is compelled to commit genocide—“infinite justice,” as it were—in the name of his redemptive exceptionalist calling. What all three imaginative instances have in common, regardless of their radically different narrative intentions, is an unerring exceptionalist logic that, in fulfilling its ameliorative imperatives—becoming absolute spectacle (“and petrified them, you might say, with astonishment”)—self-de-structs. The fulfillment of this logic dis-closes the violence to its Other that this benign end had hitherto concealed by disavowing it. More specifically and to anticipate, these representative fictive passages bring to spectacular visibility an exceptionalist logic that enables its agents to normalize (a rejuvenating) crisis. That is to say, they justify the normalization of the state of emergency (or exception); “preemptive war” against what is deemed to be an “evil” enemy; “regime change”; and the deployment of the spectacular (mind-numbing) tactics of shock and awe to achieve this higher *telos*. What is different from Melville's earlier representation of this end of the American exceptionalist itinerary in

Twain's later version, however, is its affective tone. With the inordinate power the exceptionalist ethos had been endowed by the spectacular advance of scientific knowledge and technology in the late nineteenth century, the incremental slide from tragedy to (unintended) farce, to invoke Marx's distinction, becomes manifestly visible and nearly absolute.

In the end, of course, Hank Morgan fails in his exceptionalist "humanitarian" mission to remake feudal England, under the thrall of "mystical Babylon," into a redeemed (modern) republic. But this failure is not, as most Americanist critics have laboriously affirmed, because Mark Twain, having lost control of his narrative to a dark alter ego (his penchant for techno-science), had to kill him off in the end.<sup>9</sup> Nor was this "failure" because Twain was critical of his protagonist's American exceptionalist project from the outset.<sup>10</sup> The Connecticut Yankee fails in his errand, rather, because he betrays the inexorably practical imperatives of his "Yankee of the Yankees" ethos. In a postscript written by the Yankee's (ventriloquized) English aid, Clarence, after the practical "Yankee of Yankees" (temporary) triumph over British knight errantry and the Established Church, we learn that a vestigial sentiment of the "mistimed sentimentalities" to which he had previously given an ostensible "permanent rest" (251)—manifests itself. Against his better judgment, he leaves his place of security to minister to a wounded knight, who stabs him, thus enabling his symbolic enemy, the black magician Merlin, to recuperate his insidious Old World authority.<sup>11</sup>

The fourth passage I want to invoke as evidence of the hyperbolic excess intrinsic to the logic of American exceptionalism is from Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, written by an American reporter who, as is everywhere evident in his text, knew how deeply backgrounded in American history the American exceptionalist mission in the Vietnam wilderness was. In this series of deliberately fragmented subjective reports from the war zone ("in country"), Herr underscores the unerringly forwarding ("westering") imperatives of the American military mission in Vietnam in an imperial war being fought against a Third World people, who, attuned to its Achilles' heel, refuse to be answerable to that imperial Western structuring strategy. He thus goes far to explain the defeat of an infinitely more powerful United States as having as much to do with the illogical logic of American exceptionalism as with the heroic efforts of the Vietnamese "enemy."

This paradox of the exceptionalist ethos is epitomized by Herr's commentary on the liminal Tet Offensive, when the brutal violence of unerring forwarding tactics was discarded by the US military command in Vietnam for the even more brutal and indiscriminate violence of the body count, what the "Mission" euphemistically called the "war of attrition"<sup>12</sup>:

We took a huge collective nervous breakdown, it was the compression and heat of heavy contact generated out until every American in Vietnam got a taste. Vietnam was a dark room full of deadly objects, the VC [Viet

Cong] were everywhere all at once like spider cancer and instead of losing the war in little pieces over the years we lost it fast in under a week. After that, we were like the character in a pop grunt mythology, dead but too dumb to lie down. Our worst dread of yellow peril became realized; we saw them now dying by the thousands all over the country, yet they didn't seem depleted, let alone exhausted, as the Mission was claiming by the fourth day. We took space back quickly, expensively, with total panic and close to maximum brutality. Our machine was devastating. And versatile. It could do everything but stop. As one American major said, in a successful attempt at attaining history, "We had to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it." That's how most of the country came back under what we called control, and how it remained essentially occupied by the Viet Cong and the North until the day years later when there were none of us left there. (71)

Once more, though now at a time in American history late enough to warrant rational restraint, one hears in this self-righteous symbolic voice, singled out by Michael Herr, of the American major who justified the "Mission's" spectacular annihilation of the village Ben Tre and the province of which it was the center in the name of saving them for the free world, this very same excess justified by the redemptive American exceptionalist ethos that informs the spectacle-oriented exceptionalist voice of Twain's imagined late-nineteenth-century Connecticut Yankee. It is a hyperbolic excess that, to any sane mind, comes across as (unintended) self-parody—or lunacy. But, as in the case of the Indian-hater *par excellence* and particularly of the "Yankee of the Yankees," we also bear witness to the horrific consequences of that self-parodic or lunatic voice and thus to the self-destruction of America's redemptive exceptionalist mission in the wilderness of Vietnam. *When the spectacle becomes absolute, Herr implies, the speech that the spectacle has deprived the spectator of is returned. At the liminal point, the spectators are enabled to retrieve their humanity, that is, to become a polity.*

The fifth and last, but by no means least, instance of this pervasive exceptionalist ethos from the American cultural archive that bears imaginative witness to its self-destruction I take from a subversive film of the hyper-nationalist Cold War era, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964).<sup>13</sup> It is a film that, perhaps more than any other representation of the United States' exceptionalist errand in the global wilderness prior to September 11, 2001, visualizes the apocalyptic consequence of its "benign" *telos* in the appropriate form of grotesque farce. Indeed, it is, I suggest, a film that "stages" this grotesque apocalyptic end in a form that deliberately echoes the staged hyperbolic Western humor that, as Constance Rourke's classic *American Humor* testifies, is endemic to popular and canonical American cultural production,<sup>14</sup> not least to Mark Twain's fiction, most famously, the scene in *Connecticut Yankee*, depicting Hank Morgan's spectacular defeat of Sir Sagramour le Desirous. In this scene, it will

be recalled, Morgan decisively confirms his status as “The Boss” of England, won earlier in staging the eclipse of the sun, by staging it as a “Wild West” show in which the Connecticut Yankee, with lasso and Colt revolvers—his “spectacular techno-scientific instruments”—triumphs once again over the “black magic” of Merlin. I am, referring, of course, to the climactic scene of *Dr. Strangelove* in which the B-52 Stratofortress laden with a nuclear warhead—the apogee of shock-and-awe high-tech firepower—unleashed as a preemptive strike against the Soviet Union by a paranoid American exceptionalist brigadier general, Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden), who believes that the global “Communist conspiracy” entails the contamination by fluoridation of all Americans’ “precious bodily fluids,” is on its unstoppable forwarding way to annihilate its evil target. This hyper-spectacular scene, not incidentally, parodically echoes the multitude of nineteenth-century Protestant millenarian tracts celebrating America as the ruthless God-chosen redeemer nation.<sup>15</sup>

Accompanied intermittently but relentlessly by the triumphant drum-beat rhythms of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” the commander of the B-52 bomber, Major T. J. King Kong (Slim Pickens), a Texan, as his pronounced Western drawl underscores, dons his cowboy’s garb immediately after receiving and verifying his orders, then after releasing the bomb-bay doors, which have been sealed by a missile strike, mounts and straddles the atomic bomb as if it were a spirited mustang in a rodeo, and, whooping exultantly as he waves his cowboy hat above his head, rushes headlong, redeemer-like, toward his apocalyptic prospect.

In sum, all of the foregoing resonant instances of the operations of the American exceptionalist ethos are imaginative cultural readings taken from American texts that span the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which is to say, the history that has been represented (until recently) by traditional American historians and literary critics (what, following Gramsci, I have elsewhere called, the custodians of the American cultural memory) as a redemptive history. But what is uncanny about these *cultural* texts is that they all are increasingly proleptic of the violent *political practice* of American exceptionalism at the liminal point to which it is pursued by the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11 in its spectacular War on Terror. I mean, on the one hand, its bringing what Guy Debord called the “age of the spectacle” in the 1960s to its fulfillment in the twenty-first by way of pursuing the *exceptionalism* of the logic of American exceptionalism to its apocalyptic end: the absolutization of its spectacular essence—the hyper-visualization of being that awes its “inferior and benighted” victims into silence—spellbinds and robs them of speech (and a polity).

This absolutization of the spectacle during the Bush administration, which is remarkably prefigured in the literary instances I have invoked, is borne witness to not only by its representation of history, which consisted of systematically staging reality as spectacle. I think here, for example, not only of such staged gestures as President Bush’s appearance, standing in

the smoking ruins of the World Trade Center in the aftermath of al Qaeda's bombing, bullhorn in hand, turning it into "ground zero," and his spectacular appearance on board a US battleship in the Persian Gulf, before a sign announcing "Mission Accomplished" and dressed in military garb, to proclaim to the world (prematurely, not unlike the fictive Hank Morgan's premature proclamation of the republic in England), the decisive, "surgically executed" defeat of Saddam Hussein's army in Iraq.<sup>16</sup> I am also thinking of the Bush administration's systematic staging of its War on Terror in terms of Armageddon ("Operation Infinite Justice"). The absolutization of the spectacle is also borne witness to by the Bush administration's global military practice in his War or Terror, particularly by the spectacular high-tech violence it employed in Afghanistan and Iraq (against the threatening "axis of evil")—what it, drawing on the United States' colonial legacy, called the tactics of shock and awe—to accomplish its global mission, the *Pax Americana*.

In pursuing the logic of American exceptionalism to its fulfillment in practice, on the other hand (in absolutizing the spectacular inhering in its exceptionalism), the Bush administration also betrayed the violence that has always haunted the exceptionalist myth—the apocalyptic violence proleptically disclosed by my five synecdochical historical cultural instances—but that the benign discourse of the "redeemer nation," abetted by the hitherto unfilled status of the exceptionalist logic, has always disavowed. At this liminal point in the practice of American exceptionalism, as I have underscored, the spectacle *self-de-structs*. In becoming *total*, that is, as in the case of Heidegger's account of the fulfillment of the spatializing metaphysical logic of the West in "the age of the world picture," it dis-closes—renders "*visible*" and "*potential*"—that which the spectacle has had to repress or annihilate to maintain its authority as the truth. In Heidegger's pre-Debordian terms, this potential is the nothing (*das Nichts*), or, what is the same thing, the *radical temporality of being*, a temporality that in essence is unrepresentable. In the indissolubly related terms of my imaginative instances, what is revealed at the apocalyptic limit (the word, derives from the Greek *apo-kalypsis*, means "to disclose what has been closed off or concealed colonized, as it were) is *speech*, the very characteristic of human life that the spellbinding spectacle would rob it of. All this concerning the effects of the reduction of the unrepresentable to spectacle, I suggest, is chillingly audible in the (dis)astounding response of a "senior advisor" in the Bush administration to the reporter Ron Suskind's question concerning its understanding of historical reality as it pertained to the United States' war against Iraq:

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore,"

he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” (Suskind)

Let me put this analysis of my five synecdochical imaginative instances’ anticipation of President Bush’s absolutization in practice of the spectacular imperatives of the logic of American exceptionalism in the wake of 9/11 alternatively—in the more recent but indissolubly related theoretical language of such post-poststructuralist theoreticians as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek (among others). One could say that, in staging the War on Terror as a spectacle, Bush pushed the logic of American exceptionalism to the point at which the United States—“the redeemer nation” or “the exceptionalist state”—became a state in which the state of exception (the abrogation of the law [*nomos*] in the irrational name of securing it) became the rule.

Under these “emergency” conditions, mirrored chillingly in the bizarre excess of relief that Huntington expresses in identifying “militant Islam” as America’s new enemy of the twenty-first century after the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by al Qaeda, President Bush became sovereign. In a way remarkably reminiscent of Captain Ahab, the Indian-hater *par excellence*, and particularly the American major representing the American “Mission” in Vietnam and the Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s court, these emergency conditions enabled him, in the name of “homeland security” and of the American redemptive calling, to unilaterally initiate “preemptive wars” against what he arbitrarily deemed to be “rogue” or “outlaw” states (Afghanistan and Iraq); to compel “regime change” intended to harness such errant states to American geopolitical interests; and, not least, to employ extra-ordinary, that is, illegal—spectacular—methods to achieved these practical ends (shock-and-awe military tactics and the detention and torture of alleged terrorists [Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and other extraterritorial sites of “extraordinary rendition”]). Equally important, these normalized emergency conditions also enabled the Bush administration to go far in abrogating the human rights of the domestic population of the United States. Indeed, the normalization of the state of exception enabled Bush, in Agamben’s appropriately stark terms, to harness the disciplinary apparatuses of biopolitics to aggrandize the latent and increasingly growing tendency of American exceptionalist logic to reduce human life (*bios*) to bare life (*zoē*)—life that can be killed without this killing being named murder—and, in obscuring the boundaries between exclusion and inclusion, to contribute to the rendering of the concentration camp as the end (“the hidden paradigm”) of the modern (democratic) state:

Along with the emergence of biopolitics, we can observe a displacement and gradual expansion beyond the limits of the decision on bare life, in

the state of exception, in which sovereignty consisted. If there is a line in every modern state marking the point at which the decision on life becomes a decision on death, and biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics, this line no longer appears today as a stable border dividing two clearly distinct zones. This line is now in motion and gradually moving into areas other than that of political life, areas in which the sovereign is entering into an ever more intimate symbiosis not only with the jurist but also with the doctor, the scientist, the expert, and the priest. . . . certain events that are fundamental for the political history of modernity (such as the declaration of rights), as well as others that seem instead to represent an incomprehensible intrusion of biológico-scientific principles into the political order (such as National Socialist eugenics and its elimination of “life that is unworthy of being lived,” or the contemporary debate on the normative determination of death criteria), acquire their true sense only if they are brought back to the common biopolitical (or thanatopolitical) context to which they belong. From this perspective, the camp—as the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception)—will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity, whose metamorphoses and disguises we will have to learn to recognize. (*Homo Sacer* 122–23)

But, as in the case of the absolutization of the spectacle, the Bush administration’s normalization of the state of exception by way of proclaiming the Homeland Security State at the site of “Ground Zero” also brought the exceptionalist logic of American exceptionalism to its end in the sense of its (theoretical) demise or self-destruction. In fulfilling its policing imperatives—in forcibly enacting in the end (like a *deus ex machina*) its potential as *structure*—this willful practical enactment not only disclosed the imperial violence that the *discourse* of American exceptionalism has always disavowed. In so doing, it also revealed its “Other” as a constructed (and colonized) enemy. Thus freed from its ideological frame, this alien “Other,” this refugee from the logic of belonging of the nation-state, has come to be seen/heard as a radical difference, a new and potential possibility—a “means without end” in Agamben’s formulation of this aporetic disclosure—that becomes the insubstantial basis, the “whatever being” of an (always) “coming community” (*Coming Community*).

This double disclosure (*apo-kalypsis*) of the violence endemic to the exceptionalist ethos and the political potential its fulfillment renders visible/audible is borne witness to, I suggest, by the historical itinerary of American literary and critical studies from the time of its origins in the Cold War period to the post-9/11 occasion. In the process of determining the “Americanness” of American literature, the founding “Myth and Symbol School” of American Studies (F. O. Matthiessen, Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, R. W. B. Lewis, Lionel Trilling, and Richard Chase, among others), deeply inscribed by the exceptionalist ethos, not only produced a nationalistic literary canon (“the American Renaissance,” in Matthiessen’s formulation) but also harnessed American

literature, particularly that which overdetermined the idea of the United States as redeemer nation, to the United States' global Cold War against Soviet communism.<sup>17</sup> During the decade of the Vietnam War, however, when the United States' spectacular violence inflicted on a Third World people struggling against colonial rule—the brutal, totally dehumanizing, military strategy of “attrition” (the “body count”) and the unhoming “pacification” cultural operations (“New Life Hamlets”)—came to be seen as patently excessive and contradictory, American literary studies fell into a state of crisis. It was at this juncture that the term *American exceptionalism*, which was not current at the time of the hegemony of the Myth and Symbol School, emerged into conscious use, but now as an *aporia*, an ideological problem. This was the moment, too, of the emergence of the critical initiative that has come to be called the “New Americanist Studies,” a counter-memory initiative dedicated at the outset to the interrogation of the American exceptionalist ethos that has silently reigned since the Puritans.

But it was the United States' annunciation of its universal exceptionalist War on Terror in the aftermath of 9/11 that has instigated the New Americanists to go beyond the interrogation of American exceptionalism and its nationalist imperatives. In its radically contradictory unilateral rendering of the state of exception the global rule and its tacit reduction of human life to “disposable reserve” or “bare life” in the name of the universal “peace” of the exceptionalist state, this spectacular American annunciation compelled these New Americanists to think America's Others contrapuntally. That is to say, it compelled them to address America not simply from inside (as was the case of the old Americanists), but also from the outside, that is, from the point of view of the exilic consciousness, or, to put it alternatively, from a “postnationalist” or “transnationalist” perspective. To invoke a recent New Americanist text that is symptomatic of this latest estranging initiative (Castronovo and Gilman),<sup>18</sup> the normalization of the emergency state has precipitated, against itself, the possibility of the emergence of what Walter Benjamin called the “real state of emergency,” the “time of the now” that thinks the emergence not in terms of an end, but as a means without end, that is, as sheer potentiality.

#### CODA

Following his “triumph” over Merlin by way of the “magic” of his modern American scientific knowledge and the immediate spectacular civilizational improvements he has been able to accomplish as “The Boss” of feudal England, the practical Connecticut Yankee, anticipating the enlightened future English history he will make, writes, almost casually, “Unlimited power *is* the ideal thing when it is in safe hands” (51). And Morgan will adhere unerringly to this deeply inscribed American assumption as the determining principle of his “ameliorative” errand to the end. What the five genealogical literary/cultural

texts I have invoked from the history of American cultural production have collectively suggested in a resonant way, however, is that behind the Yankee's apparently innocuous statement, indeed, this American "truism," lies the spectacle-oriented *ideology* of the American exceptionalist ethos. I not only mean the extremist belief that the American people, as opposed to the peoples of the decadent Old World and elsewhere, are a chosen people engaged in the redemptive work of a higher cause (God, originally; History, later), but also the belief that, as such an elect responsible for the transformation of chaos into order (or evil into good), they are morally justified in using all ("unlimited") means—even apocalyptic violence in the last instance—to accomplish this "benign," transcendently sanctioned universal *telos*. In other words, these five imaginative texts collectively reveal not only that the "truth" of American exceptionalism is a fiction that has all too often concealed an imperial will to power over what threatens the United States' authority, but also that the moral claim deriving from this truth—that the "unlimited [spectacular] power" wielded by democratic America thanks to its advanced scientific knowledge—"is" in "safe hands"—is a grotesque life-destroying hypocrisy. In so doing, this genealogy also proleptically exposes the hollowness of what Jacques Rancière, in the wake of 9/11 and the Bush administration's War on Terror, has aptly called the United States' (illegitimate) "right to humanitarian interference," an intervention that annuls the political (international law) in the name of the exalted ethical: "infinite justice" (74).<sup>19</sup> I am referring to the United States' perennial presumption, increasingly avowed since its spectacular firebombing of Dresden and its exploding of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II, that it alone among nations is morally qualified to globally police the production of weapons of mass destruction or to unilaterally intervene in crisis situations where, it always alleges, the victims who have human rights cannot effectively invoke them and thus must rely on "America's" avenging ethical integrity: its "safe hands." In thus estranging the terrain mapped by the American exceptionalist ethos, these genealogical texts (Twain's against itself), not only bear historical witness to the apocalyptic violence that American exceptionalism has always disavowed (or represented as collateral damage) in the name of progress. In so doing, they also proleptically point to the urgent need, made manifest in the period between the Cold War and the War on Terror, for an American studies that has as its "end" the revocation of the traditionalist Americanist vocation: the interrogation of the redeemer nation's "safe hands." And beyond that, of course, the retrieval of speech (the political) from the shock-and-awing spectacle.

## NOTES

1. In invoking the notion of the spectacle, I am distinguishing it from the sublime (the nothingness of being). In the pre-Socratic Greek era, the sublime (*bupsous*) instigated wonder, the impulse to ask the question of being. The spectacle, on the other hand, produces awe, and, as such, has as its purpose

the petrification of questioning. It is, as Guy Debord has shown in *The Society of the Spectacle*, the means by which the West has domesticated and consumerized the sublime.

2. As I have shown in *Exiles in the City*, the liminality of the post-imperial occasion Said diagnoses in *Culture and Imperialism* is paralleled in a remarkably similar way by Hannah Arendt in the chapter of *Imperialism* (the second part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) entitled “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man” (267–302); and by Agamben in “Beyond Human Rights.”

3. I use “ethos” here and throughout this essay in the sense that Jacques Rancière gives to the word in his critique of the “consensus” politics of democratic capitalism:

political dissensus over partaking in the common of the community [which is to say, authentic politics] gets reduced to a distribution in which each part of the social body supposedly obtains the share to which it is entitled. According to this logic, positive laws and rights are increasingly finely molded to fit the diversity of social groups and to match the speed of changes of social life and individual ways of being. The aim of consensual practice is to produce an identity between law and fact, such that the former becomes identical with the natural life of society. In other words, consensus consists in the reduction of democracy to the way of life or *ethos* of a society—the dwelling and lifestyle of a specific group. (72).

4. Parts of this book were previously published in *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, and *North American Review* between 1968 and 1970.

5. Outraged by the “repulsive, unnatural, and indecent plot” in Melville’s *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*, Peck wrote: “We can afford Mr. Melville full license to do what he likes with ‘Omoo’ and its [“savage”] inhabitants; it is only when he presumes to thrust his tragic *Fantoccini* upon us, as representatives of our own race, that we feel compelled to turn our critical Aegis upon him, and freeze him into silence.”

6. See Hall.

7. Foucault writes,

The new historian, the genealogist, will know what to make of this masquerade [the traditional historian giving “alternate identities, more individualized and substantial” than those of modern European humanity]. He will not be too serious to enjoy it; on the contrary, he will push the masquerade to its limit and prepare the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing. No longer the identification of our faint individuality with the solid identities of the past, but our “unrealization” through the excessive choice of identities—Frederick Hohenstaufen, Caesar, Jesus, Dionysus, and possibly Zarathustra. (160–61)

8. For a powerful reading of the “paranoid” aspect of American exceptionalist policy in the post-9/11 era, which is instigated by what, echoing the American jeremiad, she calls “enemy deficit,” see McClintock.

9. See, for example, Cox; and Smith, *Mark Twain’s Fable*. Twain’s penchant for techno-science at the time of writing *Connecticut Yankee* is epitomized by his famous addiction to the Paige typesetting machine.

10. See, for example, Rowe; and Sewell.

11. For an extended version of this argument that Twain is basically sympathetic with his Yankee protagonist, see Spanos, *Shock and Awe*.

12. The euphemism “attrition” also points to the paradoxical banalization of the spectacular violence of the referent. It achieved its apogee in Robert Komer, head of CORDS (Civilian Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) and mastermind of the “Phoenix,” or “pacification” program: the systematic American effort to gain control of the villages of South Vietnam that took the form of the indiscriminate calculus of the “kill ratio” or “body count”: “if we attrit the population base of the Viet Cong, it will accelerate the process of degrading the V.C.” (qtd. in Tram xiii). For an extended analysis of the United States’ banalization of spectacular violence in Vietnam, see Spanos, *Exiles*.

13. The screen play of *Dr. Strangelove* was co-written by Stanley Kubrick and Terry Southern, who adapted it from Peter George’s Cold War thriller novel *Red Alert* (1958). Aware of the exorbitant excessiveness of the United States’ exceptionalist Cold War policy, Kubrick and Southern, his co-writer, not unlike Melville vis-à-vis American Ahabism and Indian-hating, immediately re-envisioned George’s thriller as a black—indeed, absurdist—comedy, the only authentic way of representing the lunatic reality of the nuclear arms race.

14. See, for example, Rourke.

15. See Tuveson. In the appendix, “A Connecticut Yankee in the Mystical Babylon,” Tuveson not only reads Twain’s novel as an important instance of this nineteenth-century American Protestant millennialism but also, in identifying Morgan’s project with America as a “redeemer nation,” harnesses the novel to the United States’ Cold War policy against Soviet totalitarianism.

16. The extreme degree to which the Bush administration staged history as spectacle in the aftermath of 9/11—and to which the American media and public mimicked its silencing imperatives—is persuasively shown by Susan Faludi in *The Terror Dream*.

17. F. O. Matthiessen’s democratic American canon was directed against Nazi totalitarianism during World War II, not Soviet communism. But his exceptionalist canonization of American literature was instrumental in the Myth and Symbol School’s harnessing of his reading to the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

18. See also Pease and Fluck, *Re-Framing*.

19. Rancière writes,

The “right to humanitarian interference” . . . is like the return of the disused rights sent to the rightless back to their senders. This movement is not a null transaction. In being returned, the “disused” rights acquire a new use, one which effects on the world stage what consensus achieves on the national stages: an erasure of the boundary between law and fact, law and lawlessness. The human rights that are “returned” are the rights of the absolute victim, so-called because he is the victim of an absolute evil. The rights that are returned to the sender—and avenger—are akin to a power of infinite justice against the Axis of Evil. (74)

The expression “infinite justice” was the term the Bush administration used to refer to the shock-and-awe War on Terror in the wake of 9/11.

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