(MIS)READING AMERICA

American Dreams, Fictions and Illusions

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Contents

READING AMERICA

THE PASTS

VISIONS OF FUTURES AND PASTS THAT NEVER CAME

ETHNIC READINGS

MEDIA READINGS

Introduction:
From John Smith's Map to *Southland Tales* – Four Centuries of Reading America

October 12th, 1492 is commonly considered a watershed date in the history of America. Early in the morning the three Spanish ships arrived in the vicinity of Guanahani, soon to be rechristened to San Salvador, and, symbolically, ushered in the era of intense geographical exploration and empire-building. What happened in the Caribbean, however, was not only the discovery of a new land but also the beginning of its constant invention and reinvention. The story of Columbus' mistake is well-documented but both during the first decade and afterwards visions of America were shaped as much by the spirit of rational exploration as by the powers of imagination of those arriving and settling in the new land.

The tendency to read America for what explorers and voyagers wanted it to be rather than for what it was became

firmly inscribed in texts produced by both those who travelled to the new land and those who experienced it through second- or even third-hand accounts. Explorers' diaries and memoirs, promotional tracts, colonial chronicles, woodcuts, drawings, paintings, maps, even letters to monarchs and protectors in the homelands, all testify to the persistent transatlantic or, one is tempted to say, trance-Atlantic fascination with the reality which so frequently blurred and merged with fantasy. Increasing accessibility of such documents has contributed in the last decade to the changing understanding, not only among a narrow group of specialists, of how first Europeans and then Americans perceived the continent. From such documents and images, there emerges a clear sense of the degree to which the land was continually and continuously read and reread. Four hundred years later the process still continues. The late 20th-century humanities decisively contributed to the more guarded and skeptical sense of subjectivity and relativity of all such visions but the reading itself has not ceased. For over 400 years America has been read by generations of writers, visual artists, film directors, sociologists and political scientists. Too diverse to even attempt any systematic enumeration, what many of such readings have in common is the desire to read **from** America combined in equal measures with the tendency to read **into** America.

John Smith's famous map of New England is an early instance of such inventive scrutiny. Originally included in the 1616 edition of *A Description of New England*, the first text to use the name for this portion of North America, the map records the geographical and topographic knowledge Smith obtained during his voyage to the coast of Massachusetts and Maine two years earlier. Compared to its contemporaries, Smith's map seems at first somewhat underwhelming. Like works of Spanish or other English cartographers, who appended maps with elaborate insignia of royal power and adorned them with

images ranging from the depictions of peoples inhabiting various areas to fantastic leviathans swimming in the seas, Smith's work features some of these elements, but their number and relative simplicity pale in comparison to other cartographic representations of America. This is not to say, however, that Smith resisted the urge to encode his own vision of the new land.

Given his exploratory and travelling experience, the map charts the territory fairly faithfully. However, once the readers recalibrate their attention from the imagery and the coastline to details, the abundance of names becomes apparent. It seems that almost every island, peninsula, hill or bay big enough to be included is topographically named. Naturally, starting in the second half of the 16th century, English, French and Dutch sailors frequented this part of the continent quite regularly and the coastal areas were hardly *terra incognita* but the degree of naming detail is still extraordinary. The map's toponymic excess clearly reflects more than a documentary compulsion.

Names suggest familiarity and acts of naming exorcise the unknown – like many explorers of his time, Smith wanted to communicate to his English readers a sense of security and a degree of knowledge. Accompanying what is essentially a promotional tract, the map illustrates Smith's reading of America as the land of opportunity whose richness of commodities made it a h(e)aven for those seeking fortune. Inscribed as much in the text of *A Description of New England* as in the recorded topography of the land is promise and hope. The map is not the territory, as the Polish-American scientist and philosopher Alfred Korzybski famously remarked but, in some ways, Smith's map is more than the territory. It tells us as much about the state of exploration in the early 17th century as about Smith's individual and England's collective dreams and yearnings attached to the *New* England. Its eager naming looks into the future, reading North America's east coast to those inspecting it.

Almost four hundred years later, the opposite, far west coast is anxiously read in Richard Kelly's science fiction drama/black comedy *Southland Tales*. Released in 2006 and set in the America of the alternate 2005, in which two cities in Texas fell victim to nuclear terrorist attacks, the union balkanized, World War III erupted, and the extended Patriot Act granted almost unlimited powers to US-Ident, a federal surveillance agency, *Southland Tales* is a postmodernly eclectic reading of the United States as it enters the new century. The film's savage reception can be, at least partly, ascribable to its explosive mixture of wry political commentary, campy humor and melancholy lyricism, but one should not be misled by its apparent lack of seriousness.

The script of the movie is heavily inscribed with references to literature, cinema and popular culture. In one early scene, the vice presidential candidate Bobby Frost, half of the fictional Republican Elliott/Frost ticket, is attending the official opening of the first US-Ident facility in Southern California. He begins his speech with these words – "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I–/ I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference." The quote's irony will not be lost on anyone familiar with American literature but Kelly clearly has more in mind than a witty reference. What meaning these words acquire when uttered on the premises of a dystopian institution singularly devoted to social control and violation of personal liberties is more than obvious. Incidentally, the film's other signature quote is the re-reading of the lines by another American poet who took a long step back to obtain a better perspective at his country of birth: "This is the way the World ends./ This is the way the World ends./ This is the way the World ends./ Not with a whimper, but with a bang."

Mounted between such re-interpretations of American poets, Kelly's vision of the future of America inscribed in the film is hardly optimistic but few viewers who have seen

Southland Tales would probably doubt the director's sincerity of intention. The forward-looking hope so strongly inscribed in the 17th-century explorer's map seems absent from the film but, excessive and chaotic as it may seem, its grim commentary remains more than relevant.

Separated by time, space, medium and experience, Smith and Kelly share the fascination with America, reading its uncertain present and scrying its unwritten future. Their readings are not universal or unique but the map and the film speak volumes of the attraction the land and its people have exerted for over four centuries upon those arriving and those living in the cherished land. This volume reflects this attraction. The twenty-six essays it comprises are as diverse and polyvocal as their subject – the reality of the country and the people. Some attempt more direct readings and others treat the act metaphorically. A number of them inspect America's pasts that happened while several decode the futures that never came. A group of them focuses on the readings of America from perspectives other than the original one – European, white, protestant. Their authors read America through literature, film, music, painting, and, finally, institutions. While united by the act of reading and the acknowledgment of multiple points of view, the essays collected here will never come together to present a coherent, smooth and unambiguous panorama. As seen through and in them, America will always remain a hologram – showing a different face and yielding a different reading with each change in the gaze's focus, angle or illumination.

READING AMERICA

ANDREA O'REILLY HERRERA

Cartographies of Knowledge: The Remapping of American Literature and Culture

On 13 November 1789, Thomas Jefferson, the 3rd president of the United States, penned the following lines in a letter to William Stephens Smith: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." On 19 April 1995 – the second anniversary of the siege in Waco, Texas – Timothy McVeigh, a former U.S. veteran and security guard, bombed the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma killing 168 people (19 of whom were children) and injuring 450. McVeigh professed to be registering his discontent with what he perceived to be a "tyrannical federal government." At the time of the bombing, he was wearing a tee-shirt with an image of Abraham Lincoln and the phrase [sic] *semper tyrannis* (thus always to tyrants) – the state motto of Virginia and the words John Wilkes Booth purportedly uttered after

fatally wounding President Lincoln. An image of a tree with three drops of blood and Jefferson's famous quotation was on the back of McVeigh's shirt.

Throughout the fall of 2009, organized groups of conservative protesters (or "tea party" activists) appeared at town hall meetings across the United States to protest President Barack Obama's healthcare plan which proposed, among other things, universal healthcare for nearly 50 million uninsured U.S. citizens. The tea party protestors systematically disrupted these gatherings and thereby prevented civil dialogue and debate. One such protester, William Kostric, appeared at President Obama's 11 August (2009) town hall meeting in Portsmouth, New Hampshire carrying a gun and a sign that once again invoked Thomas Jefferson's aphorism. "It is time to water the tree of liberty," his sign read. When questioned on national television about the sign's potentially threatening and violent content (especially in light of its connection to McVeigh), Kostric claimed to be peaceably exercising his second amendment right to bear arms, and skirted any discussion of the implied connotation that anyone in support of Obama's healthcare plan is a traitor or "non-patriotic."

As the healthcare debate intensified, a proliferation of signs and symbols (many of which riffed on Kostric's sign and/or included the Confederate flag) began to appear in the media, along with websites and blogs that were increasingly and recklessly racist and deeply offensive in content.[1] These developments were echoed by uncensored, unsavory comments from a number of U.S. representatives[2] as well as figures in the popular media (such as national talk show hosts Rush Limbaugh and Glen Beck[3]). Since that time, a growing number of tea party activists (who have come to be identified as part of a movement) have seemed inspired and empowered by the idea that Kostric and others like him have not been admonished or held accountable for their incendiary words or potentially

threatening actions. On the contrary, many regard them as heroes or victims. The charge that they are racist or that they are contributing to an environment (modeled by the McCain–Palin campaign) that encourages people to act violently with impunity, as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi suggested,[4] has essentially been dismissed under the guise of freedom of speech, or reframed as an attempt by "liberals" or "the left" to silence those who are simply expressing their criticism of President Obama's policies and plans. One such strain of discourse suggested that the response to Obama and his proposed policies are no different from public responses to other Presidents, in spite of the fact that the particular form of "hate language" directed at Obama and his administration far exceeds that leveled at any of his predecessors. Others were quick to argue that these displays of racism or the threat of violence implied both directly and indirectly in many of these expressions, can be understood or explained as a problem of individuals or individual pathology.

I would suggest, on the contrary, that these expressions are reflective of society at large. Not only do they hearken back to a past many have somehow chosen to ignore, but they also reveal the values and the state of our culture and our nation.[5] These offensive images and displays (which continue to be produced by both the right and – in retaliation – the left), coupled with the spectacle-like atmosphere at the town hall meetings, conjure for many a not too distant past in which the United States legally sanctioned apartheid (in the form of racial segregation) and internal terrorism (in the form of lynching).[6] They also invoke a host of age-old stereotypes regarding African Americans, some of which are so deeply ingrained that they have become covert in U.S. culture and the national consciousness.

Clearly, the behavior and the views expressed at these rallies and town hall meetings are not representative of all U.S. citizens. As one of my colleagues observed, their significance

has been "over-determined" by a sector of the media that thrives on a form of sensationalism that heightens the "visibility of this moment." Nobel prize-winning economist Paul Krugman offers a slightly different interpretation. "An essential truth about the state of American politics," he observes, "[is that] the guiding principle of one of our nation's two great political parties is spite pure and simple." "The same principle of spite," Krugman continues, "has determined Republican positions [as well as the positions of their constituents one might add] on more serious matters, with potentially serious consequences – in particular, in debate over health care reform." To be clear, the manner in which the tea party activists and their more prominent leaders have expressed their dissent is a matter of great concern for many. The pack-media heightens the potential risks they pose by giving this sector of the population undue attention. As Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center observed in an interview on the *Chris Matthews Show* in mid-September 2009, the environment to which House Speaker Pelosi refers is particularly dangerous in that it has fostered a certain form of White nationalism that has historically prompted individuals (such as Timothy McVeigh and Lee Harvey Oswald) to believe that they are acting out on behalf of the wishes of the community at large.

Many scholars have pointed out that these particular expressions of "rancor" in public spaces, the media, and on the internet are fueled by a complex and interlocking combination of issues involving race, class, gender, and sexual or religious orientation – as opposed to race alone. In some sense, these demonstrations put a finger on America's pulse in respect to present-day racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and, more recently, religious intolerance (as witnessed by the public "debate" regarding the construction of a mosque and Islamic center in the vicinity of ground zero). Although some concede that we continue to make progress as a nation, recent

visible signs of symbolic racism, sexism, homophobia, and intolerance indicate, nevertheless, the ongoing relevance of the primary statuses of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual or religious orientation, though undeniably their relevance or meaning has changed over time.[7] As many have argued, these demonstrations link directly to a series of developments which have drawn national (and even international) attention since 9/11. When taken together, they put into relief the reality that racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination and intolerance are deeply embedded in U.S. institutions and U.S. society and culture at large, in spite of the notion that many insist they are marginal or irrelevant. Among these incidents are the following:

- the incremental curtailment of personal rights as a result of legislation such as The Patriot Act; the correspondent silencing of 'unpopular' views that critique the United States' involvement in the Middle East and other regions; and the accompanying and increasingly militant and hostile rhetoric around the definitions or concepts of patriotism and anti-Americanism;

- the events that unfolded during, and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which put into high relief the fates that continue to befall U.S. citizens who are historically disadvantaged and whose life chances are determined as a result of their race/ethnicity, class, gender, age, and sexuality;

- the outcry against the nomination of the recently appointed Supreme Court Justice Sonia Soto-Mayor on the grounds that her ability to arbitrate would be skewed by the fact that she is a Latina from a working-class background and the unspoken, correspondent assumption that white males are inherently unbiased by their race or ethnicity, class privilege, or gender;

- the mounting xenophobia accompanying the debate regarding immigration;

- the questionable methods used to interrogate U.S. detainees in the Middle East, which prompted Attorney General Eric Holder to initiate a Justice Department investigation;

- the emergence and ongoing presence of the "birthers," a movement of sorts which developed during the 2008 presidential election and includes a number of elected officials. Many birthers claim that Barack Obama is a Muslim (an assertion that fundamentally presumes that Muslims and terrorists are synonymous); and they continue to challenge the fact that he was born in the United States, thereby questioning Obama's right to be president);

- South Carolina representative Joe Wilson's blatant display of disrespect during the President's joint address to Congress on healthcare. Wilson distinguished himself among a group of hecklers by yelling out "you lie" at the point in his speech when the President was discussing immigrants;

- And most recently, the Immigration Bill (SB 1070) signed into law in April 2010 by Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, which requires immigrants to carry their alien registration documentation at all times and, in turn, requires police to question people if there is a reason to suspect they are in the United States illegally. (The Bill is currently being contested as unconstitutional; many claim that it will lead to civil rights violations).

These are just a few obvious examples.

The refusal to confront or challenge in any meaningful way these overt forms of discrimination not only signals a willingness to tolerate discrimination but also serves to exacerbate

what is already a racist environment as Nancy Pelosi has suggested. Ultimately, it encourages and perpetuates these forms of discrimination. It signals the reality that we live in what I refer to as "a culture of consent – a culture which creates an environment that inadvertently supports, rationalizes, and justifies discrimination. It is tantamount to the idea that when well-meaning, self-proclaimed 'good' people choose to remain silent, they perpetuate the abuse, disparagement, and, ultimately, the oppression of others." What kind of society do we live in, one might ask, if the realities of inequality, poverty and discrimination are justified, and the expression of violence (both verbal and physical) is normalized? While President Obama acknowledges that race may be a factor in the backlash against his administration (especially in respect to his health-care plan and his fiscal stimulus program), he continues to distance himself from any such discussion insisting that it distracts the public from the more pressing issues at hand. Obama's downplaying of the role race continues to play in the healthcare debate, etc. suggests to some his desire to position himself as post-racial. Many, nevertheless, regard his response as insufficient, for ultimately it perpetuates the dangerous illusion that race is no longer a relevant factor in determining ordinary people's life chances.

In response to the tea party activists, prominent national figures such as former President Jimmy Carter publicly acknowledged in plain terms that their behavior was racist in content, and represented a direct affront to Barack Obama specifically because he is Black – a claim, incidentally, that President Obama publicly disagreed with. (More recently, the NAACP, in partnership with several organizations, launched a website aimed at "monitor[ing] racism and other forms of extremism in the Tea Party Movement" (teapartywatch.org). In his televised speech, Carter took to task the illusion that we are in a post-racial/post-ethnic era merely because we have

elected a bi-racial president (albeit by a narrow majority). What his statement implied is the idea that systems of power – of institutionalized oppression and privilege – are not significantly altered or diminished as a result of token or visual shifts in the power structure. In other words, Barack Hussein Obama's election to the presidency does not eradicate or cancel out the ongoing legacy of systemic, institutional inequality any more than the felling of Saddam Hussein's statue signaled the end of an oppressive era in Iraq and the "triumph" of U.S. democracy.

Jimmy Carter's remarks also disrupted the cherished U.S. myth of bootstraps and meritocracy which suggests that anyone who works hard enough can reach her/his life potential – a myth which assumes that the playing field is even and the past does not have any bearing on the present or the future. According to this myth, if you do not succeed, you simply have not tried hard enough. Carter's claims also, inadvertently, put into high relief the idea that the foundational metaphors of and about the United States are, essentially, fictions, for enlaced in his observations is the recognition that we continue to fall short of the democratic ideals first laid out in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, especially in respect to equality and the "American dream."[8] Current evidence abounds. One only needs to reflect on the following facts: poverty in certain pockets of the United States rivals third-world poverty; racial and ethnic minorities are grossly over-represented in our prison populations, and their life expectancies are significantly lower than those of the White's; women continue to make less on the dollar than men[9]; and gay citizens in nearly 40 states do not enjoy equal civil rights and legal protections (in more than 20 states it remains legal to fire someone for being gay).

A letter issued in March 2009 by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which consists of 18 independent human rights experts, acknowledged this ongoing legacy of discrimination in the United States

and expressed concern over a lack of progress to end racial discrimination in particular. The U.N. Human Rights body urged the Obama administration and Congress to "do more to end racial profiling [especially in regard to migration policies], strengthen efforts to provide adequate and affordable housing to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, end the practice of sentencing juveniles – most of whom are persons of color – to life sentences without parole and address the deprivation of Western Shoshone American Indians of their ancestral lands." "The message from the committee," Jamil Dakwar, the Director of the ACLU Human Rights Program, insisted, "is a stark reminder of how much remains to be done to achieve racial equality. Full implementation and enforcement of human rights treaty obligations are critical for making real progress at home and for U.S. leadership on human rights abroad."

As a nation, the United States has ostensibly striven to achieve a democratic ideal that theoretically grants every citizen freedom of choice, freedom of expression (as long as one does not pose bodily harm to others) and equal opportunity. These basic and "inalienable" rights are viewed by most as the very foundation of our individual and collective wellbeing. For this reason, the United States has traditionally been regarded (or has regarded itself) as an enlightened nation committed to progressive social ideals, in spite of the fact that various groups have been excluded from this vision. In reality, as contemporary scholars have pointed out, our founding documents – not unlike the Enlightenment project in which they are grounded – failed their proclaimed vision of equality and democracy for all. These most cherished fictions regarding the American dream gloss over the reality that one's social or cultural identification or position directly determines one's legal and political rights, one's status as a citizen and one's economic, social, and political privilege.

Ironically, average White Americans – especially those who most closely approach poet and theorist Audre Lorde's mythical norm (white, male, economically stable, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian) – are largely unaware of their unearned privileges. Moreover, as race theorist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva claims, they do not see themselves as racist, sexist or intolerant for that matter. Most advocate a color-blind and gender-blind approach, and tend to emphasize "our shared humanity" – which Bonilla-Silva terms "color-blind racism." In the process, they conveniently ignore bountiful evidence of institutional and social racism, and thereby remain in a state of "obliviousness," to borrow Allen Johnson's term, regarding their own privileged status. "Most poignantly," Bonilla-Silva comments, "most whites insist that minorities . . . are responsible for whatever race problem we have in this country" (1–4, 8–10). Their sense of self-assurance is shored up by "racialized" people who have internalized their own oppression and, therefore, corroborate their views. They invoke Rodney King, whose vicious and merciless beating eventually sparked the L.A. riots in 1992, and ask, "Why can't we all just get along?"

The legacy of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia in the United States is deep-rooted and ongoing; recent events not only confirm the ever-widening chasms that exist between the classes and among people from various racial or ethnic groups, but they also point to emerging forms of discrimination and intolerance.[10] Though the relevance of the primary statuses has shifted over time, an interlocking, interdependent system of power relations, which are manifest at both the micro and macro levels, supports discriminatory behavior based on any of these social or cultural categories or positions. Moreover, a form of complicity embedded in our ideology, which frequently takes the shape of denial and silence, perpetuates discrimination and the oppression of others. "Ideology," Terry Eagleton reminds us in a quotation that is relevant to all forms of discrimination:

is not just a matter of what I think about a situation; it is somehow inscribed in that situation itself. It is no good me reminding myself that I am opposed to racism as I sit on a park bench marked 'Whites Only'; by the act of sitting on it, I have supported and perpetuated racist ideology.

"The ideology," Eagleton concludes, "is in the bench, not my head" (40).

As Julian Bond – veteran civil rights activist, historian and former head of the NAACP – corroborates:

Obama's candidacy doesn't herald a post-civil rights America, any more than his victory in November [means] that race as an issue has been vanquished in America ... We know that Obama's electoral success ... won't signal an end to racial discrimination, but it does mark the high point of an inter-racial movement that dates back to the Underground Railroad.[11]

Both the visible and symbolic shifts in academia in the United States over the past 40 years represent a significant aspect of this consciousness and activist movement to which Bond refers. The gradual institutionalization of Ethnic and Women's or Gender Studies programs into the U.S. academy – programs that were virtually non-existent before the late 1960s – constitutes a substantive challenge to an entrenched patri-archal institution that has traditionally been fundamentally sexist, racist, and hierarchical. The establishment of these disciplines marks a discursive shift in the manner in which Americanists theorize race or ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality. The emphasis at the outset was on the constructed nature of these statuses. In other words, race/ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality are not essential categories endowed with the essential meanings. Rather, meaning is imposed on these categories by those representing the dominant group; and these meanings are subject to political, historical and social change.[12]

In a related effort, Whiteness Studies, which emerged in the mid-1990s, treated whiteness as a racial category, exposed its constructed nature (as Gregory Jay contends), and destabilized its representation as an invisible norm against which everything else is measured inadvertently. Masculinity Studies, in turn, exposed for the first time the interdependent nature of gender identity and again challenged the invisible normative status of maleness. More recently, Sexuality Studies has begun to emphasize the dual notion that sexuality is not only a constructed concept but also that sexual identity is on a continuum despite the fact that it can be socially and historically located.

Signaling yet another discursive shift, multiracial feminist analyses, which gained prominence in the 1970s, challenged the hegemony of U.S. feminisms based solely upon the experiences of White, middle-class women. Theorizing difference from a contemporary multiracial perspective, Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill point out, involves: (1) examining the simultaneity of systems shaping women's experience and identity; (2) emphasizing the intersectional nature of all social hierarchies at all levels of social life; (3) highlighting the relational nature of dominance and subordination; (4) exploring the interplay of social structure and women's agency; (5) and encompassing wide-ranging methodological approaches which rely on various theoretical tools (321–331). For example, a perspective such as Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill's disallows one from analyzing the negative response to Supreme Court Justice Sonia Soto-Mayor as simply being sexist, and consequently ignore the role that ethnicity/race and class played in her opponents' opposition to her nomination.

The most current trends in race and gender analysis, which evolved from various multiracial feminist perspectives, propose an intersectional, multi-axis analysis, which emphasizes the interrelations among the primary statuses. An underlying

premise is the concept that oppression can only be measured or gauged in relation to privilege, thus the focus is not solely on the experiences of the oppressed. Everyone experiences varying degrees of privilege and oppression depending upon their social location at any given time, Patricia Hill Collins, among others, argues. These interlocking inequalities, Hill Collins continues, form a "matrix of domination" that operates on the axis of privilege and oppression.

In the past decade, the United States has begun to witness the integration, as opposed to merging, of Race and Women's or Gender Studies with American Studies. The impulse to break down the barriers that have traditionally segregated these disciplines eliminates the "ghettoizing" of what is traditionally regarded as interconnected disciplines, or the "bracketing out" of subject areas outside the U.S. experience. This trend consequently avoids the traditional institutional privileging of a single discourse or field of inquiry, a pitfall which Ella Shohat cautions against in her seminal work *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (3–4).

The dominant discursive approach in integrative Americanist Studies is increasingly transnational. As a direct result, discrepant and previously marginalized histories and voices both in the United States and abroad have become more visible and vocal. Contemporary trends in American Studies not only treat U.S. history in relation to colonialism, imperialism and its legacy, but they also weigh seriously the manner in others regard the United States. Acknowledging the internal strife that continues to haunt our nation as well as the sometimes controversial role we have played in world affairs, many contemporary scholars, such as Wai Chee Dimock, recognize that we – as Americanists and scholars of race/ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality – must confront "the unraveling of national sovereignty" (1). As a result, we must come to terms with the United States' attendant loss of its privileged position or status

both economically and in respect to its assumed dual role as "spokeperson for the universal," and "civilizing model," to borrow Ella Shohat's terminology. No longer can we regard Western Europe and the United States as "unique source[s] of meaning" or ethics, Shohat argues. Rooted in European humanism, the ethnocentric and universalizing discourse that has emanated from these sources has now become the object of a postmodern and postcolonial critique that lays bare the fact that such a worldview has rationalized the conquest, colonization and, in some cases, genocide of three quarters of the people inhabiting the planet. It also acknowledges that the United States is now one of several competing economic superpowers. Such a worldview, many scholars argue, is largely responsible for the current, worldwide economic and environmental crisis; it has shrugged off the experiences of the poor and of non-White or non-Anglo peoples and, in some cases, simply eradicated their cultures and rendered them a-historical.

A resulting discursive de-centering of the United States from Ethnic/Gender/and American Studies has also occurred. Collections such as Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell's *Shades of the Planet, American Literature as World Literature*, for example, demonstrate the notion that Americanists are gradually beginning to envision a theoretical paradigm that is no longer U.S.-centric. "Rather than taking the nation as the default position, the totality we automatically reach for," Dimock writes, "we come up with alternate geographies that deny it that totalizing function . . . a domain of inquiry, which no longer replicates the terms of territorial, intellectual, and moral sovereignty" (Dimock and Buell 3). The emphasis, then, is not on stratification or hierarchies, but in modularization and coeval or multi-axis analysis. The imperative is to de-territorialize American Studies, as Paul Giles suggests, and view U.S. History as a "nested" phenomenon or humble subset

of world history (Susan Stanford Friedman). Any meaningful analysis of the United States' cultural production, therefore, must be grounded in this framework (Dimock and Buell 8).

Equally imperative, Dimock and Buell argue, is an analysis that emphasizes a cultural continuum that is both contextual and fluid. Based on the American physicist Douglas Hofstader's Pulitzer prize-winning work *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (1979), they regard the intelligence of American literature as a "recursive structure," which is "reversible, generative, modulating," and ultimately "unpredictable" as opposed to linear. In this sense, U.S. cultural production is to borrow Hofstader's term, a "heterarchy," which is only a part of a larger continuum.[13]

In sum, contemporary critics such as Dimock, Buell, and Shohat are cautioning like harbingers – warning us (U.S.) that we can no longer take a position of neutrality or choose to ignore the manner in which we have been, and continue to be, implicated in world affairs. Theorists of color across the globe have thus begun to produce knowledge and propose alternative perspectives and cartographies within what Shohat refers to as a "kaleidoscopic framework," which regards groups, communities, nations and continents in relation without presuming that they are identical. They are joined by a host of theorists whose aim is to disrupt "unstated" White, Western norms and Western "conceptual binarisms" and hierarchies (emanating in some instances from the ranks of U.S. feminists of all stripes) by exploding the notion that their "positionings" were identical (Shohat 2–3). Postcolonial scholars (not unlike those who have more recently focused their efforts on the environment) have posed a serious critique of capitalist ideology and its fundamentally unsustainable aspects. They read U.S. history within the context of colonialism and thereby examine the United States' interventionist role in the current, global economic and environmental crisis. "The five-hundred-year

colonial domination of indigenous peoples," Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*:

> the capitalist appropriation of resources, and the imperialist ordering of the world formed part of a massive world-historical globalizing movement that reached its apogee at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Globalization theory in this sense has its roots in a diffusionist view of Europe [and consequently the United States] spreading its people, ideas, goods, and economic and political systems around the world. (14)

Colonial imperialism, Shohat and Stam argue, was, and continues to be, informed by a "rescue or savior narrative" embedded in "a vision of advanced and mature [i.e. developed and civilized] nation-states."[14] Postmodernist and postcolonialists also aim to dismiss universalist discourses of feminism and hierarchical paradigms that conceptualize in a superannuated and binary fashion concepts stubbornly rooted in what Ella Shohat terms "the Promethean civilizing mission" or rescue or savior narrative of the past (10).

Rather than "encapsulating events" or phenomena, or confining them to a U.S. context, scores of Americanists are undergoing a conceptual rethinking and broadening of the manner in which they interpret U.S. history and cultural production. Current scholarly inquiry in the U.S. encourages alternative modes of analysis and has begun a remapping of traditional identity designations. And thus, Americanists have begun to analyze U.S. literary production across what Dimock refers to as "deep time." In her critical work *Through Other Continents*, for example, she discusses the writing of Margaret Fuller in relation to ancient Egypt and the Italian revolution and pursues questions regarding ethics by considering the "Buddhist-inflected ecology" of Gary Snyder, the Sanscrit epic *The Ramayana*, and China's *His-hu-Chi* (*Journey to the West*), which loops backward into a discussion of the work of

contemporary Native-American and Asian-American authors. When read together, Dimock claims, these texts "give us ingredients for a new ecology . . . [for we are] confronted with instances of the nonhuman that compel us to rethink the human."[15]

The impulse toward the inter-textual and the global, in turn, has challenged traditional disciplinary boundaries, as Ella Shohat observes, and in the process rejected "a fictive concept of unities" among groups or communities both in the United States and abroad. In the same vein, these scholars no longer define nations (and even continents) solely according to geographical coordinates or regard them as hermetically sealed entities. On the contrary, Shohat tells us, nations and continents are part of a "permeable interwoven relationality." An approach such as Shohat's rejects all essentialist claims to identity, and thereby recasts the manner in which we speak about authenticity or cultural appropriation. It emphasizes "racialized colonial patterns shared by various colonial-settler nations," as opposed to any notion of "racist exceptionalism" (i.e. the idea that the United States is uniquely racist) (Shohat 16). Ultimately, it further emphasizes what Shohat and Stam refer to as the United States' "co-implicativeness" in the current state of world affairs.

Current scholarship has also begun to highlight the experiences of those living "in between" nations and worlds. Border Studies – symbolized by signature works such as Gloria Anzaldúa's *La frontera* or *Borderlands* – analyze the relationship between society, space, time and history within an intersectional context. Diasporic and postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha, bell hooks, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Édouard Glissant have, in a similar fashion, challenged discourses that propose a closed or static conception of national and cultural identification.[16] And Native-American scholars and writers concerned with issues regarding the relationship between

the environment and social justice (such as Vine Deloria, Jr., V.F. Cordove, Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo, Robert Warrior, David Shorter and Daniel Justice), have proposed a holistic theory that emphasizes traditional ecological knowledge, sheds light on how we live on and maintain the planet and asks us to consider how, in turn, we comport ourselves as human beings.

Americanists in general are rethinking the manner in which the spatial and the temporal, the local and the planetary are theorized, especially as it bears on individual subjectivity. As Americanists – we are gradually giving way to these other forms of knowing and theorizing. At the most basic level, we have begun to rethink our vocabulary and reconsider hegemonic, binary terminology such as modernity/pre-modernity, developed/underdeveloped, as well as the very term Americanist. "A more adequate formulation of . . . transnational relationships," Ella Shohat tells us: "would not see any world as either 'ahead' or 'behind.' Instead, it would see all the 'worlds' as coeval. Living the same historical moment but under diverse modalities of subordination and hybridization" (15). In order to achieve this end, Shohat suggests, we must place traditionally isolated discourses and fields of inquiry – such as gender and sexuality studies, women's studies, global studies and international affairs, postcolonial studies, area studies, American and ethnic studies – in dialogue by employing what she terms a "multichronotopic" form of analysis. Only then can we truly begin to remap culture space and imagine what Shohat refers to as alternative "cartographies of knowledge."

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Endnotes

1 A number of these signs compared President Obama to Adolf Hitler, Bin Laden, an African witch doctor, and Joseph Stalin.

2 For example, Republican Congressman Todd Akin (MO) joked about Democrats getting lynched at town hall meetings, an idea echoed by the signs of Obama hung in effigy as well as lynched donkey or jackasses featured at tea party gatherings. In the same vein, freshman Republican Congresswoman Lynn Jenkins (Kansas) told a gathering in her district that the GOP was still searching for a "great white hope" to stop Obama's political agenda. A colleague attending the 2009 PAAS Conference mentioned to me a protester carrying a sign in Hagerstown, Maryland at the Cardin town hall meeting that read "Death to Obama, Death to Michelle and her two stupid kids."

3 Fox News talk show host Glen Beck took the "reverse discrimination" route and went as far as to suggest that President Obama has "something against White people."

4 In September 2009 Nancy Pelosi drew a comparison between the current atmosphere in the United States and the period in the late 1970s when Harvey Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone were assassinated for their unpopular social views.

5 The same argument can be made about the widespread sexual or physical abuse of women and children, though this is not the focus of this essay.

6 Jews, Catholics, and Italians were targeted by the KKK along with African Americans.

7 For example, in October 2009 the House of Representatives voted to expand the definition of violent federal hate crimes to those committed because of a victim's sexual orientation; President Obama has recently signed this measure into law; the Senate has approved a resolution apologizing to American Indians for centuries of "ill-conceived policies" and acts of violence by U.S. citizens (a symbolic gesture) issuing a formal apology to Native Americans; and President Obama has received international recognition for "more consensual leadership" – he was recognized for his "extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation among peoples," despite the fact that his selection as the winner of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize has elicited both praise and criticism from various quarters.

8 Ironically, Obama has played on this myth and, as result, received quite a bit of backlash from the Black community.

9 Black women make less than their White counterparts and Latinas make even less than their Black sisters.

10 A social movement called One Nation Working Together has recently emerged. Among other things, they have organized a rally in Washington, DC called the One Nation March that aims to gather together individuals

from a "diverse set of backgrounds, experiences, beliefs, and orientations" committed to "putting America back to work" and "pulling America back together" (onenationworkingtogether.org).

11   Keynote address, 99th NAACP National Convention, Sunday 13 July, Cincinnati, Ohio.

12   See, for example, Michael Omi and Howard Winant's seminal critical work *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (NY: Routledge, 1986, 1989).

13   See Dimock and Buell's introduction to *Shades of the Planet*.

14   A recent example of such a critique was the unpopular position emanating from the ranks of postcolonialists, postmodernists, and race theorists that criticized the United States' foreign policy and suggested that this policy, which was reinforced by a rescue narrative, was in some sense responsible for provoking the events that took place on 11 September 2001. Such an approach deconstructs the United States' inscription of moral and ethical superiority.

15   See Dimock's introduction to *Through Other Continents*.

16   My recent work on the Cuban diaspora shares these same aims and intentions. See, for example, *ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press); *The Pearl of the Antilles* (Tempe, AZ: Bilingual/Review Press, 2001); *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007); and *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

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Cezar M. Ornatowski

Imagining Collective Identities:
America, Europe, and Their Others

Issues of identity – collective, national, transnational, even global (especially in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 and the current "war on terror") – have recently become increasingly salient. One might even say that the problematic of identity has, explicitly or implicitly, taken center political stage over the last half century. The process of decolonization that followed World War II triggered a spate of attempts at state- and nation-building across the so-called Third World, notably in Africa and Asia. More recently, the wave of democratic transformations and nation-building projects in Central/Eastern Europe and Eurasia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fall of communism, combined with the ethnic violence in the former Yugoslavia and evidence of a resurgence of xenophobia and nationalism in many areas of the former Eastern Block also foregrounded issues of

collective identity. Many scholars have noted that in post-1989 Central/Eastern Europe the problematic of "democracy" has, to a large extent, been coextensive with the problematic of identity (Marin, Tismaneanu). The same may be said of the democratic transformation in South Africa (Salazar). The current turmoil connected to the global rise of extremism and terrorism also in part involves the problematic of identity. As the American psychiatrist Morgan Scott Peck has put it, speaking of both individual and collective psychic experience: "there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community" (233).

In my comparative research on political transformations in Central/Eastern Europe and South Africa, as well as in my work on the rhetoric of totalitarian regimes and contemporary extremism, I have focused on the question of how collective identities are constituted and transformed and how people are "induced" to "cooperate" as members of a "congregation," to use Kenneth Burke's terms (*Attitudes Toward History*, no pagination).

I begin with four assumptions that underlie current thinking about identities: identities are negative, relational, imaginary, and symbolic.

Identities as "Negative" and "Relational." What does it mean that identities are negative? "Negative" means that identities are predicated on a difference. Ernesto Laclau has argued that identity is fundamentally "negative" because it presupposes a "gap," a "lack" as its constitutive principle (Laclau and Zac). Rather than expressing purely positive content, identity needs a that-which-it-is-not, an "other" that helps to anchor the sense of the "self."

The need for the "other" or "others" leads to the second property of identity: relationality. I am a professor in relation to my students, a man in the context of a humanity made up of two genders, a son in relation to my mother, and a husband in relation to my wife. I may also be a good husband but a bad

professor, a good son but a bad citizen. I am thus many "things" in relation to many other things and it is those relations that help define the overall "me." If I were the only human left alive after a nuclear holocaust, most of the constituents of my "identity," as I understand it now, would cease to be functional; the fact of my being American, a Democrat, or a professor would be irrelevant in my relations with animals and rocks. If all other life forms were gone, let us say after the explosion of some neutron bomb, and I were surrounded only by the inorganic, my identity would probably boil down to simply being the only living being in my environment. (This is assuming I had any sanity left; experience appears to suggest that, deprived of a meaningful environment and relationships what we call "sanity," a sense of "reality" or orientation, becomes tenuous; that is why Tarzan, at least initially, was more like an ape than a human, until he returned to the human environment and its network of relationships – if we are to believe Edgar Rice Burroughs.)

Identity inheres primarily not in some intrinsic essence, but in relationships; it is, to use a term popular today, a "product," an outcome, a result of relationships. As Noelle McAfee has suggested in her concept of "relational subjectivity," even "individual" identity presupposes a one-among-others, in effect a "community." Identity is a bit like a "hologram," like those ghosts in Disneyland's Haunted House that dance around you and even sit on your lap. A hologram is itself "empty"; it is a creation of the light refracted from the original object but only when this light is interfered with by another beam. It is the interference between the two beams that produces the image. Identity gets richer, more "dense," the more relationships there are, the more salient distinctions (in terms of similarities and contrasts) can be drawn, the denser the network of affiliations, disaffiliations, positions, and, what often follows, attendant attitudes and actions. Identity is not just something one

"has" or assumes, but also something one lives or "acts out." I do not have children. Thus "daddy" is not part of my identity. I do not get to act as a "daddy," but to that extent I am, no doubt, in some way "poorer" in my identity. Had I no friends, no parents, no pets, no ties of any kind, I would be poorer still. The simple fact is that, as Anthony Cohen has suggested, one simply needs others similar enough in some relevant respect and different in other respects for "identity" to arise as a useful relevant notion at all. Since the relations that help constitute an "identity" change (nothing stands still for long), identity is both contingent and a process; it is always in the making.

Identity as Imagined. Since identity appears not to inhere in any underlying essence, it is thus made or, as we like to say these days, constructed. This construction is predicated on identification – a process that is both psychological and rhetorical. As Ernesto Laclau notes, for lack of any defining given content identity is created through identifying with something ("Introduction" 3); this identification is largely a function of rhetorically induced relationships, that is, adherences constituted through acts of imagination (Burke, *Rhetoric* 20–22). While it may be argued that a "family" is founded on some biological foundation of kinship, my sense of being "American" is founded rather on an interpretation of what it means to be "American" and on my identification with others who fit that interpretation, as well as, perhaps primarily, with a set of symbols and values presumably embodied in them that constitute "Americanness."

In his seminal book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argued that a nation is "an *imagined* political community" because "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6, emphasis added). Communities, Anderson suggested, inhere largely in a state of consciousness, a sense of "horizontal

comradeship," a temporal simultaneity existing in and moving through history. As a state of consciousness, the modern "national" community is qualitatively different from religious or dynastic communities, which relied on entirely different sorts of relationships and affiliations (7). In fact, Anderson claimed that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined; communities, he suggests, "are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the **style** in which they are imagined" (6).

In his study of the Palestinian diaspora identity, Glenn Bowman has argued that all communities and nations are "countries of words." "All ideas of community," Bowman argues,

> are 'imaginary' constructions . . . All communities are 'countries of words' in so far as the rituals of inscribing borders, picturing territories and populations, and thematizing issues salient to those terrains and the communities believed to occupy them occur within discourse . . . . the community is not a 'thing' in itself but a way of speaking, and thinking, about others who are 'like us.' People create communities rhetorically through thinking that some people are 'like' themselves while others are 'unlike' them. In this respect, demographic contiguity is only one element among many that can be drawn upon in stressing similitude and difference. (140)

In rhetorical terms, identification (and thus identity construction) involves both identification (or what Kenneth Burke calls "consubstantiality") and division (*Rhetoric* 20–21).

Identity as Symbolic. British anthropologist Anthony Cohen speaks of "the essentially symbolic" nature of collective identity: symbolic not because collectivities such as communities, nations or congregations are less than real but because they coalesce around symbols. Symbols, however, Cohen argues, "do not so much express meaning" or tell us what to mean as "give us the capacity to **make** meaning" (15, my emphasis).

Collectivities share symbols, but they do not necessarily share their meanings. "The quintessential referent of community," Cohen suggests, is that its members make, or believe they make, a similar sense of things generally or with respect to specific and significant interests, and, further, that they think that that sense differs from one made elsewhere. The reality of community in people's experience thus inheres in their attachment or commitment to a common body of symbols . . . But it must again be emphasized that the sharing of symbol is not necessarily the same as the sharing of meaning (16).

Constructing Collective Identities: Poland, America, and Their Others

Our social world is permeated with a wide variety of collective identities, including various forms of voluntary, semi-voluntary, and even involuntary association and affiliation:

- "real" states accorded broad diplomatic recognition (Denmark, Poland, the U.S.);
- generally recognized nationalities without a state (Tamils, Navajos);
- self-recognized nationalities without a state: dislocated communities (Abkhazians, Chechens, Palestinians);
- cultural/historic communities without a state (Silesians);
- ideological communities or movements (political, religious) (Mormons, Islamists);
- alternative communities (Jonestown; Branch Davidians; certain self-contained Mormon communities);
- semi-virtual communities, based on some actually existing elements of nation- or community-building (half-submerged islands, vanished civilizations);

- virtual communities, also called micronations, microstates, imaginary countries, countercountries, nationnettes, or ephemeral nations, nations that do not have "real" geo-political existence in terms of widespread diplomatic recognition (i.e. the Republic of Talossa).

All of these identities are fundamentally "imagined" historical constructions, that is, they are constituted through diverse symbolic material and vested in particular interpretations of a range of phenomena. Collective identities may also shift in status, as when Poland, throughout its history, repeatedly ceased to exist as a recognized political entity, yet continued to exist in the minds of people who considered themselves "Poles." These diverse and historically fluid forms of association define human sociality; they also play a central role in the constitution of our own "individual" identities.

If one examines the websites, one modern medium of expression of collective identities, of such diverse "congregations" – for instance, http://www.denmark.dk/en as an example of a "real" nation/state, http://www.palestine-info.co.uk/ of a generally recognized nation without a state, http://www.abkhazia.org/home.html of a self-recognized nation without a state, or http://www.kingdomoftalossa.net/index.cgi or http://www.talossa.com/ of a virtual state – one may begin to recognize some recurring elements of collective identity construction:

- ruler (president, ruling family, monarch, leader, god or deity);
- government (type of government, ideology, political scene);
- constitution or other foundational document (code of basic laws, holy text);
- symbols (logos, coats of arms, flags, anthems, songs, monuments);

- heroes;
- religion (faith, moral principle);
- texts (legends, sacred texts, ideological manifestos);
- geography (land, environment, landmarks, sacred places, monuments, climate, weather);
- history (often a defining or originating event: holocaust, martyrdom, persecution, miracle, migration, aggression, as well as watershed events, achievements);
- culture (music, literature, performance, spectacles, festivals, holidays, games, sports);
- language (lexicon, terminology, script);
- population and citizenship (who are "we");
- others (relations with others, foreign affairs, foreign policy, neighbors, friends and enemies), and so on.

The ordering and distribution of these elements, their relative importance and their specific content vary widely.

Not all of these elements, however, are "constitutive" of collective identity. A list such as the above mixes different sorts of elements: symbols, tokens, signs, and others. An expensive house is a token of wealth; a particular sort of hat or behavioral trait may be a sign of belonging to a specific community; a flag is a symbol of collective identity. Much of the literature on collective identity focuses on such elements and examines the diverse ways people construct identities. I am interested, however, in the underlying, more general rhetorical mechanisms of collective identity; we know that politicians, for instance, continually construct or reinforce collective identities in their speeches, but how do they do that and what do those ways have to do with the other myriad elements through which people construct various "congregations"? What I am after is some broader principles, constitutive principles and analytical categories that would allow us to identify the mechanisms of collective identity construction in particular cases.