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Where is America? Elsewhere Realities and the American Dream

Adrienne Kalfopoulou

The perception of real affinities between events (that is to say, of ideal affinities, for those only are real), enables the poet thus to make free with the most imposing forms and phenomena of the world, and to assert the predominance of the soul.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"

From America's Puritan beginnings, typological definitions of reality, of the "real affinities between events" have made unique freedom of what Emerson names those "most imposing forms of the world" (45-6). Individual experience, in rhetoric and imagination, has historically privileged itself by affirming an elsewhere ideal. Private grace is sanctioned in a Puritan discourse of prophetic hope, public works are elsewhere translated into redemptive acts. The Puritan vision, Sacvan Bercovitch has shown, "fed on *the distance* between promise and fact" (23, emphasis added). According to the nation's deepest founding mythologies, the wager of faith has always simulated the real in respect to "the realm of the ideal" (Bercovitch 30).

This paper explores the ideological investment in America's continuous beginning at the beginning of its effort to actualize a cultural identity; I will use the nation's Puritan myth of origins as the ongoing cultural discourse which feeds an obsession with what Jean Baudrillard calls America's "achieved utopian ideal" (*America* 28), the consequence of its privileged notion of what constitutes the real. In Baudrillard's flamboyantly provocative view, America becomes a Disneyland fable of displacement and hyper-reality which perpetuates a cultural game of denial and deferment.

When Baudrillard suggests the impossibility of "rediscovering an absolute level of the real" (*Simulacra and Simulations* 19) in America's contem-

porary cultural landscape, he unwittingly positions the problem of American identity in relation to its Puritan past: The founding Puritan vision of the “city on the hill,” of America as the New Canaan, becomes a cultural archetype for the terms of American exceptionalism, for the uncontested “ideal affinities” which stand in for, or come to simulate, individual experiences of real events. The denied “divisiveness” (17) Bercovitch argues, of the Puritan understanding of errand gave it its authority. This originating erasure of the contradictions and discrepancies implicit in lived experience transformed the “appearances” of New World realities into a promise of cultural exceptionalism from an “Old World ideal of stasis for a New World vision of the future” (23). In Baudrillard’s words, America thus becomes “spontaneously fictional” (*America* 95); it is “everywhere but here” (*America* 56), a place where myths of cultural origin create concrete simulations of invisible realities.

The infinite displacement of the “absolute real” which Baudrillard discusses in *Simulacra and Simulations* as invested in “the whole edifice of representation” (6) is a particularly problematic issue of collapsed meaning; no longer a promise of representation, signs become mere constructions that articulate their displacement from originating events. The theological beginnings of the new republic, for example, defined notions of invisible grace against a visible wilderness boundary. Reinforced by the distance between the rewards implicit in Emerson’s “ideal affinities” of the soul and those “forms of the world,” the American wilderness is displaced, or replaced, by the self-justifying rhetoric of the American jeremiad.

In his first chapter of *Errand into the Wilderness* Perry Miller tells us that like the Reverend Samuel Danforth before him, “a basic conditioning factor” of his discovery of the uniqueness of American identity came out of “the frontier – the wilderness” (1). In both Danforth and Miller’s visions it is not the wilderness reality as such, not the “absolute” reality of it, but the wilderness “as metaphor” (1) which inspires “some deeper configuration” beyond the “obvious and natural necessity” of speaking of it as a site of difference. The wilderness of the American continent for Danforth is the jungle of the African continent for Miller; real landscapes are disclaimed to privilege the metaphorical terms that reinforce specific, culturally invested views of American centrality. Miller tells us, “a society dispatched upon an errand that is its own reward would want no other rewards, it could go forth to possess a land without ever being possessed by it” (6).

Miller locates the process of Americanization at a moment of crisis in Puritan history, in the 17th century, when the theocracy’s conception of di-

vine mission was challenged by the demands of survival in the American wilderness.¹ Endangered of “being possessed by” the consequences of wars with the Indians and other New World realities, the early colonists were faced with the necessity of reaffirming a dominant belief in their sense of errand. “[The Puritan’s] greatest difficulty”, Miller explains “would not be the stones, storms, and Indians, but the problem of identity” (15). The anxiety of how to reaffirm this sense of mission is clearest in Miller’s reading of Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*. Mather writes of “the Wonders of the Christian Religion, flying from the Depravations of Europe, to the American Strand” (15); his rhetoric of “bewilderment, confusion, chagrin” in regard to late 17th century examples of “the declension of the children” unable to live up to the vision and faith of “their mighty progenitors” gives way, Miller stresses, to the fact that “there is no surrender” in Mather’s vision of promise, there is always “something with a purpose and an intention *sufficient unto itself*” (15, emphasis added). This impassioned assertion of American cultural identity in the midst of practical hardship reasserts the authority of the Puritan errand against those “forms and phenomena of the [New] world” (Emerson 46) and enacts Bercovitch’s definition of America as “a vision that works in spirit because it can never be tested in fact” (xiv).

In archetypal narrative sequence, Miller in the 1920s reenacts the paradigm of constructing a representative American self by simulating the notion of “beginning at the beginning” (viii), of empowering a “strategy of deterrence” (*Simulacra and Simulations* 7). In Miller’s case, the “real” African site of his epiphany remains a shadowed backdrop which never becomes real enough to contest the ideological terms of his narrative of American selfhood. Miller’s story of Puritan origins and Americanization “deters” or distracts from the originating African site, or real event where this experience is taking place.

In “Left Alone with America,” Amy Kaplan’s introduction to *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, the colluding terms of the American ideological obsession with maintaining a coherent cultural self image is foregrounded.

¹ Perry Miller cites the various stages of adaptation to the American wilderness environment by the Puritan settlers and how reiterations of Biblical ordinances served to keep the settlers focused on “works of necessity [rather than] excitement” such as land speculation “making money, haunting taverns, or committing fornication.” The initial, founding vision of a society “despatched upon an errand” became the overriding rhetoric of the Puritan jeremiad. If any settler were to dissent from “a society so dedicated to a holy cause,” God, John Winthrop warned, would express his divine wrath in “crop failures, epidemics, grasshoppers, caterpillars, torrid summers, arctic winter, Indian wars, hurricanes, shipwrecks, accidents [. . .]” as proof of “how abysmally they had deserted the covenant.” (Miller 6-9).

She argues Miller's basic dismissal of Africa, like Danforth's use of the American wilderness as a metaphor, as a distancing of the threat of an alternative narrative, one which would contest the values in the "real" story of America's discovery of itself. Kaplan calls the site of Africa "the enabling condition that shapes [Miller's] paradigm," the ignored reality that makes possible the archetype's construction. Africa, she clarifies, "figures as distance itself, a foil or shadow for the Puritan 'city on the hill'" (5). This brings us back to Bercovitch's understanding of the jeremiad as a litany which fed itself on "the distance between promise and fact," to Baudrillard's evocation of a hyperreality in which America creates itself as a utopia "which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved" (*America* 28).

It is the quintessential *fiction* of American culture, its evolved simulation of any reality which allows it to accommodate "the eternal birth of the simulacrum" (*America* 41) because "space there is the very form of thought" (*America* 16). In tracing the terms of this disappearing act, when space, metaphorical or otherwise, appropriates the fact of the sign, we see, as Kaplan demonstrates, that experiences of imperialism such as that of the Belgian Congo which defined Miller's Africa, are ignored in his "realization of the uniqueness of the American experience" (ix). Competing cultural realities, "those repressed alternatives" (Kaplan 4) to the narrative of Puritan origins, are omitted in the uneasily silenced setting of Miller's story of cultural affirmation. On the banks of the colonized Belgian Congo where American history is implicated in slavery, Miller's intellectual self-discovery presents itself as problematically exempt from its surrounding histories. Or, perhaps, this is the factual evidence of Baudrillard's definition of the simulated real, that America, by definition, creates itself elsewhere. If Africa, in Kaplan's words becomes "the repository" (4) for alternative narratives to the culture's fundamental myth of origins, the myth itself conceals the colluding terms of its construction.

Miller's conformity to the ideological standards of his achieved vision, his stated goal to explore "a body of Protestant doctrine [. . .] *on its own terms*" (ix, emphasis added) demonstrates the cultural construction of a first world dominant white national identity that silences "the historical referents" (Kaplan 8) of its position. In his supervision of "the unloading of drums of case oil" Miller strikingly conflates Danforth's American wilderness with the African jungle which, even syntactically, blurs the boundaries between the two:

It was given to me, equally disconsolate on the edge of a jungle of central Africa, to have thrust upon me the mission of expounding what I took to be the innermost propulsion of the United States, while supervising, in that barbaric tropic, the unloading of drums of case oil flowing out of the inexhaustible wilderness of America. (viii)

While deliberately reconstructing the “tangible symbols of the [American] republic’s appalling power” (ix), Miller ignores the historical displacement which constructs his fiction of origins. He speaks of democracy, borrowing the term from Danforth, at a colonized site of oppressed peoples. Kaplan makes the further point that the rhetoric he uses “foregrounds the ways an imperial unconscious of national identity” is simultaneously “formative and disavowed” (5) to maintain the fictive “seamlessness” of cultural hegemony: it is on “*the edge of a jungle of Central Africa*” where Miller has been given “*the mission of expounding*” what he takes to be “*the innermost* propulsion of the United States” while supervising in that “*barbaric tropic*, the unloading of drums of oil flowing out of the *inexhaustible* wilderness of America” (viii, emphasis added). Paradigmatically, “*the vision demanded [. . .]*” he notes, “*that I begin at the beginning*” (viii, emphasis added). Miller rhetorically obviates the conflicted “divisiveness” of his carefully constructed paradigm of national identity and the realities which would dismantle his “rejuvenated” (Kaplan 9) sense of mission; he returns to “*the security of graduate school*” with renewed purpose and vision: He confesses, “*it seemed obvious that I had to commence with the Puritan migration [. . .] what I wanted was a coherence with which I could coherently begin*” (viii, emphasis added). Africa is left far behind, necessarily distanced to accommodate or “enable” the simulated coherence of a dominant narrative. In this way, “*the meaning of America*” remains representative, a fictive democracy of values which propagate dominant views of white cultural hegemony.

If Baudrillard’s level of the “absolute real” is impossible to isolate apart from its simulation, apart from “the process of the real” as an achieved site of cultural meaning, then, “no equivalence with the real is possible, and hence no repression either” (*Simulacra and Simulations* 21). The crime becomes a vision of canceled out differences, an equivalence, like Miller’s narrative of origins, which upholds a notion of meaning or ideology of law *only because* it simulates meaning.

In *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970), Philip Slater’s impassioned indictment of American evasiveness, Slater questions the motivation for American involvement in the Vietnam war and demonstrates how the Vietnamese jungle reality, like Miller’s Africa, disappears into the hyperreality of a distance

which, again, cancels out difference.² In a section titled “Violence as Distance” Slater calls attention to a “vocabulary of self-deception” (38) which undermined, or rhetorically erased, the actual massacres by the physical distances from which they were enacted. “American bomber pilots in Vietnam expressed a “joy of killing” (52) with “merry euphemisms like ‘hosing’ and ‘barbecuing’” because “dropping bombs from 40,000 feet” (44) insured “the ‘enemy’ is distant and impersonal” (52). The literal distance between the bombers and their victims also expressed an ideological distance made possible by the physical:

Flying in a plane far above an impersonally defined target and pressing some buttons to turn fifty square miles into a sea of flame is less traumatic to the average middle-class American than inflicting a superficial bayonet wound on a single soldier [. . .] He cannot see the women and children being horribly burned to death – they have no meaning to him. Violence-at-a-distance, then, was popular just because it was so easy [. . .]. (46)

The rhetoric used to describe the Vietnam killings as “saturation” or “carpet” raids create the collapse of the real within an imaginary space (*Simulacra and Simulations* 21) in which the actual dead are erased and the sign or self-image produced empowers its own reflection. As Slater puts it, “included in our country-bumpkin self-image is the notion that we always came into foreign conflicts against our will, seduced by our peaceful pursuits” (38). Turning his back on a colonized Africa, Perry Miller speaks of himself as “a boy” invigorated by the challenge of reaffirming a sense of national identity as much as the bomber pilot in Vietnam might see himself as necessarily implicated in acts of violence to insure pacification.

Baudrillard makes the acid observation that in this context of entangled orders of signification, when the sign can no longer promise “the depth of meaning,” when it can no longer be trusted to be *exchanged* for meaning (*Simulacra and Simulations* 6), we are introduced to a third order simulation of hyperreality, a time of a proliferation “of myths of origin and signs of reality – a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity” (6-7), when the distance between the dream and the fact of fulfillment is fully col-

² In a general castigation of how the culture of the 60s tended to escape, evade, and avoid responsibility for the “unwanted complexities” of its social problems, Slater coins the phrase “the toilet assumption” to describe a cultural tendency to remove “the underlying problems of our society farther and farther from daily experience and daily consciousness.” Slater then uses the Vietnam war as a case in point of “our spontaneous reaction to try somehow to bomb [the problem] away or flush it down the jail” (19-20).

lapsed. Reality is now the achieved utopia of Disneyland, the perfect “deterrence machine,” constructed “to hide that it [Disneyland] is the ‘real’ country” (*Simulacra and Simulations* 12). Like Disneyland, the idea of America conceals the fact that reality has privileged itself elsewhere, where “unhappiness does not exist, the poor are no longer credible [...] the massacre of the Indians did not happen, Vietnam did not happen” (*America* 111); it is a space of hieroglyphic events that simulate Emerson’s “most imposing forms of the world.”

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