American Studies and the Romance with America: Approaching America through Its Ideals*

I. American Studies at a Moment of Disenchantment

The history of the field of American Studies can be summarized in two brief sentences: The field was constituted by a romance with America, with the myths and symbols of American exceptionalism, which were then, in a second stage, submitted to ever more radical forms of disenchantment. It is tempting to attribute this disenchantment to the administration of George W. Bush. However, the disenchantment with "America," as the shorthand term we still use for the United States, began already at a much earlier stage, namely with the revisionist scholarship of the 1970s and the following decades in which the founding myths of the U.S., such as, for example, the idea of the frontier and its regenerative potential for American society, were radically reexamined, and canonized intellectual traditions such as the *American Renaissance* or the rhetoric of American exceptionalism were deconstructed. As I try to show in an essay on "Theories of American Culture," reprinted in this volume, the history of the field over the last thirty to forty years can be conceptualized as a constant radicalization of this revisionist critique of traditional narratives about America and, linked with it, as the ever more elusive search for an alternative oppositional perspective. In this search, the transnational agenda which is presently considered the cutting edge of the field, is merely the latest installment in an attempt to escape from the field's initial romance with America. Thus, we should not narrow down the issue of disenchantment to our disaffection with the Bush administration, especially at a time when anything that has George Bush's name attached to it evokes a negative response. Administrations come and go and whoever bases his criticism on the moral outrage over recent policies will now find himself in the embarrassing situation of having to readjust his analysis to an America represented by Barack Obama.

On the other hand, we cannot dispense with a reflection on the premises about America on which our scholarly work is based. We cannot dispense

---

* This essay is based on a keynote lecture delivered in Oslo at the 2008 Biannual Convention of the European Association of American Studies.

with it because, hermeneutically speaking, we cannot first collect data and then interpret them; instead, we are always already – and inevitably – guided in our selection and interpretation of data by prior assumptions about the object of study. In this respect, all attempts in the field of American Studies to renew itself by methodological rigor, by increased interdisciplinarity or by transnational perspectives can be self-deceptive. Methodological concepts such as transnational or interdisciplinary remain empty boxes as long as we have not clarified to what purpose and in the context of what premises this particular perspective or approach is employed. This is, in fact, one of the reasons why the tradition of critical theory developed by European American Studies over the last decades provides an important basis and starting point for a more independent approach to the field. As I have written in my response to Emory Elliott's Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, if the internationalization of American Studies is to be more than lip service or, worse, a mimicry of the latest U.S.-American agenda, then it must surely mean that we accept the challenge (and have the courage) to develop an independent perspective of our own (Fluck, "Inside" 25).[1]

II. A Short Libidinal History of American Studies

In the context of such a project, the reference to the romance in my title is more than a flowery metaphor. Ever since the historical novel or, more precisely, the historical romances written by Walter Scott, we have become aware of the close connection between romance and national self-definition. To speak of the romance implies, among other things, a search for something that stands for the highest and purest ideals and that is, at the same time, never quite attainable, so that it will constantly refuel our desire. To say, then, that the field of American Studies has long been grounded in a romance with America means that it was motivated by a search for, and a projection of, certain ideals – so much so in fact, that American Studies in post-War Germany, for example, could become a medium for the formulation of such ideals, in the political and civic realm as much as in contemporary culture. In the political and social sciences, these ideals were mostly civic ideals like democracy, multicultural citizenship or civil disobedience. America provided the rhetoric to idealize democracy as government of the people by the people for the people – an editorialist of the Berlin newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* recently praised the American system of primaries an "olympics of democracy." In literary and Cultural Studies, one may think of cultural ideals like

1 Liam Kennedy offers an admirably diplomatic description of the self-provincialization of European American Studies: "For much of the last 50 years, European Americanists have tended to write as though part of a transatlantic intellectual class and in so doing have not questioned but lent support to the authority of US-centred knowledge based in American institutions and publishers" (144).

anti-authoritarianism, informality, pragmatism, experimentalism, youthfulness or, more recently, diversity. Such ideals still dominate the perception of the U.S. Even where the United States is bitterly criticized for the gulf between its ideals and its practice, this is usually done in the name of American ideals and their betrayal. In other words: Even the critical analysis of the U.S. is based on its ideals, and, therefore, functions somewhat paradoxically as an affirmation of the idea of America.

The scholar who has been most influential in analyzing this ritual of consensus is Sacvan Bercovitch. Even in the most bitter criticism of 'America,' he argues, the idea of America is not only reaffirmed, but undergoes a kind of rebirth because it reemerges in regenerated form. No matter whether you praise it or criticize it: 'America' as an idea and ideal cannot lose. Or, as Bercovitch puts it in his analysis of the Puritan jeremiad: "But Danforth's sermon shows how this kind of opposition may serve to revitalize society, since the very standards by which society is found wanting are the standards by which the culture continues to justify itself." (Bercovitch, "New England" 99) This is what I am aiming at with my title reference to "the romance with America:" a view and an analysis of the United States based on utopian promises of the idea of America. Whether this results in a critique or in an affirmation or even celebration of the American dream, is of a secondary nature in the context of this argument. No matter what outrage may be caused by recent events, the romance with America stays intact.

Romance also seems a fitting term for my purpose, because it draws attention to the fact that, no matter what our theoretical conviction or methodological principles may be, we cannot help but organize our knowledge about America in narrative form, so that theories of American history or theories of American culture come to us as narratives about America.[2] In effect, it could be tempting in the context of this discussion to rewrite the history of the field of American Studies as a history of a number of different romances that have dominated the field at various times. Such a history would have to start with American founding myths like the success story, the frontier myth or the melting pot that can all be seen as versions of the romance because they all tell stories – often in fairy tale fashion, as many ideological critics have noted – of an almost miraculous transformation of the self. They all provide modernized versions of the *ur*-form of fiction, the triumphant recognition of an individual that distinguishes him- or herself from the mass of others by undergoing a radical rebirth. The frontier myth became so popular because it generated stories of adventure that transplanted, as Owen Wister was the first to point out, the narrative core of the knightly adventure romance, the

2 Inevitably, such narratives also imply a political dimension, although, as a rule, politicians do not want to acknowledge that their legitimation is based on narratives. Cf. Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson: "Narrative is, first of all, the stuff that too often gets left out of politics" (14).

progress into unknown, dangerous territory, to modern America. The success story presents a modernized version of the triumphant hero of adventure who has successfully asserted himself in the struggle with others and therefore deserves to be singled out from the mass of others. Finally, the metaphor of the melting pot provided yet another promise of rebirth for those leaving home to venture into the unknown. These American founding myths are almost pure versions of the romance, linked by the common denominator that in all of them the common man can move into the hero position. This can be called the romance of social rebirth. To be sure, the myth and symbol critics, contrary to their later image as ideologues of American exceptionalism, criticized American culture for its superficial, self-congratulatory indulgence in such myths, but they nevertheless insisted on the corrective power of American Renaissance writers saying "No! In Thunder" in order to give these ideals depth and maturity, pretty much in the way in which Bercovitch has described the working of the American ritual of consensus.

A second romance in the field was that of American popular culture, which, in American Studies, turned out to be especially attractive outside the U.S. as expression of defiant subcultural values like anti-authoritarianism, informality, immediate corporeal experience, or instant gratification. We might call this the outlaw-and-defiance romance. A third romance, also especially popular in Europe, was that of Southern culture seen as a culture of tragic existential dimensions and thus as an antidote to a shallow American materialism. We might call this the tragic-nobility-romance. A fourth chapter in this libidinal history of the field would have to deal with American modernism and postmodernism, or, more generally speaking, with a pragmatic experimentalism in American culture, in which the modernity of American life, unhampered by European traditions, promises constant renewal – and thus liberation from being trapped in a bourgeois identity. This is the romance of an America in which individual freedom and creativity go together effortlessly. And finally, yet another chapter in this history of our romance with America would have to be the popular myth of a democratic culture which can be re-described as a romance of the common man in which everybody has the same innate creative potential. This is the romance of transcendentalism and pragmatism, of Emerson, Whitman, Twain, and Dewey, and their project of overcoming the separation between art and life, so that culture can become the source and vital center of a democratic identity that is finally liberated from the cultural baggage of European class societies and its corrupt and corrupting linkage of art and social status.[3]

3 On the ongoing attempts in American culture to overcome the separation between life and art, see my essay "The Search for an 'Artless Art': Aesthetics and American Culture," reprinted in this volume.

III. Libidinal Recharge: Diversity

Many of these romances have by now been relentlessly criticized by several waves of revisionist scholars as unwitting accomplices of an American ideology in which, as the New Americanists would put it, Emersonian visions of self-empowerment obscure the reality of an interpellation by the American nation-state. From this perspective, there is really only one approach left that promises to escape the iron grip of American exceptionalism and its myth of a unique national identity, namely the multicultural idea of diversity. At first sight, replacing the idea of the melting pot by that of diversity may appear as a move from myth to reality; yet, what it actually does is to replace one utopian promise by another. The United States has always had astonishing powers of assimilation, but it was never a melting pot; just as, on the other hand, the United States is characterized by amazing diversity, and yet, diversity does not shape the American system in crucial political and cultural aspects (such as, for example, state power, the military-industrial complex, corporations, money, or the media).

In this context, it is important to realize that the concept of diversity in American Studies refers to more than the liberal idea of pluralism or demographic plurality. As a critical concept, diversity has become a counter-term to the prison-house of a monolithic national identity. It is designed to undermine the ideological hold of the idea of America and this hold can only be subverted by non-identity. Difference is thus of interest only if it constitutes genuine otherness.[4] Recent trends in U.S. American Studies – most notably animal studies, disability studies, and transnational studies – all provide logical extensions of this idea of diversity and its claims for a full recognition of otherness. Diversity is thus also the key for understanding the recent turn to transnationality in American literary history. Transnational American Studies is diversity writ large and extended to a potentially global scale – diversity without borders, so to speak.[5] In the history of American Studies, diversity studies replaced ideological criticism of the Bercovitch-type and the new historicism as cutting edge-approaches, because they focus on structures

4 Cf. Alan Wald who points to the profound distinction between the experience of people of color and European ethnic immigrants (1987).

5 See my analysis of Bourne's position in his seminal essay "Trans-National America" in my essay "Theories of American Culture," reprinted in this volume. For a more recent example of this kind of transnationalism, see the ASA Presidential Address of Shelley Fisher Fishkin in which she states: "The United States is and has always been a transnational crossroads of cultures … African, African American, and Eastern European musical traditions met and mixed in the United States to produce jazz, which travelled back to Europe to shape, among other things, a large swath of twentieth-century Czech poetry and the architecture of Le Corbusier. The story of these apparently 'American' phenomena – civil disobedience and jazz – are stories of transnational flow, as is the story of America itself" (Fishkin 43).

of inequality which ideological criticism had overlooked or downgraded. However, they trump ideological criticism not only in critical edge but also in their redefinition of American exceptionalism as a global utopia, thereby bringing the utopian promise of America up to date for modern times. Again, America becomes a pioneer country, but now no longer, as in the case of Randolph Bourne, as a world-federation in miniature but as the country of otherness. The reason for the attractiveness of an imaginary America no longer resides in a traditional view of America as the land of opportunity but in the fact that America has more otherness than, say, Germany.[6]

The imaginary hold of this romance is so powerful that is has dominated American Studies for the last twenty years or even longer. Indeed it is the only romance left after the revisionist critique of the American founding myths. This is the logical outcome of an ever escalating, ever more radical quest for an oppositional or critical perspective on America that has moved from the center to the margins in the assumption that under current conditions of the American nation-state, we can only be liberated from the margins. This oppositional logic has created a romance of the borderlands, that is, of a state in-between, a multicultural utopia of difference, which affirms the right of cultural otherness against the homogenizing pressures of a national identity. From this perspective, unbridgeable difference is the best guarantee to be outside the system, and an identification with the other can thus become an act of moral and personal regeneration. Indeed, diversity fulfills all the needs of a true romance in narrative terms: the adventure of a journey to the borders of civilization, an encounter with an other outside of the oppressive hold of the iron cage of civilization, and, finally, the arrival at a new state of identity through the regenerating encounter with, and acceptance of, difference. Finally, diversity also fits perfectly the American rhetoric of consensus, because you can bend it either way: You can use it to criticize an America that has not made good on its promise of equality, but by doing so, you also link America not only with the promise of equality, but, more importantly, with that of a full and equal recognition of otherness. American cultural diplomacy, by the way, has by now realized the usefulness of diversity for that purpose, as one can presently observe in Berlin (and, I am sure, in many

6 For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see my essay "American Literary History and the Romance with America." Cf. also Paul Bové on this point: "American Studies finally begins to move away from the habit of studying the United States as an exceptional and isolated entity; this means not so much a look at the place and function of the United States in a global order, though, as it does a tendency [sic] to compare U.S. forms of culture to those of other usually national or subnational groupings from Canada to Chile; often there is a special interest in those thought of as subaltern" (217). He continues: "Such ways of thinking and talking belong to the hope that important political resistance and perhaps social 'empowerment' might come from the alignment of academic work of this kind with subaltern groups within the United States and crossing its borders. My hypothesis is that critics cannot fulfill this hope" (219).

other places). In a historical situation in which an automatic equation of ideals such as democracy or freedom with America has become discredited by neoconservative misuse, diversity, it seems, is the only ideal left alive and well for the purposes of public diplomacy.[7] Or, to put it differently: It is the only ideal left strong enough to renew the romance with America.

There is a supreme irony at work here, it seems to me. Think of the many, especially young, scholars all over Europe who focus on minority writers or on the immigrant experience because these promise authentic insights into the construction and performance of oppositional identities outside of the centers of American power, and who think that by doing so, they position themselves as critical observers of the American system. Instead, they continue a tradition of analysis, obviously ingrained in American Studies, in which American society and culture is approached through its ideals and utopian promises. It may be criticized for betraying these ideals; in effect, it is constantly criticized for doing this, but, as we have seen, in the act of criticizing, these ideals remain the hermeneutical premise for understanding America. What radical revisionists in the U.S. do not want to acknowledge – in fact, this may apply to many scholars in Europe as well – is the crucial role ethnicity and minorities have played in redefining and thus reviving American exceptionalism.[8]

IV. Scenes of Disenchantment

But what could be the alternative to approaching the United States primarily through the lens of ideals like democracy, freedom, opportunity, and, by now, diversity? There is the danger here of a mere inversion, a danger that may be fueled by the anger and rage of the disappointed lover who says: I believed in you so long, I trusted you, and now you have revealed your true colors and I realize that I have been fooled all along. The problem of such an inversion lies in merely turning things on their head. If America was the land of freedom before and this claim is revealed to not always be true, then

7 Gordon and Newfield draw attention to the way in which business has also taken up the idea of diversity and turned it into "diversity management:" "Driven by the imperatives of 'global competition' and 'changing demographics,' diversity management arrived on the corporate scene to help business get, in R. Roosevelt Thomas's words, 'beyond race and gender.' Putting a spin on a Taylor-type liberalism of recognition, he argued that the 'recognition of the uniqueness' of all individuals and groups could be a boon and not a hindrance to the corporate mission. Diversity management explicitly dehistoricized culture, race, and gender in order to offer *management* itself as the instrument for organizing differences" (5-7).

8 Fittingly, Liam Kennedy speaks of "the romance or fetishization of the trope of race in European studies of American culture … reproducing an American exceptionalism through the valorization of American culture as sites of marginality, of dissent, of the new and subversive" (144-5).

America becomes the land of oppression or institutionalized hypocrisy, and if there is no agent discernible, then the oppressor must be the nation-state.[9] This, at least, is the narrative the New Americanists have offered us in the last years.

One way to proceed at this point might be to have another look at some of the disenchantments the romance has undergone. As a product of post-War reeducation in Germany, I can think of quite a number of such disenchantments. To stay with just the beginnings of American history: Nobody told me, for example, during my years of study that Winthrop's famous reference to a "city upon a hill" was an isolated rhetorical moment, never used ever again before or after his lay sermon on the Arbella, and that it referred, of course, to the renewal of the Protestant Church, not to that of an American nation. Nobody told me that Crèvecoeur's *Letters of an American Farmer* with its famous question "What is an American?" was hardly more than the pastoral role play of a gentry-farmer with loyalist sympathies, who soon left the land of promise for a position as a French diplomat, and who only returned to the U.S. in order to search for his family, which he had left behind in loyalist panic. Nobody told me, as Gordon Wood has recently done in his book on *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, that the famous and much revered founding father actually tried to become an English courtier for a long period of time – so much so, in fact, that he stayed in England for twenty years and did not even return to America when his wife was dying.

For the past fifty years, American Studies programs at European universities (and, I am sure, many other parts of the world), have faithfully reproduced an exceptionalist American self-image. In this context, certain facts had no place. Nobody volunteered the information to me, in many years of studying in Europe and the U.S., at places like Harvard, Berkeley and Yale, that the author of the Declaration of Independence was a slaveholder throughout his life; in fact, not one of the lesser ones like Franklin, who only had two slaves,

---

9 From a different position, Michael Hardt makes a similar point: "Innumerable hagiographic studies present the founders of the republic, in particular, as the best and brightest, moral exemplars, founts of inexhaustible wisdom. Since the 1970s, however, and increasingly in the last decade, the major streams of scholarly work on the United States have shifted focus away from the center towards groups that have been marginalized, particularly those that have been subordinated based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. The result has been a wonderful flowering of new perspectives on the United States from below, offering a multifaceted and plurivocal panorama. This shift, though, bringing the margins to the center, raises a new question: what to do with what used to be considered the center? … One obvious and logical response is simply to ignore them: they have far too long been the objects of popular and scholarly attention and now it is time to focus on others. A second response is to continue the focus on the center but reverse the polarity. Such studies tend, in general, to repeat the old U.S. exceptionalism in an inverted form. The United States is still viewed as separate and different from the rest of the world but now because of its imperialist, racist and repressive character" (43).

but one of the major slave owners in Virginia, and, despite his proclaimed rejection of the institution of slavery, a hesitant gradualist who always found new reasons to defer any engagement for abolition. The facts are so glaring that even the renowned liberal historian Edmund Morgan, who is certainly unsuspicious of any radical leanings, could not help but say: "If his actions are any evidence, he [Jefferson] placed a higher value on collecting books and drinking good wine than he did on freeing his slaves" (Morgan 60). At the time Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he owned 175 slaves and "while many of his contemporaries freed their slaves during and after the Revolution," (Finkelman 129-30) he did not.[10] In contrast to other slaveholders in Virginia such as Robert Carter, Jefferson never thought of setting his slaves free, and in contrast to someone like George Washington, he set free only 6 slaves out of over 200 in his will, condemning, as Finkelman puts it, "nearly 200 others to the auction block" (129-30).

George Washington, of course, was a slaveholder, too, as were Madison and many other members of the Virginia gentry that led the way in the fight for independence; and so was Andrew Jackson, the great champion of democratization. In fact, a closer look reveals that ten of the pre-Civil War presidents were slave-holders and that, as the historian Leonard Richards has put it, in "the sixty-two years between Washington's election and the Compromise of 1850, for example, slaveholders controlled the presidency for fifty years, the Speaker's chair for forty-one years, and the chairmanship of House, Ways and Means for forty-two years. The only men re-elected president – Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Jackson – were all slaveholders. The men who sat in the Speaker's chair the longest – Henry Clay, Andrew Stevenson, and Nathaniel Macon – were slaveholders. Eighteen out of thirty-one Supreme Court justices were slaveholders" (9).[11]

---

10 In his book *Slavery and the Founders. Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson,* Paul Finkelman has tried to make an educated guess about the number of slaves Jefferson had during his lifetime: "No one has ever made an exact count of all the individual slaves Jefferson owned. At his death he had about 200. During the Revolution he lost over 30, and after the Revolution he sold at least 85. This means he held, over his lifetime, at least 315 different people in bondage. Given births and deaths over the period from 1764, when he came into possession of his slaves, until 1826, it is likely that the total number exceeds 400" (239).

11 On this point, cf. also Adam Rothman: "Slaveowners dominated the national government from the start. President George Washington was one of the country's largest planters. His secretary of state (Jefferson) and attorney general (Edmund Randolph) were also large slaveowning planters from Virginia" (5). Finkelman points out that "John Adams and John Quincy Adams were the only presidents elected before 1836 who had never owned slaves" (116). Given more space, this discussion could – and would have to – be extended to the infamous "Three Fifths Rule" through which slaves were counted as three-fifths of a person for determining the electoral college which elected the president. Gary Wills has recently drawn attention to this compromise, which won the election of 1800 for Jefferson. Quite rightly, Wills asks: "Why

V. Re-Emplotments: Liberal and Radical Narratives About Slavery

What do we make of such cases of disenchantment?[12] The strong role of slavery in the life of the much-cherished Founding Fathers is currently the perhaps most interesting challenge to an exceptionalist rhetoric and a romance with America, because the Founding Fathers, together with Lincoln, seemed to be the only historical figures that had long appeared immune to revisionist revelations. There is at present something like a Founding Father cotton industry in the U.S. that seems to signal a wish to return to seemingly safe sources of American identity in a time of national self-doubt. However, there is also a growing body of literature on the relation between the Founding Fathers and slavery that tries to come to terms with the embarrassing paradox of cherished Founding Fathers who were at the same time unrepentant slaveholders. If "slavery is a story about America, all of America" (Farrow xxix), what does this mean for our perception and explanations of America? A recent review of two revisionist studies by Gordon Wood in the *New York Review of Books* under the title "Reading the Founders' Minds" reflects the difficulties of reconciling newly recovered facts with prior narratives about

is the impact of the federal ratio so little known? The first reaction of many people when told about its role in Jefferson's election is to ask why they never heard of it before" (5). For the role of the constitution in solidifying the system of slavery, see Rothman: "Thus, the federal Constitution protected slavery without ever using the word. The three-fifths clause (Article 1, Section 2) gave an advantage in the House of Representatives to states with large slave populations. The slave-trade clause (Article 1, Section 9) prevented the national government from prohibiting the importation of slaves for twenty years. And the fugitive clause (Article 4, Section 2) prevented runaway slaves from finding any legal refuge in 'free states'" (4). Finkelman concludes: "As I argue in Chapter 1, slavery permeated the debates of 1787 and, in the end, the slave owners got substantially what they wanted: a Constitution that protected slavery" (x).

12 One further aspect has to be emphasized in the context of this discussion, namely the complicity of the North with the institution of slavery. The subtitle of the study *Complicity* by Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jennifer Frank already points to the basic fact: *How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery.* The preface and introduction contain some powerful examples of the discourse of disenchantment: "The year before the American Revolution, more than 5000 Africans were enslaved in Connecticut. Though there were certainly fewer slaves proportionately than in Virginia or South Carolina, the number shocked us. How could we not know this? How could we not know, for example, that in 1790 most prosperous merchants in Connecticut owned at least one slave, as did 50 percent of the ministers? The federal census clearly showed this" (xviii). "While it may seem incredible that the depth of the North's role in slavery is largely unknown to the general public, only since the civil rights movement have many historians themselves begun to recognize how central slavery was to our history." (xxvi). "Slavery has long been identified in the national consciousness as a Southern institution. The time to bury that myth is overdue. Slavery is a story about America, all of America. The nation's wealth, from the very beginning, depended upon the exploitation of black people on three continents" (xxix).

America. Wood wrote two by now classical studies on the revolutionary period in which slavery played no significant role. However, as his review demonstrates, the issue can no longer be ignored. Wood has to face it, and he has to come to terms with the disenchantment connected with it. His answer provides an interesting illustration of the options remaining for a re-emplotment of America. Indeed, the case is exemplary of the current struggle over the re-emplotment of America.

As Wood notices in the opening paragraph of his review, many historians today want "to place slavery at the heart of America's origins," while Wood wants to put back idealism at the center. His major critique of the new revisionist studies is that they have "no place for idealism" (66).[13] Hence, the challenge emerges how idealism can be put back into the story of the Early Republic and, by implication, that of America. Clearly, this can no longer be done in the form of romance. Wood's solution is the replacement of romance by tragedy. Founders who were motivated primarily by idealism, and, actually "condemned slavery as inconsistent with everything the Revolution was about," but gave priority to protecting the achievements of the Revolution (which would then eventually also take care of slavery), could not foresee future developments. As Wood puts it in his recent book *Revolutionary Characters. What Made the Founders Different*: "The reason the founders so readily took the issue of slavery off the table in the 1790s was this mistaken faith in the future" in which the slavery issue would take care of itself (27). That is their tragedy.[14] Tragedy is, by definition, an affirmation of ideals even in view of their defeat, one might even say, especially in the light of their defeat. It is fascinating to see how even in acknowledging the betrayal of the ideal, a way can still be found to reaffirm it.

Liberal romancers like Gordon Wood want to see slavery as a tragic mistake. Cultural radicals, on the other hand, insist that slavery stands at the center of American society and history. For them, slavery highlights the truth about an America in which that which is considered the exception by liberals is actually the rule. The terms for this narrative about America are Walter

13 In a recent collection of essays by Wood, *The Purpose of the Past. Reflections on the Uses of History,* his review article was reprinted under the title "Presentism in History." The new title already indicates that Wood now wants to resort to a familiar line of defense: to make slavery an issue for judging the founders is to project present-day concerns onto the past. It never seems to have occurred to him that his own response, insisting on the idealism of the Founders, also reflects a strong investment in current debates about the meaning of America which guides his own argument and makes him interpret certain facts in ways that are by no means self-evident. In this sense, his own approach is equally "presentist."

14 What Wood ignores completely at this point of his argument is that, quite in contrast to his "unfortunate delay"-explanation, "it cannot be denied that slavery expanded in the United States for fifty years following the American Revolution" so that "the question is not merely why the revolutionary generation did not abolish slavery, but why slavery expanded under its watch" (Rothman ix).

Benjamin's state of emergency or Giorgio Agamben's state of exception.[15] The state of exception places the subject in a position in which it nominally belongs to the legal order, only by being excluded from it in the use of civil rights. Donald Pease illustrates the point by the case of the Trinidadian critic C.L.R. James who, in 1952, was accused of leftist political activities and was deported to Ellis Island: "Rather than categorizing him under any of the legal positions – resident alien, national subject, prospective citizen – through which colonial immigrants were empowered to exercise their rights and liberties, the state's dis-interpellation rendered James subject to the force of the law but deprived of the rights and privileges of a legal human subject. Having been stripped of every social and political prerogative, James was reduced to the status of unprotected flesh" (24). This seems like a fitting description of certain politics of the Bush administration, but it would seem to be limited as a concept for the analysis of other stages of American history for precisely that reason. However, a link can be established via slavery which, in drawing on a concept by the sociologist Orlando Patterson, is described as a form of social death.[16] Thus, Pease argues, upon "removing the conditions of social belonging and political agency from James and his fellow detainees on Ellis Island, the state catastrophically transformed Ellis Island into a scene of generalized social death" (24). The state of exception called slavery that stands at the beginning of America and the contemporary state of exception are thus linked in traumatic continuity. The romance with America, it seems, is replaced by a narrative of perpetual trauma.

One of the basic premises of this argument, in effect, of almost all approaches within cultural radicalism, is the assumption that under conditions of modern governance, power has become indirect and manifests itself primarily through the formation of identity by way of interpellation. How, then, can we ever hope to escape such identity ascription? The answer can only lie in forms of dis-interpellation or dis-identification by which the imaginary hold of the subject-position is being ruptured. Many debates in current critical and cultural theory are focusing on the question under what conditions dis-interpellation and dis-identification are still possible.[17] The most

15 In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin writes: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight" (397). Agamben has applied Benjamin and Carl Schmitt to present day times: "President Bush's decision to refer to himself constantly as the 'Commander in Chief of the Army' after September 11, 2001, must be considered in the context of this presidential claim to sovereign powers in emergency situations. If, as we have seen, the assumption of this title entails a direct reference to the state of exception, then Bush is attempting to produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible" (22).

16 See Orlando Patterson's influential book *Slavery and Social Death*.

17 Judith Butler, for example, writes: "Although the political discourses that mobilize

frequently found answer, predominant in race and gender studies, is based on the figure of the margin. As I have written in a different context, at one point "American literary history began to put all hopes for decentering the idea of America on marginalized groups and ethnic subcultures, until the critique of essentialism problematized an automatic equation of disenfranchised minority groups with resistance and left only the idea of a negating potential of flexible, multiple identities" (Fluck, "American Literary History" 6). Essentialism was replaced by the figure of in-betweenness that can be found in border theory, postcolonial studies and now also in transnational studies. If signification is kept in flux, for example by hybridization, this heterogeneization of subject-positions will undermine a fixed, unified identity. However, as we have seen, this diversity-model can also easily become part of the romance with America. By contrast, the terms dis-interpellation or disidentification aim at much more decisive and radical forms of rupture with an imaginary identification.

The crucial difference between the two concepts of in-betweenness is that one is the result of cultural hybridization taking place on the level of signification, and the other one of a particular subject-position "in-between" – no longer described, however, in terms of the center-margin opposition but from the perspective of the state of exception. Again, the case can be illustrated by C.L.R. James: "After the state pronounced him a security threat, James underwent a drastic change in juridical status that might be described as dis-interpellation" (Pease 24). The force of James's critical study of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, entitled *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In,* which James wrote on Ellis Island, derives from this experience of dis-interpellation, which made him discover new, unwritten subject positions "in-between" also in connection with *Moby-Dick*. "In adding accounts of the knowledges produced by mariners and renegades on Ellis Island at the conclusion of his interpretation of Melville, James imagined a different ending for the crew on board the *Pequod*" and thus transformed the ending of *Moby-Dick* into a heroic narrative which could no longer be integrated within a Cold War narrative "that set Ahab's totalitarianism into opposition to Ishmael's liberal democracy. Their stories mounted forces of resistance to both of the superpowers comprising this bipolar apportionment of the planet" (Pease 31). Any possible romance with America is effectively deconstructed here. But another narrative emerges, a newly revitalized heroic narrative based on the defiance of the outsider who resists "the mounted" forces of superpowers. In the final analysis, the

identity categories tend to cultivate identification in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of disidentification is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation" (*Bodies that Matter* 4). The term dis-identification was introduced by Foucault, whereas dis-interpellation refers to Althusser's concept of identity formation by hailing or interpellation. In practical use, the two terms are often used interchangeably.

state of exception has created the man of exception, the dis-interpellated man "in-between." By creating a new outsider figure in a series of argumentative steps in which slavery is used to show a continuity of the state of exception, Pease has successfully revived one of the most cherished American myths by going beyond America and uniting the outsiders of the world in a new transnational romance: "James thereby directly linked these alternative forms of literary production to the international social movements whose imperatives they corroborated" (31-32). Whereas the liberal re-emplotment of America is forced by slavery to switch to a tragic mode, the radical re-emplotment revives the romance pattern by reconceptualizing it transnationally.

VI. One More Profane Nation?

In recent contributions to the *Herald Tribune,* Ann-Marie Slaughter, dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton, has deplored the neo-conservative turn in American politics. One of her articles is entitled "Say it, America: This is not who we are" and a second one proposes, already in its title, what can be done about this national identity crisis, namely "Reviving America's Ideals."[18] This article provoked an interesting exchange of opinions in which I find a response by David Rieff especially interesting. What if, Rieff says in response to Slaughter's call for a return to American ideals, "what if it's not true that there is an admirable, essential core of American values from which we have strayed and to which we could return? What if the United States is a country like all others, neither superior nor inferior in its values and whose most important leaders have been a morally mixed bag?" Or, as Sacvan Bercovitch puts it in an essay on "The Rites of Assent:" "Who knows, the errand may come to rest, where it always belonged, in the realm of the imagination; and the United States recognized for what it is, not a beacon of mankind, as Winthrop proclaimed in his Arbella address of 1630, not the political Messiah, as the young Melville hymned in *White Jacket* – … but simply … just one more profane nation" (35).[19]

18 See also Slaughter's book *The Idea That Is America. Keeping Faith with Our Values in a Dangerous World*, and Michael Kazin and Joseph McCartin, who write in the introduction to their book *Americanism*: "In our opinion, the ideals of Americanism deserve not just to endure but to be revived and practiced as the foundation of a new kind of progressive politics. The quality of our democracy, the health of our pluralistic culture, and the role our nation plays in the world all hinge on our ability to recreate Americanism in the years ahead. The national ideology will continue to flourish, whether or not it is embraced by the left. But if progressives – as scholars and citizens – wish to play a significant role in shaping this nation's future, they must learn again how to speak in terms of ideals they share with other Americans" (16).

19 In his study *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson,* Darren Staloff contrasts "Jefferson's visionary legacy" with Hamilton's sober realism: "Americans like to think of their role in the world as uniquely pacific and idealistic. America is a beacon of freedom and

Indeed, what if the American story is not one of ideals which were occasionally betrayed, but the story of an unmediated coexistence of utopian promise and profane reality in which American ideals were never what interpreters have made them out to be, namely constitutive of American society. By this, I do not mean to say that ideals have not consistently played a central role in the process of American self-legitimation, but that there is a large number of central features of American life – e.g. the crucial role of money in politics, a quasi re-feudalization of the social order resulting from a growing gap between rich and poor, a network of secret agencies for national security approaching the status of shadow governments, to name but a few – that exist independently from ideals. Obviously, you can be a fighter for independence and a life-long slaveholder without any of these aspects getting into each other's way.[20] This fact may change our view of Jefferson, the person, but not necessarily of the civil ideals he formulated, because these can have an existence and an impact apart from his person. Thus, in affirming these civil ideals, we can still acknowledge their force and desirability, but that does not mean that they should still be our guiding principles in analyzing American society and culture.[21]

democracy, a light unto the nations. Without doubt, there is some truth in this image. But Hamilton reminds us that this is only part of the picture. … Many of our first hundred years of national history were absorbed with an aggressive and occasionally brutal program of territorial expansion and conquest. Since then our projection of power on a global basis, while often serving the interests of stability and order, has hardly been modest. America is not unique in this regard. … What is unique about America is our obdurate insistence on cloaking our understandable objectives and policies in idealistic Wilsonian rhetoric. … We prefer to see ourselves as uniquely blessed and exceptional, a nation whose might and prosperity are the result of superior virtue, the natural consequence of a unique character, or the blessings of an approving deity. Hamilton forces us to abandon these illusions. His unflinching honesty demands that we recognize that our success is part and parcel of the march of modernity in the western world and our singular embrace of it. We are not exceptional, Hamilton tells us, only more fortunate in our immense resources and lack of traditional cultural and political baggage" (127-8).

20 Of all the recent books on the founding fathers and slavery, Finkelman has described the "normal," everyday activities of the slaveholder Jefferson most compellingly: "As a slave owner, Jefferson was neither sadistic nor vicious. But he bought and sold slaves, punished them, and hunted them down when they escaped. He advised his friends and relatives about purchasing slaves and gave them as gifts. He sold slaves away from their families to punish them and to make examples of them 'in terrorem to others.' Throughout his life he sold large numbers of slaves to raise cash" (Finkelman 134-35). Finkelman concludes: "The history of Jefferson's relationship to slavery is grim and unpleasant. His words are those of a liberty-loving man of the Enlightenment. His deeds are those of a self-indulgent and negrophobic Virginia planter" (160).

21 Clearly, after years of a debasement of many core American ideals, Obama will be able to restore faith in them. In a comment in the *International Herald Tribune,* the British historian Tristram Hunt says about Obama that he "brings the narrative that

I am willing to admit, however, that the project of reconceptualizing the United States not as an exceptionalist, but as a profane nation may not be quite as easy as it sounds. As Liam Kennedy has pointed out, "European Americanists may be said to have found themselves in the paradoxical position Regis Debray satirizes and that every thinking European feels acutely: our passports are from the European Union … but our libidos are made in the USA (Kennedy, "Spectres of Comparison" 144).[22]

We arrive here at an interesting tension which we should openly acknowledge. On the one hand, we need knowledge about the United States because it is a global power and an exemplary modern society which affects our own lives and society decisively. On the other hand, we may be strongly tempted to follow our own imaginary desire and focus on those themes and topics that gratify our hunger for otherness. The one group of scholars can be called realists, the other enthusiasts. Realism undermines enthusiasm, but enthusiasm may be needed for engaging in the work in the first place. Indeed, if America would be conceived of as being merely profane and a morally mixed bag, this might sound pretty boring as a founding premise for a field of study. However, there may yet be hope, for, after all, scholarship and the search for a new form of emplotment can also be regarded as an adventure worth pursuing. Perhaps we do not have to dispense entirely with the romance then, and, hence, the imaginary attractions of our field; perhaps European American Studies will be able to develop a project of which U.S. American Studies does not seem to be capable of at the present time, namely to make the search for a different emplotment of America the new adventure in our field.

---

everyone wants to return to – that America is the land of extraordinary opportunity and possibility, where miracles happen" (Nov 6, 2008, 1). However, one may be happy – as I am – that a better America has reasserted itself and that a barrier of racism has been overcome symbolically, but this is not the same as reinstating the American Dream as guiding perspective for an analysis of the U.S. because such a perspective cannot capture the coexistence of forces I have described.

22 A highly interesting example of how the romance with an "other," compellingly different, American culture affected even the British New Left is provided by Joel Pfister in his book *Critique For What?*, where he lists some of the unconventional, "raw" types of American culture that would attract European New Left intellectuals: "In the late 1950s and early 1960s New Left journals published an obituary in praise of Billy Holiday's 'blood-curdling quality,' a review of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), critiques of avant-garde composer John Cage's alienated aesthetics of 'non-involvement' and of filmmaker Samuel Fuller's evasive 'bourgeois romantic-nationalist consciousness,' analyses of U.S. jazz musicians such as Ornette Coleman, a critique of bluesman John Lee Hooker's preoccupation with 'sexual themes' and of Chuck Berry's rock'n'roll 'glorification of the American way of life'" (63).

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *The State of Exception*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1955. 253-264.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. "New England's Errand Reappraised." *New Directions in American Intellectual History*. Eds. John Higham and Paul Conkin. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979. 85-104.

-----. "The Rites of Assent." *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture*. Ed. Sam B. Girgus. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1980. 5-42.

Bourne, Randolph. "Trans-National America." *The American Intellectual Tradition, Vol. II: 1865 to the Present*. Eds. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper. New York: Oxford UP, 1989. 179-188.

Bové, Paul A. "Can American Studies Be Area Studies?" *Learning Places. The Afterlives of Area Studies*. Eds. Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian. Durham: Duke UP, 2002. 206-230.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Castronovo, Russ and Dana D. Nelson. "Materializing Democracy and Other Political Fantasies." *Materializing Democracy. Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*. Eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson. Durham: Duke UP, 2002. 1-21.

Elliott, Emory. "Diversity in the United States and Abroad: What Does It Mean When American Studies Is Transnational?" *American Quarterly* 59.1 (2007): 1-22.

Farrow, Anne, Joel Lang, and Jennifer Frank. *Complicity. How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2005.

Finkelman, Paul. *Slavery and the Founders. Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*. 2nd ed. New York: Sharpe, 2001.

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies. Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly* 57.1 (March 2005): 17-57.

Fluck, Winfried. "Theories of American Culture (and the Transnational Turn in American Studies)." *REAL* 23 (2007): 59-77.

-----. "Inside and Outside: What Kind of Knowledge Do We Need? A Response to the Presidential Address." *American Quarterly* 59.1 (2007): 23-32.

-----. "The Search for an 'Artless Art:' Aesthetics and American Culture." *The Power and Politics of the Aesthetic in American Culture*. Eds. Klaus Benesch and Ulla Haselstein. Heidelberg: Winter Universitätsverlag, 2007. 29-44.

-----. "American Literary History and the Romance with America." *American Literary History* 21.1 (2009): 1-18.

Gordon, Avery F. and Christopher Newfield, eds. *Mapping Multiculturalism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996.

Hardt, Michael. "Jefferson and Democracy." *American Quarterly* 59.1 (March 2007): 41-78.

Kazin, Michael and Joseph A. McCartin. "Introduction." *Americanism. New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*. Eds. Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006. 1-21.

Kennedy, Liam. "Spectres of Comparison: American Studies and the United States of the West." *Comparative American Studies* 4.2 (March 2006): 135-150.

Morgan, Edmund S. *The Meaning of Independence. John Adams, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson*. New York: Norton, 1976.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death.* Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP, 1982.

Pease, Donald. E. "From American Literary Studies to Planetary Literature: The Emergence of Literary Extraterritoriality." *REAL* 23 (2007): 9-35.

Pfister, Joel. *Critique For What? Cultural Studies, American Studies, Left Studies.* Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm, 2006.

Richards, Leonard. *The Slave Power. The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2000.

Rieff, David. "American Exceptionalism: Is there a Moral High Ground? (excerpts from letters)." *The International Herald Tribune* (May 23, 2007).

Rothman, Adam. *Slave Country. American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 2005.

Slaughter, Ann-Marie. "Reviving American Ideals." *The International Herald Tribune* (May 18, 2007).

-----. *The Idea That Is America: Keeping Faith with Our Values in a Dangerous World*. New York: Basic Books, 2007.

Staloff, Darren. *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson. The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2005.

Wald, Alan. "Theorizing Cultural Difference." *Melus* 14.2 (1987): 21-33.

Wills, Garry. *The Negro President: Jefferson and the Slave Power.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Wood, Gordon. *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004.

-----. *Revolutionary Characters. What Made the Founders Different*. New York: Penguin Press, 2006.

-----. "Reading the Founders' Minds." *New York Review of Books* (June 28, 2007): 63-66; repr.: as "Presentism in History." *The Purpose of the Past. Reflections on the Uses of History.* New York: Penguin, 2008. 293-308.