

University of New Mexico

UNM Digital Repository

English Language and Literature Faculty
Publications

Scholarly Communication - Departments

1990

The Other of the Other: Topology and the Ideogramatics of American Imperial Practice

Hector A. Torres

University of New Mexico

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/engl_fsp



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Torres, Hector A.. "The Other of the Other: Topology and the Ideogramatics of American Imperial Practice." (1990). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/engl_fsp/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly Communication - Departments at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Language and Literature Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

Hector A. Torres
Associate Professor
Department of English
University of New Mexico

The Other of the Other:
Topology and the Ideogramatics of American Imperial Practice

In this essay I trace what I will here call a cultural pathology in American history and historiography. This cultural pathology certainly stems from the Puritan dilemma of colonial, but it might also be said to have no unique location or site of origin. Rather than locate a unique site of origin for this cultural pathology in any period of American history, I shall argue for its location in the subject of discourse. If Hardt and Negri are right when they claim in *Empire* (2000) that the United States begins to practice a new mode of political sovereignty after the first Gulf War in 1991, it is also the case that such royal prerogative to go to war in the name of peace and the economy correlates with a long history of repetition dating back to every quarter of American history, be it the puritan dilemma, or the economic basis of the American Revolution, or the federalist-antifederalist debates surrounding the Constitutional Convention, or the Jeffersonian Revolution of 1800, etc. I read American history and historiography with a psychoanalytic interest, employing the Lacanian phrases, *maque-à-etre* and the Other of the Other, to designate the cultural pathology I am speaking of. This pathology is manifested in American historiography as a will to exceptionalism, and in American history as a prerogative to legitimacy.

I privilege a psychoanalytic hermeneutic to the history of American imperial practices for the dialectical paths that psychoanalysis is obliged to keep between the

desire and cognition of the subject of discourse, as these play out in both the analyst and the analysand. This dialectical paths of psychoanalysis in keeping track of id and ego effects, desire and cognition intertwined, demonstrate their value beyond a *Realpolitik* approach to American foreign policy, let's say, the extent that it can shed light on the desire and the actions of any subject of discourse in American history and historiography. Dorothy Ross, for instance, plots American historiography along a dialectical path between myth and realism that yields a narrative in the romantic mode. The story of Western progress, liberal democracy, republican ideals, and free market capitalism were the constituents for a narrative that "seated world progress in the American nation" (652). Ross critiques this scheme of things in which the Divinity of the Puritans has no Other God to contest it because New England America has the monopoly on it. And despite the secular turn the Constitution represents, the story of American exceptionalism, again quoting Ross, "derived fundamentally from divine favor, a favor that began with the Puritan mission to New England and was sealed in the American Revolution and Constitution" ("Grand Narrative" 652). The critique Ross levels at the romance of American historiography demonstrates the intertwinement of cognition and desire in the subject of discourse. We should notice the family resemblance between Ross's quasi-structural analysis the dialectic between myth and realism in American historiography, Louis Althusser's statement that ideology has no history, and Hardt and Negri's point that "Empire, presents its rule not as transitory moment in the movement of history, but as a regime with no temporal boundaries and in this sense outside of history at the end of history" (xiv-xv).

Specifically, reading American historiography through the dialectical paths of psychonalysis immediately confronts the question of the Other and by iteration the question of the Other of the Other. In phonetic spelling, all these repetitions of the signifier 'other' would not be represented with a capital 'o'. The phonetic stream being privileged, in phonetic spelling these instances of the the signifier 'other' would not carry a capital 'O'; only the graphic language seems to call for a capital/noncapital letter distinction. Lacan's usage of the phrase the Other of the Other thus encodes not so much a structural ambiguity as a referential ambiguity. Negation reduces the iteration to a chain of one, the Other. In so doing, negation tries to reduce the referential ambiguity at work in the phrase the Other of the Other. Needless to say the encounter with the Other, whether as transcendent being or otherwise, is inevitable. The subject of a discourse encounters the Other in the phenomenology of the speech act, there where the subject experiences its own division between waking and sleeping, or, Freud's *Ichspaltung*. The subject of discourse encounters the Other in every act of speech, in every utterance whether or not an other is in close proximity to hear. Jacques Lacan puts this encounter cryptically, iconically, when he says in *Écrits*: "The Other is, therefore, the locus in which is constituted the I who speaks to him who hears, that which is said by the one being already the reply, the other deciding to hear it where the one has or has not spoken." The Other that the subject of discourse is obliged to live with is alone, has not even an image of an other that might complement it. Within this psychoanalytic dimension, the Other already represents the practical limits in language, its empirical boundary condition so to speak.

It is within this purview of the Other that I read Jeffersonian Revolution of 1800 and Thomas Jefferson's crisis in conscience concerning the constitutionality of the Louisiana Purchase. A historical eruption of Empire takes place in the figure of Jefferson, in his figurations so to speak. Jefferson's ideal of an American republic governed under a Constitution whose words called for a narrow construction of federal power undergoes a topological transformation through the exercise of executive power during his administration. "The Jefferson presidency," states Abraham Sofaer, "is especially important to any study of the distribution of power among the branches of American government" (*Foreign Policy* 168). Sofaer pinpoints in Jefferson, the effective production of political legitimacy at all levels of discourse through the machinations of mixed government: "The purchase of Louisiana, was authorized by Congress in principle and subsequently approved and funded. Jefferson silently swallowed his constitutional scruples in allowing Congress to absorb Louisiana without a constitutional amendment" (197). The expansive tendency of empire is confirmed in this neutralization of Jefferson's ideal for America to become a small agrarian republic. Jefferson effectively resolves a theoretico-politico-ideological crisis in favor of territorial expansion, covering over a lacuna in the Constitution itself. Sofaer sends us to a footnote for some letters belonging to the ideogram that Jefferson performs. "Jefferson took the position that the Constitution had not given the general government the power of 'holding territory, and still less of incorporating it into the Union.'" Jefferson to John Dickinson" (197). The subject of discourse is the site where empire expands, the non-place where language and the real collide and collude to invent reality. Jefferson, the figure of discourse who writes the Constitution, fuses absence with presence into a text that lacks legitimacy but acts

legitimate. It is this combination of present and absent elements from the domains of discourse and experience that form not so much the exceptionalism of American imperial practices as the peculiar historical effects they give rise to. Jefferson's ideogrammatic example shows that the syntax of a discourse orders a practice. The axes of selection and combination that constitute syntax apply with equal force to the grammar of discourse as to the subject of discourse. Syntax always already implies the making of specific choices. Arrangments, the 'con-textures' of language and action the subject of discourse undertakes and undergoes may not always yield 'fit', as the referential function of language would have it, but they will effect a compromise. The subject of discourse is eminently adept at striking compromises between the *irrealis* of language, which might be correlated with the Real of trauma, and the exigencies to comply with the rule of symbolic Law. The imaginary always plays in this syntax of compromises to yield its characteristics warp of reality, the *méconnaissances* of the subject of discourse.

Thus, Jefferson doubles the size of the American Republic by stretching over the discursive lacks of the Constitution with a theoretical practice that declares in essence, *fiat lex*. The declaration appeals to no external law to back up its claims of legitimacy, since such appeals end in infinite regress. Lacan's phrase, the Other of the Other is here operative, for it shows nature of the gaps that Jefferson must traverse in his dialectic of desire. If the Other has no Other, as Lacan maintains for pyschoanalytical reasons, the Other of the Other is a reciprocal and mutual relation of self-cancellation that underscores absence, solicits the disappearance of the authority of self-present experience. This relation of reciprocal self-cancellation is as much ordered as free and has much in common with the Derridean practice of crossing out the verb to be twice. Jefferson holds

to the position that the Constitution lacks certain grounds to legitimize a certain act and in so doing acts out his *méconnassance* of the new juridical and territorial reality he is constructing in the name of the Constitution. Such *méconnaissance* is perhaps nothing Jefferson could have avoided inasmuch as everyone is bound to warp reality according to certain empirical conditions, which is to say along the contingencies of experience, language, history, memory, race, class, gender, etc. While the syntax with which Jefferson overcomes his crises of conscience over a narrow versus a broad view of the Constitution is certainly invisible to us today, certain effects of the self-cancellation of the Other by the Other, the collapse of both Others into a single signifier, persist in the subject of discourse as ghosts and memory traces in American history and historiography.

Today, globalization has expanded capital and its sovereignty into practically every corner of the earth, with *Pax Americana* not far behind. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri register these heterogeneous capitalist processes as the lack of an outside to Empire, America's new mode of political sovereignty. (Deconstruction echoes this theorem back to Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, having stated that the inside is the outside in *Of Grammatology* (date).) No outside means that the subject of discourse cannot look for independent verification of its doings, its discursive realities. Visible and invisible, the syntax of the ideogram with which Jefferson covers over the discursive lacunae present in the Constitution yields determinate results. *Pax Americana* today means that others—the globe—are not to stand in the way of democracy and the free market. This echoes American rhetoric of the nineteenth century, specifically in the subject of the discourses that filled the pages of John O'Sullivan's *The Democratic Review*. If under and through the processes of globalization, America today practices its new mode of political

sovereignty over a global civil society, then one could say without hint of teleology that America's Manifest Destiny has been fulfilled. Under the light of Manifest Destiny, America's role as executive nation in the United Nations is not so much new as newly expanded. The unique status Hardt and Negri ascribe to the U.S. Constitution, that is, its role as a model for world government, would not stem from a history of exceptionalism but from a repetition that transforms theory and practice into a single surface of discourse that could rightly be called topological. In Lacan's topology of the subject's psyche, desire and cognition stretch along a single surface of signifiers composed of conscious to unconscious thought. These signifiers of conscious and unconscious thought no doubt touch on Saussure's ideogrammatic picture of the linguistic sign. The nebula of thought towards which the linguistic sign reaches is just as much a signifier and hence a representation of a syntactic lack in language as the unconscious represents the kernel of our being and hence an ineradicable *manque-a-être*, lack in being. If today America appears to be exercising a new mode of political sovereignty, perhaps it is due to the warp one and all bring to the discussion of global politics—a persistent *méconnaissance* of national with supranational levels of republicanism.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. Monthly Review Press: New York (2001).
- Derrida, Jacques. *Limited Inc.* Northwestern University Press; Evanston, Ill. (1998/2000).
Of Grammatology. Johns Hopkins UP: Baltimore, Maryland. (1976).
- De Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Open Court: Chicago and La Salle (1983).
- Hardt, Michael & Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Harvard UP: Cambridge: Massachusetts. (200).
- Huston, James L. "The American Revolutionaries, the Political Economy, and the American Concept of the Distribution of Wealth 1765-1900." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 98 no. 4, (Oct 1993) 1079-1105.
- Lacan, Jaques. *Encore the Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink. W. W. Norton, New York. (1975/1998).
- Pollins, Brian M & Randall L. Schweller. "Linking the Levels: The Long Wave and Shifts in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1790-1993." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 43, no. 2. (Apr 1999): 431-464.
- Ross, Dorothy. "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 100, no. 3 (Jun 1995): 651-677.
- Sofaer, Abraham D. *War, Foreign Affairs and Constitutional Power: The Origins*. Ballinger Publishing Company. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1976.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. "Dis-Covering the Subject of the 'Great Constitutional Discussion,' 1786-1789. *Journal of American History*, vol. 79, no. 3. (Dec 1992). 841-873.
- Tyrell, Ian. "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 96, no. 4, (Oct 1991): 1031-1055.
- Zevin, Robert. "An Interpretation of American Imperialism." *The Tasks of Economic History*, vol 32, no 1 (Mar 1972: 316-360.