Comparative American Identities

RACE, SEX, AND NATIONALITY IN THE MODERN TEXT

ESSAYS FROM THE ENGLISH INSTITUTE

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EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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COMPARATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITIES

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Introduction: Who Cuts the Border? Some Readings on "America"

HORTENSE J. SPILLERS

For Roberto and Maddie Marquez

The January 10, 1891 edition of *La Revista Illustrada* carried the initial publication of José Martí's celebrated essay, "Our America."[1] Later, almost exactly a year to the day, "El Partido Revolucionario Cubano"—the Cuban Revolutionary Party—was created, with Martí acknowledged as "its leading spirit, inspirer, and organizer."[2] The compressed background of historical events that Philip Foner provides in the Introduction to the second of four English-language volumes of Martí's writings[3] reacquaints readers in the United States with a larger-than-life romantic instance, whose initiating moments date back to one's childhood and its ephemeral encounters with symptoms of the heroic: Simón Bolívar, Father Hidalgo and "the cry of Dolores," alongside Martí, are entailed with the same fabric of cultural memory and a curiously elided time-space continuum that threads the name of A. Philip Randolph with the successes of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the heady political maneuvers of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. It remains, then, a matter of surprise that, even as one eventually grasps the reasons why, Martí's "our" and "America" do not usually embrace US at all—except by the logic of a clearly defined dualism of antagonists, who, in the febrile imagination of his writings, must contend, in effect, for the right to name and claim "America." As Foner observes, that vast stretch of formidably organized political power (at which site all nine of the essayists writing here live and work, if not originate), ninety miles north of the island and nation of Cuba, demarcates, for Martí, that "other America," neither

"*his* America," nor "Mother America" of Martí's dream of wholeness.[4] About seventy years following the writing of the lectures that comprise *The Philosophy of History*,[5] G.W.F. Hegel himself might have been offered occasion for surprise at the exemplary boldness of one José Martí:

> The European university must bow to the American university. The history of America, from the Incas to the present must be taught in clear detail and to the letter, even if the archons of Greece are overlooked. Our Greece must take priority over the Greece which is not ours. We need it more. Nationalist statesmen must replace foreign statesmen. Let the world be grafted onto our republics, but the trunk must be our own. And let the vanquished pedant hold his tongue, for there are no lands in which a man may take greater pride than in our long-suffering American republics. (p. 88)

Interestingly enough, Martí and Hegel, inhabiting either end of the nineteenth century, posited, for radically different reasons and toward radically different and reversed ends, two contrastive "Americas." For Martí, as the excerpted passage suggests, "Our America," of indigenous historical currents, fires, on the one hand, the profoundly figurative polemic of his revolutionary moment and impulse, those "long suffering American republics, raised up from among the silent Indian masses by the bleeding arms of a hundred apostles, to the sounds of battle between the book and the processional candle" (p. 86). On the other hand, the "other America," the United States, "this avaricious neighbor who admittedly has designs on us,"[6] arouses Martí to the visionary urgencies of an Armageddon. Perhaps the longest syntactic chain in "Our America" throws forth immitigable linkage between "since/then," *post hoc, ergo propter hoc,* embedded in oppositional ground:

> And since strong nations, self-made by law and shotgun, love strong nations, and them alone; since the time of madness and ambition—from which North America may be freed by the predominance of the purest elements in its blood, or on which it may be launched by its vindictive and sordid masses, its tradition of expansion, or the ambitions of some powerful leader . . . since its good name as a republic in the eyes of the world's perceptive nations puts upon North America a restraint that cannot be taken away by childish provocations or pompous arrogance or parricidal discords among our American nations—the pressing need of Our America is to show itself as it is, one in spirit and intent . . . (p. 93)

Though far too schematic, one learns, to exhaust, or even adequately account for, the range of Martí's thought,[7] his rhetorical binary, nonetheless,

subtends one of the chief critical functions of his solidary political and intellectual engagement.

Martí's expressly dramatic protocol of pronouns is neither more nor less presumptuous than Hegel's implied one, which also distinguishes "America," New World, from the "United States of North America, but an emanation from Europe" (p. 82). Hegel's "other America" "has always shown itself physically and psychically powerless, and still shows itself so" (p. 81). These aboriginal societies "gradually vanished at the breath of European activity" (p. 81); we needn't add that such "breath" ferociously animated the winds of multiple violence—epistemic, linguistic, iconographic, genocidal. Hegel's European-emanated United States, with its "republican constitution," its Christian sects of Protestant enthusiasm, its "Universal protection for property" belongs, finally and dismissively, for Hegel, to an American "future," "where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World's History shall reveal itself—perhaps in a contest between North and South America" (p. 86).

That Hegelian "perhaps" is borne out, amazingly so, in hemispheric wars of national liberation, so far, including Cuba, (in its First and Second Wars of Independence) and Cuba again, under the successful insurgency of Fidel Castro, shortly past the mid-point of the twentieth century. No one can fail to read current affairs in Ibero-Hispanic America and the Caribbean—from Sandinista Nicaragua, to post-Noriega Panama—outside an ironized perspective on this "future" and the culture texts inscribed and unfolding about it.

Ensnared, then, between Old World and New, past and future, the contrary ideas of "America" instantiate the text and the materiality on a historico-cultural ground long fabled and discursive in acts of European invention and intervention. It is as if the Word, for Europe, engenders Flesh. Peter Hulme argues, for example, that the discourse of English colonialism arises fundamentally on the career of two key terms—"hurricanes" and "Caribbees"—that mark relatively new lexemes in the English language. "Not found before the middle of the sixteenth century," these terms do not settle into "their present forms before the latter half of the seventeenth."[8] Both originate in Native American languages, and "both were quickly adopted into all the major European languages" (p. 58). Raymond Williams's *Keywords* does not carry entries on either term, but it is rather startling that as innocuous as they might appear in the lexicon, "hurricanes" and "Caribbees/Caribbean," especially the latter, have achieved keyword status over a significant spate of modern intellectual history. Any subsequent addenda that we might devise on Williams's project concerning the evolution of terministic cruxes "in the West" might well inaugurate around "Caribbean" and its own emanations.

Contemporary Cuban intellectual, Roberto Fernández Retamar—poet,

essayist, and distinguished editor of *Casa de las Americas*—offers, in his classic essay, a highly informative synthesis[9] of the history of related terms—"Caribbean/Caribbees/Caliban." As background and framework that situate Retamar's reading of culture in "Our America," this rich congruence of terms is biographically reinscribed in the exemplary instance of Martí's public life and career. Retamar tracks "Caribbean" from its eponymous Carib community of Native Americans, who, we are told, valiantly resisted European incursion in the sixteenth century, to its philosophical and terministic transformations, by way of "Caliban," in the contemporary period, with specific reference to the works of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and O. Mannoni.[10] As if a moment of phantasmogoria that perfectly mirrors the Freudian formula of media cross-dressing—the dream as *visual* transliteration of the day's *grammar* events—"Carib" is translated as a "deformation" and "defamation" into "cannibal." The latter generates an anagram in "Caliban," as Shakespeare had already made use of "cannibal" to mean anthropophagus "in the third part of *Henry IV* and *Othello*" (p. 11).

This nested semiotic filiation, inaugurated by a reputed "look," retailed as truth to Christopher Columbus, will stage a paradigm of discursive, scopophilic behavior for colonizing and enslaving powers toward "peoples of color," and most dramatically in its duration, for Hegel's "Negro" of Subsaharan "Africa," which demonstrates "no historical part of the world," it was said; ". . . has no movement or development to exhibit," it was concluded (p. 99). For Columbus's reporters (and Hegel), anthropophagi reside on that border between nature and culture, inhabited by " 'men with one eye and others with dog's muzzles, who ate human beings.' "[11]

Would we dare, then, risk a simplistic and essentialist reduction? "Someone," perhaps, saw "something" or "someone" in a stage of cultural production long before Columbus came,[12] and even now with pure revisionary heart-work and devotion to the politics of the plural, we cannot decipher exactly what it was. Having few corrective narratives to counterpoise, the future-laden actor reenacts an analogy on a child's game: a sentence is passed along a spatial sequence, person to person, and at the end of it the garbled "message" makes only comic sense. Just so (or almost), we will not "know" now, since the "first speakers," either way, are not "available." By the time Shakespeare sifts "cannibal" through the sieve of his imagination, it is an already inspissated narrative of plenitude, crystallized in the sixteenth century by, among other sources, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1580) and Michel de Montaigne's "De los Caníbales" (1580); the translation of Montaigne's work by way of Giovanni Floro's *Essays* was available to Shakespeare, Retamar observes (p. 14).

The construction and invention of "America," then—a dizzying concoction of writing and reportage, lying and "signifying," jokes, "tall tales," and transgenerational nightmare, all conflated under the banner of Our

Lord—exemplify, for all intents and purposes, the oldest game of *trompe de l'oeil,* the perhaps-mistaken-glance-of-the-eye, that certain European "powers" carried out regarding indigenous Americans. *Misprision,* therefore, constitutes law and rule of "Our America" in its "beginnings" for Europe. "Made up" in the gaze of Europe, "America" was as much a "discovery" on the retinal surface as it was the appropriation of land and historical subjects.

From what angle does one insert the "United States but-an-emanation from Europe" into this picture, or perhaps, more ambitiously, a series of perpendicular pronouns—the "I's"/"eyes" of this collection of writings on the New World?

At least one thing is doubtless: At whatever point one cuts into this early modern discourse on what will become, quite by accident, by arbitrary design, by the most complicated means of economic (and otherwise) exchange, and the entire repertoire of genetic play and chance, her space, his space, of central habitation in the unimagined "future" of World History, the initial news is hardly good for anyone. "Physically and psychically powerless" and overcome by men who *eat* (the) other(s), this orientalized, Europe-fabled "America" could not be salvaged by even the hippest stunts of the televisual media, except that a Martí, for one, will reclaim it as a necessary project of historical demolition and reconstruction. But the United States, carved out of this New World ground, must be read, just as it is intimately connected, with this unfolding historical text of unpromise. The seams will show now, but that is also part of the picture. This ground is broken—by culture and "race," language and ethnicity, weather and land formation, in generative and historical time, as more or less gendered "situation-specificities,"[13] in various postures of loves and hungers, cohabit it—even though, given any point at which the multiple "I"/"We" are positioned on its axes, it appears to be monolithic ground. Retamar, pursuing the implications of Martí's "mestizo America," identifies as *the* "distinctive sign of our culture," those ". . . descendants both ethnically and culturally speaking, of aborigines, Africans, and Europeans" (p. 9). He goes on to interrogate, in rhetorical accents sometime reminiscent of Martí's own writings: "From Túpac Amaru . . . to Nicolás Guillén, to Aimé Césaire, to Violeta Parra, to Frantz Fanon—what is our history, what is our culture, if not the history and culture of Caliban?" (p. 24).

It seems clear that at great expense to the national "pursuit of happiness," a United States culture text/praxis, in the dreamful flattening out of textures of the historical, would repress its calibanesque potential, just as we would amend Retamar's strategy of evocation to account for at least one other strand of the "sixties without apology."[14] If, for instance, Bartolomeo Las Casas and José Martí touch my life-line at some distant point of reverberation, then certainly Isabella Baumfree, become "Sojourner Truth," and

Rosa Parks, Malcolm El-Hajj Malik, and Martin Luther King, Jr., among others, must sound through Retamar's at no greater distance. The problem of the pronouns—and *we* mustn't mistake this, as the late sixties taught—cannot, will not resolve itself in a too-easy "hands around the world" embrace among hemispheric cross-cultural communities. But if one concedes "Caliban" as a joining figure, then by virtue of what set of moves is the notion applicable along a range of culture practices in light of the hegemonic entailment of operations out of which certain US communities express relations to "Our America"? In other words, in order to disrupt the homogeneous narrative that the United States, as an idea-form, or that "other America" provokes in Martí's, or Retamar's view, or even George Bush's view, the contradictions of proximity must be brought further out: Some of US render unto Caesar, more or less, is not simply locutional.

Apparently everywhere one might look on this massive scene of heterogeneous historical attitudes, it seems that "Caliban" designates a copulative potential by way of the Atlantic system of slavery—the ownership of man by man (Virginia's "chattels personal," say), man's ownership of "private property" (Cuba's seigneurial ownership of the sugar product, say), and the captive communities' occasional revolt in the teeth of it (Canada's Caribbean marronage, for example). In the sociopolitical arrangements here stipulated, "man," wherever he appears in the bargain, articulates with juridical, axiomatic, historical, ontological, and local *specificity.* "America," with its US, locates a prime time of "the fruits of merchant capital"[15] as a stunning chapter in the modern history of patriarchal law and will. In other words, America/US shows itself as a "scene of instruction" in the objectifying human possibility across an incredibly various real estate and human being. This vulgar oxymoron of purposes and motivations insists on the combo—human-as-property—and there, in all the astonishing foreclosures of certainty, "English," among other Indo-European languages, enters its currency in the "execrable trade."

It would seem highhanded, then, to read this Real as *a discourse,* but certainly the conceptual narratives around "cannibal"/"Caliban"—a colonial topos, common to the seventeenth century, Hulme argues, projects slavery "as the necessary stage between savagery and civilization" (p. 62). "Caliban" designates itself a moment of convergence between Old World and New, inasmuch as the idea-formation demonstrates "features of both the Mediterranean wild man, or classical monster . . . with an African mother, whose pedigree leads back to Book X of *The Odyssey*" (p. 70). Further, Caliban, as the issue of Sycorax,[16] entertains "particular connection with the moon . . . whose signs the Caribs could read . . ." (p. 70). Need we be reminded here of the "intersections of blood and the moon, the mother and home: towards that terrain which traditionally has been given and denied the name of 'woman' "?[17]

When Martí invokes "Mother America," one imagines that he means the formulation of "mother" in relation to nurture and security, but the term might also mark, under the precise historical circumstance upon which his vision of "America" is raised, the *silence* bred by defeat. If Columbus's *Diaries,* compounded of report, offered the explorer a useful fiction for entering New World communities, then that available discourse evinces a remarkable instance of "rhetorical enargeia," which Patricia Parker describes as "convincing description or vivid report, [containing] within it the same visual root as the name of "Argus," sent with his many eyes to spy."[18] The Columbian reporters, for example, were not only providing "promotional narratives," but "a 'blazing,' or publishing of the glories of this *feminized* New World, of the possibilities of commercial abundance and 'return' " (emphasis mine; p. 141). Perceiving a link here between language and spectacle, Parker speaks of discursive inventiveness as a "transgressive uncovering, or opening up of a secret place, of exposing what was hidden in the womb of a feminized Nature . . ." (p. 142). These "ocular proofs," giving rise to discursive elaboration, as we have observed in the Caliban/Caribbean/cannibal semiosis, yoke the gaze and the profit in a rhetorics of property (p. 147).

The inventory of both the American land and the figure of Caliban—"ugly, hostile, ignorant, devilish"—inscribes a "rhetorical and an economic instrument, one way of controlling the territory in question . . ." (p. 150). Even though Sycorax is given no script in *The Tempest,* as we recall, her "absence," except in comminatory provocation, confirms the "unrepresentability" of Caliban, the mothered-womaned, to a spectator-audience.[19] A not-sayable offers a strategy for describing the "future," which is always a pregnant possibility in the now.

Hulme describes the locus of *The Tempest* as an "extraordinary topographical dualism" because of its "double series of connotations"—the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. This scene of double inscription is borne out further in "tempest" itself, from the Mediterranean repertoire, and Gonzolo's "plantation," from the Atlantic repertoire (p. 71). But practically speaking, beyond the "rarified latitudes" of Shakespeare's art, the "discovery of America" may be read as "a magnetic pole compelling a reorientation of traditional axes." Superimposing two planes—a palimpsest, "on which there are two texts" (p. 72), "America" juxtaposes "two referential systems" that inhabit "different spaces except for that area which is the island [neither here nor there] and its first native Caliban" (p. 72). As a "geometrical metaphor," Caliban intermediates a "central axis about which both planes swivel free of one another." As a "textual metaphor," Caliban inscribes an "overdetermination," "peculiarly at odds with his place of habitation which is described as an 'uninhabitable island' " (p. 72). Caliban translates the "monstrous" in his mediating posture "between two sets of connotations"

and a "compromise formation . . . achieved . . . only at the expense of distortion elsewhere" (p. 72). Precisely metaphorical in the collapse of distinctive features of contrast, Caliban can "exist only within discourse . . . fundamentally and essentially beyond the bounds of representation" (p. 72).

Or is it the *bonds,* the *bonds* of representation? William Faulkner's Luster, the grandson of his "enduring" Dilsey,[20] tries to recall to young Quentin Compson, his proximate age-mate, the name of the wild male child now installed in the shadows of "Sutpen's Hundred"[21] and decides that his not-so-ready-to-hand last name exemplifies a "lawyer's word": "what they puts you under when the Law catches you" (p. 215). Inflected from "Bon," by way of his paternity in Charles Etienne de Saint Valery Bon and a maternity situated by Faulkner's narrator as a "gorilla" of a woman, "Jim Bond" stands free, if not emancipated, in his US/African/European/Americanity as an embodied instance of the "ferocious play of alphabets,"[22] but not unlike Caliban, "he" also marks a would-be place, or a "geometrical metaphor" on the verge of being in an American wilderness—fictitious Jefferson, Mississippi (trapped in a once dark pastoral frame) after the "fall" of the South. Verging on past and future, Jim Bond, a live-wire instance of the law's most persistent social invention, assumes the status of deictic, or nonverbal marker, *here* and *there, this* and *that,* as the conventions of discourse out of which he arises proffer him no claim to a "present/presence," except as the unkinned "monster," feared and despised, from Caliban, to Bigger Thomas. Though I am suggesting here a narrative of filiations across a broad swatch of Western discourse, there are, admittedly, considerable differences between these "impression-points": If we accept the argument of Hulme and others that Caliban describes sheer and fateful discursivity that evades the trammels of representation, then what must we make of a figure like Jim Bond whose representability prescribes and provokes *all* that he is?

Both cultural vestibularity and an after-word, "America/US," from Caliban's perspective and that of his diverse relations, must come upon Language and the Law (and in a sense, they overlap the same item from the store of Europe's hardy "beneficence") as the inimical "property" of "civilized man." ("You taught me language, and my profit on't/Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language.") This place, this text, as Jim Bond embodies it, as the European interventionist/invader might have imagined, orchestrates representation as the already-coded "future." Some of US know this process—in discourse and discourse/politics—as history as *mugging.*

This overdetermined representability, or texts overwritten, locates authority on an exterior, as the seizing of discursive initiative seems to define

a first order of insurgency wherever it appears in the New World. Colonial North America as the final port-of-call on a trajectory that starts up the triangular trade all over again would mute its involvement in the narratives of Caliban, as we have observed before, by the fateful creation of "minority" communities in the United States, but it is the ascribed task of such communities to keep the story of difference under wraps through the enactments and reenactments of difference in the flesh. The single basis for a myth of national unity is raised, therefore, on negation and denial that would bring a Jim Bond to stand in the first place. In that space—like the return to the scene of a crime—we can recite the triangulation of a particular mapping that might demonstrate new ground for the workings of Hulme's "geometrical metaphor."

The historic triangular trade interlarded a third of the known world in a fabric of commercial intimacy so tightly interwoven that the politics of the New World cannot always be so easily disentangled as locally discrete moments. Nowhere is this narrative of involvement more pointedly essayed than in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* that choreographs Canada, the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, and the United States as geographical and/or figurative points of contact in this fictive discourse. If Caliban as a narrative paradigm links American communities in a repertoire of sporadic historico-cultural reference, then we might traverse its play in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

In this layer upon layer of "graphireading,"[23] Faulkner never quite comes to the point, but puts it off again and again in the successful evasion of closure. The tales that converge on "Thomas Sutpen," both the narrated and the sign-vehicle that starts up the narrative and sustains it, are related by speakers who recall the character from some vantage of time long past (as Rosa Coldfield), or, at even greater narrative remove, the recollections of others' *inherited* recollection of Sutpen (as Quentin Compson). At the intersection of a plurality of texts, Sutpen aptly demonstrates the notion of character as a structure of assumptions that reading embodies and, not altogether unlike the orientalized Carib/cannibal formation, is concocted in the imaginings of each speaker from a repertory of rancor, grudging admiration, gossip, rumor, hearsay, and more or less stabilized impression. The work plunders and reworks itself as narrators not only elaborate what they cannot have known, but also correct passed-down information, fill in gaps, piece together disparities, disprove or improve inherited conclusions, assume identities, even invent new ones, that the novel has not embedded. For instance, Quentin Compson's Canadian roommate Shreve McCannon/McKenzie (also "transported" from *The Sound and the Fury* to *Absalom, Absalom!*) posits a quite likely character of a lawyer to the mother of Charles Bon and offers an intercessory "gift" that the "author," we're led to imagine, had not thought of. We also learn from McKenzie that Thomas Sutpen could not have been born in *West* Virginia, if he were 25 years old

in Mississippi in 1833, which would establish his birth year as 1808 (p. 220). Having acquired his "American history" in a western Canadian classroom, Shreve, after all, a Harvard man, knows very well that West Virginia was not admitted to the Union until 1863. But the traditional reading on Sutpen, as Quentin receives it down the paternal line, requires him to have been born "in West Virginia, in the mountains." Reading in the interstices, we surmise that Sutpen "comes from" nowhere that an early US map would have articulated.

Essentially originless, if the continuities of kinship and place of birth, relatedly, mean anything, Thomas Sutpen, reminiscent of the colonized European subject before him, "arises" in "Old Bailey" and a criminality inscribed in notary's ink. But achieving the means to efface these corrupt "beginnings" founds both the desire of Sutpen's own fictional biotext and "Sutpen's Hundred," the 10 square miles of virgin land carved out of north Mississippi. The shadow of Sutpen's imputed desire falls between two poignant moments, collapsed into a single, dreaded economy of recall and forgetfulness. The homeless prepubescent boy, wandering the surrounding country with an unspecified number of siblings and a drunken father, learns very slowly (in the tempo of the Faulknerian sentence) what hierarchy and difference are and how they work: "He had learned the difference between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men, not to be measured by lifting anvils, gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out of the room" (p. 226).

As the story is interpreted by Quentin and Shreve, somewhere in Harvard yard, Sutpen's memory so freezes on these scenes that it would be plausible to think of them as analogous to birth trauma. But if one's "second birth" marks the coming to "consciousness," then the second time around for Sutpen is doubly painful, engendered by the outraged shame of *being-looked-at.* The drunken father has somehow landed work on a plantation whose owner lives in the "biggest house [Sutpen] had even seen" (p. 227). This man who owns things—"all the land and the niggers"—spends "most of the afternoon . . . in a barrel stave hammock between two trees, with his shoes ["that he didn't even need to wear"] off . . ." (pp. 227–28). When young Sutpen, bearing an unread message from his father to the man in the Big House, arrives at the front door, something quite astonishing takes place: ". . . the monkey-dressed nigger butler kept the door barred with his body while he spoke . . ." (p. 231), and "even before [Sutpen] had had time to say what he came for," the butler tells him "never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back" (p. 232).

Sutpen's "birth" in the moment strikes with such force that the narrator insinuates it as *rupture:* Even before the butler completes the message, Sutpen "seemed to kind of dissolve and a part of him turn and rush back