

A New Capital for American Literary History

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Cyrus R. K. Patell

New York University

[This talk was given as part of the panel “American Literature and the Geographic Imaginary,” proposed and chaired by Rachel Adams (Columbia University). In her proposal, Adams described the goals of the panel in this way: “This panel surveys the effects of the geographic reorientation of Americanist literary study that has reshaped the field in the last decade. While many scholars have argued for the necessity of unsettling nation-centered paradigms of literary study, Americanists have not yet fully conceptualized the implications of such a shift for teaching and research. Too often, a recognition of the limitations with the nation as an organizing principal gives rise to an empty invocation of the post-national, the transnational, or the diasporic. By contrast, this panel proposes that spatial reorganization must be accompanied by deep structural transformations in method, theory, and periodization which we refer to as the field’s ‘geographic imaginary.’ Building on Donald Pease’s description of the ‘field imaginary’ of American Studies, the concept of a ‘geographic imaginary’ implies that our approach to literary study is structured by profound, and often unconscious, assumptions about space and spatial division.” My co-panelists were Paul Giles (Oxford University), whose paper, “American Literature and the Geographic Imaginary,” historicized the equation of American literature with national space, and Joe Roach (Yale University), whose paper, “World Bank Drama: The Fate of Intangible Heritage,” used the production history of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical *Oklahoma!* as a way of exploring explores the consequences of the deterritorialization of the “geographic imaginary,” the transformation of seemingly national themes and texts as they travel offshore.]

In *The Dialectics of Our America*, José David Saldívar asked, productively, what happens if we understand Havana, Cuba, to be “an alternative capital of the Americas” (15). The question I want to ask for the next few minutes today may seem, at first, to be less radical, but given both the historiographical paradigms for U.S. literary history under which most of us were trained and the current political climate, the answers might prove to be very progressive indeed. My question is: “What happens

when you shift the geographical orientation of the typical American Literature I survey course south, moving its capital from Boston to New York City?"

Most survey courses in American literature that I've taken, or visited, or read about, or taught have given New York short shrift as the locus for the production of both U.S. literary history and U.S. cultural mythologies. This is often true even of courses that include the turn-into-the twentieth century, when New York was clearly the site at which the national cultural mythology was being produced by the media and by the publishing industry. It is certainly true of the course "American Literature I: From the Beginnings to the Civil War," which I have taught at NYU for the past twelve years. It begins with some Native American creation stories and Columbus's letters, before launching into Puritanism and a procession of New England writers, leavened by one Philadelphia writer (Charles Brockden Brown) and two New Yorkers (Washington Irving and Walt Whitman).

It was when my colleague Bryan Waterman and I put together a syllabus for a course entitled "Writing New York" that I began to realize how the story I had been telling in my American Literature I course could be told from a New York perspective to uncover (with all due respect to my mentor, Sacvan Bercovitch) not the *Puritan Origins of the American Self* but rather the cosmopolitan origins of the American self.

What if, after reading those Native American creation stories and letters by Columbus we were to focus our attention not on New England, but on New Amsterdam? Current anthologies make it difficult, but materials can be found in *Narratives of New Netherland, 1609-1664*, published in 1909, and *Anthology of New Netherland, or Translations from the Early Dutch Poets of New York, with Memoirs of their Lives*, originally published in 1865 and reprinted in 1969. Instead of Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation* (1630), one could read the *Letter of Reverend Jonas Michaëlius*, written in Dutch two years earlier, which describes early voyages of discovery and then proceeds to describe Manhattan in the 1620s. There is the poetry of Jacob Steendam (1616 – ?), born four years later than Anne Bradstreet, especially "The Complaint of New Amsterdam" (1659) and "The Praise of New Netherland" (1662), the

latter written in the same year that Michael Wigglesworth's famous poem "The Day of Doom" was published.

Reading these works and others collected in these two anthologies, one discovers a colony that is strikingly different from Puritan New England. Kenneth T. Jackson and David S. Dunbar, the editors of the anthology *Empire City* put it this way: "Unlike Boston, which was founded as a kind of religious experiment, New Amsterdam was founded for the purpose of making money." Commenting on an account of New Amsterdam included in Nicolaes van Wassenaer's *Historisch Verhael* (Historical Account), they note that "the countinghouse, not the church, was the most important building in town" (26).

In the introduction to *Empire City*, Jackson and Dunbar tell this anecdote, which they believe attests to the signal difference between New Amsterdam and Boston:

In 1624 when the Dutch first set up a trading post on Manhattan, their goal was not to convert the Indians or to practice a special religion but to make money. Visiting Manhattan in 1774 from Puritan Boston, John Adams expressed disdain: 'I have not seen one real gentleman, one well-bred man, since I came to town. They talk very loud, very fast, and altogether. If they ask you a question, before you can utter three words of your answer, they will break out on you again and talk away.' Poor breeding? Perhaps. But New Yorkers established the first chamber of commerce in the Western Hemisphere in 1768, developed the first regularly scheduled shipping service in 1818, built the Erie Canal by 1825, and established the nation's dominant stock exchange by the 1840s. (1)

In comparison to Puritan Boston, New Amsterdam seems almost modern with its ethnic diversity, multiculturalism, and (at least theoretical) emphasis on religious tolerance.

By the 1840s, although there were fewer than one thousand residents in New Amsterdam, there were eighteen different languages being spoken there. And the dominant language, of course, was not English, but Dutch. Indeed, the fact that the earliest narratives about New Amsterdam are all written in Dutch helps, perhaps to explain, why so many of our literary histories have centered their accounts on New England. Indeed, the focus

on Bradford's *History*, which is not only written in English, but shows little interest in native languages, suggests that scholars have followed Bradford's ideological lead. The History's lack of interest in the native tongues is striking because Bradford was interested enough in languages to learn Hebrew in his old age and because its precursor text, the short *Mourt's Relation* (1621), which Bradford co-authored with Edward Winslow, includes some transliterations of Indian language. One benefit of reorienting US literary history around New York and its predecessor New Amsterdam is that it forces us to understand what Werner Sollors and Marc Shell's *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* has begun to make clear: that languages other than English have always been a part of the American experience, that "American literature" should not be limited to American literature written in English.

Another advantage of the reorientation around New York is that it allows Puritanism to enter into the story obliquely. New Amsterdam is where Anne Hutchinson and her family eventually settled after being expelled from Massachusetts; they were killed there during Indian hostilities in 1643. "In the early seventeenth century," write Jackson and Dunbar, "when Puritan Boston was banishing Anne Hutchinson from the city because of doctrinal disagreements, the West India Company, fearing that bigotry might threaten trade and discourage immigration, was welcoming Lutherans, Quakers, Anabaptists, Catholics, and even Jews to Manhattan." Viewing Puritanism through the prism of the Antinomian Controversy and from the vantage point of New York City as a safe haven from religious persecution has the effect of knocking it from its pedestal at the center of the U.S. literary tradition. Puritanism remains important but it ceases to be the point of origin for the American self.

In New Amsterdam, of course, principle often clashed with politics, as Adrian van der Donck complained in his *Remonstrance of New Netherland* (1650), which was critical of Governor Peter Stuyvesant's policies. In 1654, the West India Company would chastise Stuyvesant for trying to prevent twenty-three Sephardic Jews from Brazil from entering the colony, declaring, "The conscience of men ought to be free and unshackled, so long as they continue moderate, peaceable, inoffensive and not hostile to government. Such have been the maxims of . . . toleration by which . . . this city has been governed; and the result has been, that the

oppressed and persecuted from every country have among us an asylum from distress” (Jackson and Dunbar 32). Stuyvesant would test these principles again three years later, when he issued an order banning Quakers from New Netherlands (reminiscent of Massachusetts Bay Colony’s banishment of Quakers to the Caribbean as punishment for speaking in the streets). Stuyvesant’s order was answered by a document entitled “Remonstrance of the Inhabitants of the Town of Flushing,” which argued that the “law of love, peace and liberty” extends to all who “are considered the sonnes of Adam, . . . whether Presbyterian, Independent, Baptist, or Quaker” (Jackson and Dunbar 34).

Although ultimately unsuccessful in preventing Stuyvesant from establishing the Dutch Reformed Church as the only legal church in the colony, the Flushing Remonstrance attests to the deep roots that toleration had in the Dutch colony. When the British forced Stuyvesant to surrender the colony in 1664, the soon-to-be-New Yorkers were open for business as usual the day after the Dutch militia marched out of its fort. Eager to maintain and improve New York’s position as a center of commerce, the British found it prudent to be tolerant of Dutch customs and practices. Indeed, the first mayor of New York City would embody the fusion of Dutch and British culture: Thomas Willett was English by birth, but had lived in Leyden, spoke Dutch, owned property and did business in New Amsterdam, and was in fact on friendly terms with Peter Stuyvesant (Trager 11).

Beginning our survey of U.S. literature by focusing on New Amsterdam has a ripple effect throughout the syllabus. The importance of theater culture to the city suggests that we should re-evaluate the relative lack of attention paid to pre-twentieth-century U.S. drama and look at such as Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* (1787), Anna Cora Mowatt’s *Fashion* (1845), and Benjamin A. Baker’s *A Glance At New York* (1848) with new interest. Washington Irving becomes a New Yorker once again, rather than the traitorous Anglophile whom Philip Freneau excoriated in his poem “To a New England Poet” (1823). Irving becomes a cosmopolitan writer who mixes Dutch and English and then extends his purview in later works such as *The Tales of a Traveller* (1824) and *The Al Hambra* (1832).

The Young America movement becomes a crucial part of the story of how the Civil War came to pass and a crucial part of U.S. literary history

because of its ties to Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman. Herman Melville, born in New York City in 1819, becomes a writer who embodies the tension between New England, with ties to Boston on his father's Melvill side and ties to the patrons of Dutch New York on his mother's Gansevoort side. "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street" takes on a new importance in Melville's career; as Dennis Berthold and Barbara Foley have shown, we have read the story too ahistorically for too long. Although its richness as a text is evident in its ability to support intricate psychoanalytic and deconstructive readings, our New York focus asks us to historicize the text, to read it, first, as a tale of New York's Wall Street culture and, second, as a response to the infamous Astor Place Riots, which took place just blocks from Melville's home on Fourth Avenue and to which he was connected by virtue of his signature on a petition that catalyzed the riots. Although it makes a nice story to see Melville's meeting with Hawthorne as the spark that lit the flame of genius within *Moby-Dick*, it is useful also to remember that the novel's opening chapter is set in Manhattan. Why begin there, unless to suggest that there is something crucial about the city's cosmopolitanism for an understanding of Ishmael's experience at sea? The conflict between Ishmael and Ahab has been read in many ways: would it be too far-fetched to see it, in part, as a conflict between New York's cosmopolitanism and New England's fundamentalism?

Another writer who embodies the tension between New England and New York is the relatively neglected Theodore Winthrop, who died young, while fighting for the Union Army in 1861. Winthrop's career itself embodies the geographical reorientation toward New York: born in Connecticut, the scion of the famous Winthrop family, educated at Yale, and related to several of its presidents on his mother's side, Winthrop wrote his under-studied, gender-bending gothic novel *Cecil Dreeme* (1862) while living in NYU's University Building. Full of allusions to Shakespeare's plays, *Cecil Dreeme* blends such different genres as advice manuals for young men, the novel of manners, and the sensational city novel epitomized by a novel like George F. Thompson's *New York Life: or, The Mysteries of Upper-Tendom Revealed* (1849).

Like Winthrop, Walt Whitman draws on sensationalist urban genres. Instead of seeing Whitman's poetry as an extension of New England

Transcendentalism, we might view it as the literary flowering of New York cosmopolitanism, arising out of the ethnic ferment that Whitman witnessed in lower New York, as well as the sensationalism of the penny press and of writers like Thompson. In our revised survey of U.S. literature, Whitman retains his place as the national bard, but his poetry represents the aestheticization and nationalization of the New York experience. The historian Thomas Bender accurately observes that “Whitman transformed [the] social materials” provided by “city culture” into “a work of art that at once reveled in and reconciled difference.” Read in this way, Whitman’s poetry offers a rebuke to the traditions of both New England Puritanism and Jeffersonian agrarianism, which have dominated U.S. cultural mythology.

“It is puzzling but true,” writes Bender, “that the outlook associated with New York’s cosmopolitan experience has been unable to establish itself as an American standard.” That is because of the continuing power of what Bender identifies as “the most influential myths of America. . . . Often American history—and the meaning of America—has been framed as a political and cultural dialectic between Virginia and Massachusetts, [between] Cavalier and Yankee,” between Puritan New England and Jeffersonian Virginia. “In spite of the narrowness and purity of the Puritan dream of a ‘city upon a hill’ and of agrarian Jeffersonianism, these myths have come to be associated with the essential America, evoking the virtues of the small town and the agricultural frontier” (Bender 185).

As Bender notes, Puritanism and Jeffersonianism are very different ideologies: “one is religious the other secular; one hierarchical, the other egalitarian; one town-oriented, the other rural; one reminiscent of the medieval worldview, the other drawing upon the Enlightenment.” But in Bender’s analysis, despite their differences in outlook, what Puritanism and Jeffersonianism share is this: “*both reject the idea of difference.* Neither can give positive cultural or political value to heterogeneity or conflict. Each in its own way is xenophobic, and that distances both of them from the conditions of modern life, especially as represented by the historic cosmopolitanism of New York and, increasingly, other cities in the United States” (Bender 186).

Taken together New York writers offer a counter-mythology that has never fully taken hold in the United States, one that is grounded in a

cosmopolitan conception of self and culture. Depending on your perspective, New York City is either the apogee of American culture or the most un-American place in the nation.

I want to conclude by suggesting that this counter-mythology might serve as an antidote to the various forms of intolerance set in motion in the U.S. and abroad by the events of September 11, 2001. Our country will not take up the cosmopolitan alternative that New York offers without the vigorous intervention of teachers, writers, and other educators. Reorienting our accounts of U.S. literary history around the New York experience is one way to fight this intolerance, one way to demonstrate that, far from being “un-American,” cosmopolitanism is one of the oldest and best American traditions.

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