

Olson, Empire, and the thinking of America

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*for Peter Q. who knows how it feels*

“Spurning the clouds written with curses, stamps the stony law to dust, loosing the eternal horses from the dens of night, crying: *Empire is no more! and now the lion and wolf shall cease.*”

—William Blake, “A Song of Liberty”

“Do you think that men who have enjoyed the blessing of liberty will calmly see it snatched away?”

— Toussaint L’Ouverture

“You have no power over my body, neither can you do me any harm . . .”

—Anne Hutchinson to John Winthrop and the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1637

“This country is without hope. Even its garbage is clean . . .”

—Jean Baudrillard, *America*

**America’s reputation** – a quaint word in relation to a long history of violence, conquest, and exploitation – beyond its own shores has been in tatters, at best, in much of the world for a very long time. At “best” because tatters at least retain some mark of the imagination of a time of first distinguishing energies that promised a new world. At worst, with no tatters to invoke that original thought, America is simply a force of destruction, cruel and violent, obliterating everything unique and dear in the world, everything of value. It relentlessly degrades the human world into a homogenized, universal *culturemarket* made up of billions of *consumers*, indistinguishable except for their market profiles. It transforms the physical world into a never ending river of commodities to feed that market, while virtually enslaving whole populations to produce them. Jean Baudrillard’s observation after his cross-country U.S. jaunt pretty much sums it up: “[America] is a world completely rotten with wealth, power, senility, indifference, puritanism and mental hygiene, poverty

and waste, technological futility and aimless violence . . .” While the rest of the world finds this obvious, inhabitants of the United States seem almost aggressively oblivious to it. They continue to repeat the mantra that America is *the best* and that the world should pull up its socks and get on board the modern-democratic-hygenic express because lots of goodies are to be had, including its bestselling products, *democracy* and *liberty*. And so they drive into the sunset, one hand on the steering wheel, the other on a Big Gulp, ignorant of the fact they are the shimmering embodiment of an esoteric doctrine known as *exceptionalism*.

It’s all tied up with the thinking of *America*, a word with many different registers of meaning beyond the definition of the United States. The U.S. is a juridical/political entity occupying part of the northern half of the western hemisphere. Geographically, America is that whole western hemisphere, north, central, and south, pole to pole. One of the habits of U.S. Americans that annoys the other half billion inhabitants of the hemisphere is their assumption that *America* belongs to them, dismissing the rest of us.

But *America* means more than geography. It is an idea, and like all ideas, has a history, though it tends to get lost in the political uses to which the name is put at any given moment. And the history is entangled with other ideas and events. The idea of American exceptionalism was active by the time of the Revolution, central to the commitment of U.S. leaders to spread Republican democracy around the world. It has been the focus of academic debates over the meaning of America since about the time Charles Olson published *Call Me Ishmael*, his first address to America, in 1947. Shortly after that, the premier issue of *American Quarterly*, published by the University of Minnesota, hit academic library shelves across the U.S. Both events were part of a moment in which the active thinking of *America*, as well as **America’s thinking, opened into a range of attention and authority** it had never before been granted. The founding of The American Studies Association followed from *American Quarterly*, which then became its voice. The initial issues of the magazine reflected a strangely naïve intellectual patriotism, probably because the university was still mostly the preserve of privileged men, and they thought of America as . . . well, theirs – which it was. Describing his essay as “**another chapter in the history of American patriotism,**” Merle Curti, in that first issue proposed to make a “contribution to a larger study of the images that peoples in other parts of the world have held of the United States.” It was, he said, to be a scholarly contribution toward persuading the world of America’s exceptional status as the avatar of modernity.

The American Studies Association changed over the years along with the university that nurtured it and the object of its study. In the 1960s, with millions of people in the streets fighting for civil rights, the promised but still undelivered equality, and the end of the war against Viet Nam, the thinking of *America* shifted to a decidedly more critical mode. Universities began the transformation from finishing school for future leaders and managers of the nation to job training centres for the middle class, and their moral focus shifted from anxiety about preserving Christian culture toward an attention to social justice. The curtain of **modernity’s consensus** was pulled back, exposing the “**white man**” operating the levers of illusion. **Authority (which is always problematic in America)** fragmented and American Studies became a centre for theoretically engaging the *exceptionalism* that justified an America of deceit, oppression, aggression, greed, and exploitation.

Olson’s book was part of this conversation. Developed from his Master’s thesis at Wesleyan in the 30’s (and his salvaging of Melville’s dispersed library) and fine-tuned during his coursework with F.

O. Matthieson in the American Civilization program at Harvard, *Call Me Ishmael* entered the growing world of Melville scholarship and the American Studies context it was part of, loudly announcing its difference. Rather than the smooth, seamless rational coherence of sanctioned scholarship, *Call Me Ishmael* unfolds into ir/regulation, dis/continuity, in/coherence. Olson's thinking forays beyond the forms and usages of academic scholarship, radically reassessing Melville, his novel, and the America it addressed. Just as *Moby-Dick* announced the end of the rule of the "empire of forms," *Call Me Ishmael* assaulted the authority of a scholarship divorced from the blood and tears of an actual world. Rather than symbol and allegory, Olson disclosed the economics of the **whaling industry as Melville's** narrative measure of American expansionism. Whale oil, he argued, was the black gold of its day, and whaling the economic engine of the emerging American economy and its drive for world hegemony. **Ahab's maniacal assault on the white whale** mirrored America's drive to consume the world, a drive founded, he proposed, on cannibalism.

Most people track American exceptionalism to John Winthrop's 1630 sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," written on the *Arabella* just offshore from the new world. Winthrop appropriated the biblical reference to a "city on a hill" shining as a beacon to the rest of the world to describe the new colony. That part comes at the end. Most of the rest of the document justifies social and economic inequities as God's will and establishes rules about money. It lays out the nuts and bolts of managing the new colony, from how to mediate disputes over ownership to the proper controls on lending and borrowing. While the authorizing ground of the document remained the Puritan covenant with God, the rules governing the order of the community were made up, based on perceived and projected needs of the community in a strange new land. It established the order of the new society with a text. Sacvan Berkovitch points out that Winthrop did not appeal to family or to utopia, the traditional models for community: "What is displaced is both visionary (a medieval utopia) and actual (familial, communal, and geographical origins). What comes into place is broadly modern: a community written into existence by contract and consent, through a declaration of principles and rules that bend tradition to legitimate a venture in colonial enterprise." Establishing the founding order as textual mattered. Although it would have horrified Winthrop to think so, this gesture projected modernity beyond theory into a world without foundation and opened it to the antinomian implications of liberty.

America was unique in that regard. Even Baudrillard admits it: "America is the original version of modernity. We are the dubbed or subtitled version." That may or may not be exceptional, but it was the first time anyone had established the order of a political body outside the authority of tradition or the transcendental. Upping the ante in 1776, the further act of founding proceeded to incorporate the intellectual pyrotechnics of the Enlightenment in its textual ground. A nation based on philosophy as it was being written by men. It was barely imaginable, a cosmological earthquake. People got excited.

A vision from afar!

Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets, and alarm my Thirteen Angels!

Ah, vision from afar! Ah, rebel form that rent the ancient

Heavens! Eternal Viper self-renew'd, rolling in clouds,

I see thee in thick clouds and darkness on America's shore

William Blake's "Song of Liberty" addressed the thirteen rebellious colonies as angels. In the collective imagination of that moment, *America* opened into an unprecedented range of relational possibilities and prodigalities that, as Blake said, rent the ancient heavens, leveling hierarchies, further democratizing the authority decentered in the Reformation.

Baudrillard goes on, "I cannot help but feel [America] has about it something of the dawning of the universe." The dawning of the universe is serious business. He doesn't specify what it looks like, but it doesn't matter because the dawning itself is the point, just as the textuality is the point in Winthrop's founding sermon. That figurative first light connects to an old American thinking about newness, beginning, discovery, illumination, about an opening beyond the imposed cruelties of the known, in the discovery of a new world. Baudrillard's response registers the perennial American sense of liberty from the drag of history—which is both its doom and its promise. If the founding texts result in a couple of centuries of bad faith, they also crucially preserve the possibility of rewriting the real.

Charles Olson's artistic engagement with America begins with the proposition, "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America," the opening sentence in his first book, and arguably that engagement never ends. He came by his interest honestly. America was an unprecedented opportunity for Europe's poor in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It offered them land, independence, and the right to participate in the redistributed sovereignty of the Republic, none of which were available to them in Europe. But it also promised the liberty not to participate if you didn't want to. After a couple of thousand years under the thumb of one monarch or another, with one bunch of Cossacks or another riding through your hovel, it sounded pretty good, even if there were no guarantees. To the young Olson, growing up in the heart of the old, revolutionary United States surrounded by its monuments and battlefields, America looked like a promise realized. Olson, the son and grandson of working class immigrant families, lived the promise, attending some of the finest schools in America's and realizing what his family could never have achieved in the old class bound structures of Europe.

At Worcester Classical High School, Olson was exposed to the wild outburst of American writing from the mid-nineteenth century. It balanced his classical education and added depth to a sense of a particular America of value. Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Fuller, Dickinson, Whitman, and Melville challenged the authority of the empire of literary forms (and the thinking that is tied up in it), opening up new paths for writing and thinking in the same American space that Olson shared with them. Emerson was the heart and mind behind it. Olson chose his essay, "The American Scholar," as the subject of his commencement address at Wesleyan. Emerson's call to arms arose out of anxiety about the timidity of American art and scholarship in rising to its unique occasion and producing something new from within its own specificity. The fact he thought it possible testifies to the emergence of some new spirit, one he identified with "the near, the low, the common." At the same time he proposed that American specificity as transitive, not thinkers, but thinking, which he in fact did. His condemnation of "Genius" that "leaves the temple to haunt the senate or the market" and his passionate, demonstrative love of the process of thinking, its surprising activity, rather than its accumulation and possession, left a deep mark on Olson.

Olson's landmark essay, "Projective Verse," folds Emerson's "Man Thinking" into what Olson calls the projective, which entails not only a mode of writing, or even, as Olson states, a stance, but a

whole new propositional real in which such a stance can find traction. Emerson recognized the unfolding (American) real in the loss of bedrock truth or law, say its *textuality*. Mood displaces knowledge, or at the very least, casts it in its tone, leaving knowledge with no truths to grasp. “Gladly we would anchor,” he wrote, “but the anchorage is quicksand.” It won’t just *not* hold you; it will swallow you.

Baudrillard notes the other side of the modern: “America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth. Having known no **primitive accumulation of time, it lives in a perpetual present.**” That lack of accumulated time leaves serious conversation in America a difficult event. Without history, or at the least some common representation of the past besides cartoonish “**myths**” of **shared turkeys**, felled cherry trees, and perennial victory there is no given common ground from which people can begin to address each other and their situation. On the other hand, these same conditions entangle and shape **Emerson’s** moral perfectionism, his prescient tropological morality with no foundation in law. Contradictions multiply without any hope of rectification. Contra-diction, against the word which is the hope of rectification. The idiocy of liberty.

Emerson leverages that in “**Self-Reliance**” into an uncompromised (groundless) but easy engagement with the emergent world, “**the nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner,**” he calls it. Olson finds confirmation of **that new cosmology in Whitehead’s process philosophy.** He works out one of its implications is his critique of inherited prosodic modes (what used to be called the “**laws of verse**”) as the enactment of nostalgia for a non-existent ground. Prosody is cosmology, the rhythm and rhyming of knowing. And the freedom to shape prosodic form outside the given, to make something new, something that equals the real itself, becomes entangled with the thinking of liberty.

Liberty is an uneasy thought these days, largely because of the duplicity that surrounds it. After nearly 350 years of slavery and its aftermath in Jim Crow, segregation, institutional lynching, and programmatic lethal violence by police, the word rings hollow. When the U.S. waves the flag of “**liberty**” while laying waste to anything that gets in the way of its expansion, liberty becomes a joke, the punchline in a story about how to distract a sucker while you lift his wallet and leave him stranded. It’s an old American tradition that goes back to John Winthrop, again, and his “**Little Speech**” in 1645. Responding to a failed attempt to challenge his power to manipulate elections, he contracted liberty into two opposite possibilities, predictably a good kind and a bad kind. Outside the law, he said, liberty **involved acting like an animal: it was** “common to man with beasts and other creatures. By this, man, as he stands in relation to man simply, hath liberty to do what he lists.” A certain terror lurked in the shadow of that “**lists,**” **one where animals and humans listed to do unspeakable things with each other in the tenebrous reaches of the wilderness.** Winthrop called it *natural* liberty, gobsmacking “**Nature**” and exposing it to all manner of assault. The good kind, logically consistent with his gender theology, offered an early taste of later Orwellian developments. You were to use your liberty, Winthrop said, to freely give up your liberty, like a good wife freely gives over her liberty to her husband when she marries. He called this patriarchal travesty *civil* liberty.

Anne Hutchinson was decidedly not a good wife in Winthrop’s terms. She adhered to a religious view called antinomianism which held that salvation was through grace, not works, and that the Christian was therefore not bound by moral law. More importantly, she refused to stand down when

ordered to do so by Winthrop and the General Court. She was not only a bad wife, she was disobedient. Her lawlessness extended from the theological to the domestic in a defiant assertion of her liberty from the authority of the Court. In a **show trial that could have been a model for Stalin's** judicial monstrosities, Hutchinson was condemned as a heretic and an instrument of the devil, and, along with her family and followers, expelled from the Bay colony. They were later killed in an Indian attack on Long Island. In a journal entry dated September, 1643, Winthrop coolly described the massacre of Hutchinson and her family and blamed it on them for having “**cast off ordinances and churches.**”

Winthrop was surely thinking of his old enemy and her antinomianism when he distinguished between lawless (animal) and lawful (human) liberty. Susan Howe has proposed antinomianism, that lawless liberty or liberty from the law, as an elemental American mode of thinking. She locates its beginning with two exemplary women: Hutchinson and Mary Rowlandson. In **Hutchinson's case**, the lawlessness is obvious. The intellectual repercussions flow out of her arcane theology into issues of the liberty of conscience and freedom from mental law. Her antinomian belief in a covenant of grace was in many ways less threatening than her refusal to recognize patriarchal law on any level, her open defiance of Winthrop and the General Court.

Rowlandson represents a different face of lawless. Captured by Indians **during King Philip's War** and held in captivity for 11 months before being ransomed, Rowlandson wrote about it in a strangely conflicted narrative. Howe proposes that Rowlandson went through a kind of reverse conversion that lurks in her text beneath the socially required rectitude of her surface **narrative**. She “**excavates and subverts her own rhetoric,**” Howe points out. **In Howe's reading, Rowlandson's** captivity exposed her to the world beyond the pale and she tasted the openness of the wild as she relished the taste of raw horse flesh. She was set on “**a forced march away from Western rationalism, deep and deeper into Limitlessness, where all illusion of volition, all individual identity may be transformed—assimilated.**” This image embodies **Winthrop's nightmare of natural liberty.**

Not actually antinomian in the religious sense that Hutchinson was, Rowlandson's **narrative still** resonates with the potential freedom opened in the entangled encounter with American space. Even the implicit duplicity of its form, a captivity narrative containing a secret conversion narrative, speaks to the lawlessness just past the frontier. Antinomianism and liberty, although not the same, both question the law **and stand disobedient before Winthrop's Court and his** “civil liberty.” Antinomianism involves opposing the *nomos* which is grounded in custom and usage. Liberty, which comes out of the Latin *liber*, refers to the absence of restraints and is connected through *liberalis* to a sense of generosity. Liberty is perhaps more open in the prodigality of its possible dispositions than antinomianism, which it provides ground for. While Howe persuasively locates Emily **Dickinson's** work as antinomian (although not in the root, religious sense), it **can't be separated from the** discourse of liberty. Liberty, Emerson said, is “the doctrine of poets.” They both fed into what Howe calls “**the primordial struggle of North American literary expression.**”

In that expansive sense, antinomianism and liberty are two aspects of the thinking of writing as they affect the determination of the next word, how the form-ing of language is engaged, whether left to a habit that evades thinking or a rule that tries to abolish death, or embraced as an articulating entanglement with the finitude of an im-perfection of emerging. Howe points to the radical textual **formations of Dickinson's fascicles**, and argues that the ongoing (male) editorial regularizing of her

wild, eccentric forms indicates the war in American culture on antinomianism, especially on women writers. But Emerson is still **everywhere in Dickinson's** thinking, from his proposal for an American art and writing that "**announces what no man foretold**" to his call for writers to "**upheave nature.**" Dickinson's challenge to the authority of thought and form answers that call. So do Whitman's invention of a new line and his challenge to laws of Christian moralism. And Thoreau's (and Emerson's) invention of a new form of writing thinking, formerly known as "**philosophy.**" If liberty masks U.S. hegemonic violence with a razzle dazzle phantasm, it is no less this thinking of freedom among words—among many other things. Its nature is extravagant and prodigal in its imperfections.

What Howe calls "the erasure of antinomianism in our culture" is related to what others refer to as "Empire," at least as it **metaphorically entails the eradication of difference and the elimination of resistance** to its totalizing power. It came on hard and fast in America, **lurking in Winthrop's** rhetoric as much as in the land grabs and outbreaks of violence against the natives. Francis Jennings argues each of the English colonies was a mini-Empire, and they quickly embraced genocide against their new neighbours, playing one native tribe against another, as they began their relentless expansion across the continent. In 1638, under the command of Captain John Mason, English colonists allied with Narragansett warriors bypassed a military engagement with Pequod warriors with whom they had provoked hostilities, and instead attacked the Pequod village at Mystic where they massacred over four hundred undefended and unarmed children, women, and elderly. They then beat a retreat from the enraged Pequod warriors who had been waiting to fight them elsewhere, till they were resupplied with arms and men and turned and destroyed the Pequods. They wrapped up this initial exercise in genocide by systematically tracking down survivors, executing captured males, and either killing the females, giving them as gifts to allied native tribes, or selling them as slaves in the West Indies. The United States emerged from the blood and enslavement of the Pequods, while arguably America was lost.

Melville, so crucial to Olson's thinking, tended to identify his boats with *America* and to load their names with significance. The Confidence Man's steamer is "Fidèle," *faithful*, but also *believer*, a poke at the gullible, self-deceived Americans living merrily in the midst of an unacknowledged horror. *Pequod*, the name of Ahab's ship in *Moby-Dick*, is even more pointed, identifying that floating, catastrophic America with its founding genocide, as if America was lost before it was ever found. Olson confronted the loss early in the poetry: "About seven years | and you can carry cinders | in your hand for what || America was worth," he stated in "*Captain Christopher Levett (of York)*," written in early 1958.

It was a complicated kind of loss, tied up with Olson's complex sense of the destructive energies unleashed by the failure, as Emerson had it, to actually discover America. Slavery figures in it. Although slavery was not the defining institution in New England that it was in the South, Olson does address it in "Letter 14" in story of John Hawkins, a slave trader, and the way in which his "business" was part of the failure of America. Christopher Levett, on the other hand embodies a particular relation to the world, the *stance* Olson also writes about in relation to John Smith, and Hawkins' father, William, who "made friends / among the natives, Sierra Leone / or Brazil // And had such honor / in the new places . . ." Smith, another early European explorer, was significant for Olson because he "was doing it for one of the very first times. It's a different thing, to feel a coast, an ancient thing this Smith had, what men had to have before Pytheas." This timeless mode of

encounter or entanglement with the wild/world (which Olson translates into his sense of the *postmodern*, groundless and projective) is also initial, not as time factored, but as always further.

In “The Kingfishers,” his meditation on change and renewal, Olson identified it with the ancient Mayans, one of the first first people in America, who, Olson says, because of that, were “hot to get it down the way it was.” That “hot to get it down the way it was” points to the same attention Olson found in Pleistocene man, inventing the human in the shadow of the retreating glaciers as they encountered another “new world:” “A new world took form,” Carl Sauer, Olson’s favourite geographer, wrote, “developing the physical geography that we know. The period was one of maximum opportunity for progressive and adventurous man.” That relation remains a potentiality, waiting to be activated. For Olson, two factors figure in the loss of that *ontological adventure* for the Maya, and presumably ourselves: the slippage of attention, a kind of epistemological failure or laziness, and “that other conqueror we more naturally recognize / he so resembles ourselves,” Conquest is one name for it, Ahab’s mad drive to kill the whale, a compulsion Melville connected to the fear of death and modernity’s controlling subject.

Olson ran smack into it during his war time work at the Office of War Information. Whatever lingering sense he might have nursed about the moral purpose, as Ken Warren has it, of the United States as a force for world historic change, ended in his recognition of the decidedly immoral political machinations and maneuvering for post-war expansion and world dominance that gripped the state apparatus from the front lines to the upper echelons of the U.S. government. It was a deeply transitional moment for Olson in which his belief in the transformative power of American democracy, a belief grounded in the fight against fascism which saw him justify certain political choices he later rejected, came crashing down. It wasn’t abstract. He was in the thick of it, making calls as the ground shifted under his feet. His plan to reenergize the practice of democracy in the U.S. ran head first into the new Praetorian Guard of Coca-Cola marketers imported from Madison Avenue to sell the war and prepare the ground for post-war American expansion into the ruins. Olson tried to carry on but he was censored into silence. Rather than write ad copy to sell American hegemony, he resigned:

(o statue

o Republic, o

Tell-A-Vison, the best

is soap. The true troubadours

are CBS. Melopoeia

is for Coke by Cokes out of

Pause

Soon after, he severed his ties to the Democratic Party which had been grooming him for leadership. At Berkeley, he referred to this moment of renunciation as his “only advantage:” “And in fact, the only advantage I have is that I didn’t [run the country], so I can stand here among men who have done what I couldn’t do, can’t do.”

It not only marked the end of Olson’s political career, it marked the end of any lingering illusions about the value of the U.S. as moral agent of change. It marked the beginning of his resistance to U.S. violence in all its forms, from international economic and political conquest, to cultural homogenization and commodification, to the continuing war with antinomianism, to its aggressive national narcissism and ignorance of anything other than its meagre fantasy of its own “exceptional” self. In recent years, Olson has been accused, among other things, of complicity with something called Empire, and specifically American Empire, a notion that circulates widely, although often without much attention to questions about “Empire’s” composition, or even its existence. Mostly these days, “Empire” functions as a metaphor for evil rather than as a descriptor of an actual organization of power. The threat of the Imperial Death Star replaces discriminations of sovereignty in discussions of the role of the U.S. in the world.

Once the metaphorical fog gets cleared, questions surrounding sovereignty and Empire are multiple and complex, and related to the United States, seem to come down to two possibilities: there is an American Empire, but it differs from historical Empires because it developed out of a new form of sovereignty; or, however brutal the push for U.S. hegemony may be, there is no American “Empire” because, as Walter Scheidel argues, “[i]n the most fundamental terms, the capitalist world system is not conducive to archaic flavors of territorial conquest, and it is hard to conceive of any realistic scenario that would make long-term violations of this principle appear both desirable and feasible.” This is not to deny the fact of U.S. hegemony, its military interventions, its control of international monetary policy, and its self-interested manipulations of trade. But it does clarify how metaphorical distortions obscure rather than illuminate actual dynamics.

Complexities aside, the analyses point to sovereignty and law as determining issues in understanding American power. They are relevant as well in understanding Olson’s relation to America. A specific unprecedented form of sovereignty developed in British North America. It differed from the forms of sovereignty that other European colonial powers imported to the new world, mostly because the various European colonizers came with different intent and encountered different worlds.

In Mexico, the Spanish found a world they knew well. The enormous, complex, oppressive Aztec bureaucracy with crowns, priest castes, nobility, warriors, and slaves, was much like home. Sovereignty was centralized and hierarchical. The Spanish, who were there for the loot and not settlement, took over by replacing the ruling class. They allowed large groups of Aztecs (mostly nobles) to gather for religious ceremonies. In the midst of their worship, the Spanish massacred them, as Pedro de Alvarado did at the Main Temple of Tenochtitlan in 1521. Once the seats of power were vacated of Indians, the Spanish invited themselves in and started running the place. One of the first orders of business, learned from the Christian destruction of pagan religions in Medieval Europe, was razing Tenochtitlan and building Mexico on its ruins. The natives were subjugated and used for labour.

For all its own particular horrors, British North America differed. English colonizers did not import monarchical sovereignty. Instead they invented a new form based on their particular (though not

exceptional) American experience. While Spain transferred its transcendent, monarchical sovereignty to Mexico, in British North America, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point out in their book, *Empire*, republican sovereignty developed in relation to the settlement of a new kind of space. Sovereignty was reorganized as a “**universal republic, a network of powers and counter-powers structured in a boundless and inclusive architecture**” While the “imperial” nature of this sovereignty **is a subject of contention, its revolutionary structure isn’t**. As Haedt and Negri argue, “Against the tired transcendentalism of modern sovereignty, presented either in Hobbesian or Rousseauian form, the American constituents thought that only the republic can give order to democracy, or really that the order of the multitude must be born not from the transfer of the title of power and right, but from an arrangement interior to the multitude, from a democratic interaction of powers linked together in networks.”

Hardt’s and Negri’s **new form** of power is *made* rather than *bestowed* from above. Grounded in text, it established the common, the ordinary as the metric of the real. De Crevecoeur described this state (of being) in *Letters from an American Farmer*. Travelling through the New York countryside, he observed there was **no** “. . . hostile castle, and haughty mansion, contrasted with the clay-built hut and miserable cabin, where cattle and men help to keep each other warm, and dwell in meanness, smoke, and indigence. A pleasing uniformity of decent competence appears throughout our habitations.” He goes on to condemn both the horror of slavery and the savagery of the frontier, so he was no dewy eyed *Americainiste*. But he recognized something new when he saw it.

The founders of America, at least the ones who wrote about it, had no problem with Empire. In fact, only in the last century has Empire taken on the associations with evil currently identified with it. For those early Americans, the Roman Empire, with its republican structure, stood at the pinnacle of civilized accomplishment. Besides providing artistic and architectural inspiration, it became the basis of their program for using republican democracy as a control apparatus. Whether this meets the requirements to be classified as *Empire* is less interesting than the new reality it introduced to power. **Rizomic, to invoke Deleuze, rather than vertically rooted, it operates through networks.** It “is constructed on the model of rearticulating and open space and reinventing incessantly diverse and singular relations in networks across unbounded terrain,” as Hardt and Negri observe. The experience of “**liberty**” (which everywhere infused the European air in those days, informing new thinking about self, authority, nature, economics, government, knowledge, time, space, and God) is at the heart of it. Sovereignty, Hardt and Negri point out, **is “affirmed, different from the European one: liberty is made sovereign and sovereignty is defined as radically democratic within an open and continuous process of expansion.”** This new phenomenological space is “free of forms of **centralization and hierarchy typical of Europe**” and European colonial ventures such as Mexico. It *opens* into a new potential experience of *spacetime*.

The question of space and time and self – what are they, what is their relation, how are we to think them past the now defunct Cartesian schema – **are central to Olson’s thinking in everything he** wrote. While they are Given within any specific epistemological framework, they are always propositional. From Pliny to Copernicus to Newton to Einstein and Bohr, the proposition changes with the epistemology. Mythic time, circular time, empty time, shopping time, bent time, all appear in the shifting focus of mental **lenses’ concentration**. *Spacetime is* are opening, foraying, furthering past any settlement of the moment. **Olson’s SPACE** as he engaged it in the beginning of the Melville book registered a new opening. This opening rends, shattering the integrity of feudal time with its

hierarchy of sacred days and the divine wheel of their turning. It spreads out, opening as/into liberty. Connected to the hegemonic **narrative of the American “frontier,”** it implicates liberty in the removal of the indigenous populations not just from sight, but from memory. Hence what Melville in 1855 in *The Confidence Man* called the metaphysics of Indian hating in a chapter wryly titled “**Containing the Metaphysics of Indian Hating, according to the views of one** evidently not so prepossessed as Rousseau in favour of savages.” Melville identified that hypocrisy as a poison in the heart of the United States, then in the midst of the so-called Indian Wars, the final genocidal wave that eliminated the aboriginal populations from American space. There can be no frontier if people live on the other side of it.

But the frontier was only one fact of the *opening* as millennial event. Contradictions erupt in irreconcilable openings beyond that. In Mexico the native population provided slave labour for the extraction of wealth and so continued to provide value to their conquerors. In the U.S. native populations obstructed expansion and so were erased from the U.S. national cultural memory other than as figurative elements in adventure narratives or moral allegories of Rousseauian primitivism. The moral corruption of the removal of Native Americans from their land marked the birth of the U.S. in hegemonic violence. But the opening of the liberty of this new space was/is multitudinous and ontologically contradictory. While the *otherness* of the natives was encountered as an obstacle and eliminated, the *otherness* of the *spacetime* beyond the “frontier” became part of an unprecedented, determining experience of the real. Octavio Paz locates it as a contesting otherness beyond the range of psycho/sociology, that *wild* that Mary Rowlandson *discovered-herself-in-and-in-herself*, the *dark matter* of the world that abides within the common. Paz, in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, has it as the *other side of reality and links it to poetry’s openness*: “[A]lthough tied to a specific soil and a specific history, poetry has always been open, in each and every one of its manifestations, to a transhistorical beyond. I do not mean religious beyond: I am speaking of the perception of the *other side of reality*.” The complexity of any moment and its irrepressible prodigality of meaning and sense is not a matter of history (a chain of causes leading to) nor is it reducible to a moral consistency. It is an otherness that fills without ever quite fulfilling while opening into the transhistorical and transnational.

The hegemonic drive of U.S. expansion across North America continued occupying space so it could expand its networks. But *otherness* is entangled in the emergence of this new mode of sovereignty. Liberty’s **sovereignty** is extravagant, not allegorical. The potential spills out in-filtrating minds with potential form. Olson’s **SPACE** is one fact of it. Large, he says, and without mercy. That **SPACE** and the colonizing, genocidal space of Manifest Destiny both emerge in liberty’s opening. But whereas Manifest Destiny concluded at the edge of the continent, **Olson’s** projective opened into the wild that is excluded from the United States, that “natural liberty” that resists any fore-closure of form in the name of law.

Olson’s attention always focussed on the big picture and what it revealed about the otherness of our circumstance. His sense of the violent historical conflicts between peoples was contextualized within his thinking of migration as the constant fact of the human: “**Migration in fact (which is probably / as constant in history as any one thing: migration,**” which, he goes on, “always leads to a new center.” He is careful to **keep its feet on the ground**, specifying it as “the pursuit by animals, plants & men of a suitable / . . . environment.” On this scale, movement problematizes moral judgement since the forces involved are inhuman. Humans merely move with and within the inevitable and

perennial process of the world. Olson took one of his leads here from Brooks Adams' proposal that two great migrations (or, as Adams called them, Expansions) defined Indo-European history. Driven by revolutions in metallurgy, radical new technologies, one extended from 3500 BCE to 284 CE (during which time assorted empires rose and fell to the delight of later historians), and the other from about 1000 to 1897 and after, which included the invasion, conquest and settlement of the Americas by Europeans and the birth of several actual Empires.

In "Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn," Olson contrasted this view of the orders of time, which he called millennial, to what he here called "history," another word that takes on multiple meanings in his thinking depending on his focus. Here humanism defines "history" both in scale and content. It gives coherence to the (made-up) story of the human. The millennial opens into movements on a scale that renders the human insignificant. Migration is constant. Flows of peoples up out of Asia and across what became Europe; flows of "three huge drives from the Polar North down on to the three legs of the future;" flows across the Bering ice bridge and down the west coast of America in one violent displacing wave after another, none of which invoke moral angst. Once history is out of the way the millennial reveals a world of perpetual motion that, if you push it back to Pangea, as Olson does, is as much geological as it is biological – or, say, a determining order of cosmos, a prevailing habit of the real. Flows slow and seem to stop, but the movement just shifts scale, new centers form, from micro to macro, and around them stable structures. Then migration becomes centralized, hierarchical, and stable till some other wave or expansion, some multitude on the move, crashes into it and the pieces scatter.

Which was not much comfort to the Pequods, or anyone else who found themselves in the path of that juggernaut out of Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Olson didn't have much to say in the poetry about that dimension of the English encounter with the existing inhabitants of the place he otherwise writes in such detail. It is a painful absence in some ways. But the issue was not out of mind, although as usual for Olson, his emphasis was on understanding the big picture rather than expressing moral judgments. After the publication of *Call Me Ishmael*, he planned out a companion volume to be called *Operation Red, White, and Black* which fell through when he was unable to find funding. The proposal, included in the *Journal of the Charles Olson Archive* #5, began with the judgment that: ". . . the reality of our past has been so laid over by the moral assumptions of the writers that we know nothing of our selves. I see in the Indian, white and Negro life here on this continent a series of FACTS which, if properly selected, juxtaposed and coldly told, will together make a FABLE mostly now unknown." Earlier in 1947 he had noted: "or *Open* here 6. CABEZA DE VACA: and turn back to Indians via de Vaca's medicine, so that you catch all three—White, Indian, Negro at once." And then, in a further note: "But the first fact is that the American Indian has made a life out here in North and South America a hell of a lot longer than we whites: 10,000 years ago he came, and from that time to 1500 A.D. (Anno Diaboli in his reckoning) he was boss here."

Olson's recognition of 1500 as Anno Diaboli for the native Americans clarifies his sympathy for their circumstance, but his thinking focusses largely on the wandering de Vaca who briefly crystalized an exceptional American reality, a new world in which the Europeans and African took up the mode of life of the Native Americans they encountered in their walk from sea to sea, integrating their knowledge of this place, and living together peacefully. Having become a healer using Native knowledge and techniques, de Vaca and his companions were followed by increasingly

large numbers of Indians until they encountered Spanish conquistadors in northwest Mexico. The new world ended when the Spanish gathered up de Vaca's native followers and sold them as slaves.

Olson's SPACE connects only tenuously with these "historical" issues. It occurs in another register of phenomenological encounter, the event of the open, "free of the forms of centralization and hierarchy typical of Europe," and entangled with the process that Emerson points out goes on day and night. Both spaces exist simultaneously in an irreducible complexity of contradictions without hope of resolution. Olson's SPACE announces the end of the space and time of Euroamerican modernity and the various dualist apparatuses they enliven through their separation. It embodies sheer physicality entangled in *spacetime* as the projective emergence of the real.

In that sense, Olson's understanding of "history" opens into a new dimension. Writing about Thoreau in *The Senses of Walden*, Stanley Cavell observed that ". . . America exists only in its discovery and its discovery is always an accident; and to the obsession with freedom, and with building new structures and forming new human beings with new minds to inhabit them; and to the presentiment that this unparalleled opportunity has been lost forever." Given these terms, the SPACE Olson claims in *Call Me Ishmael* names the encounter with the open as discovery. It is the open as specifically discovery after the closed, well-trodden spaces of Europe. Olson does not propose this "space" within the modern discourse of binaries, and specifically a binary involving *time* and *history* as a series of causally related moments. He moved beyond that Newtonian box of containers that hold the world hostage to their discrete mutually exclusive measures. Time, then, not as a succession of discrete moments; not even as relative or dilated. Space not as an empty container; not even bent or contracted. At Goddard College, Olson was explicit that it "is rather quantum physics than relativity which will supply a proper evidence here, as against naturalism, of what Melville was grabbing on to when he declared it was *visible* truth he was after. For example, that life, that light is not only a wave, but a corpuscle. Or that the electron is not only a corpuscle, but a wave." Time, then, as an aspect of emergence, a dynamic field of space/time/matter.

Locked in the duality of time and space, imperial culture defines its spatial control in terms of temporal achievement, as the apex of a narrative of history. For Western Europe this has meant an attachment to the achieved form as a confirmation of the cultural perfection of Empire. An Empire of forms dictates the limits of the imagination in compulsory hierarchies of value and excellence, and within that, recapitulates the forms of Empire. Time becomes the time of power within the forms of Empire. They are varied and ubiquitous in every register of life and thrive within the closure of the fantasy of perfection. Olson's SPACE reopens time into the im/perfections of liberty's prodigal entanglements. Space doesn't contain, it opens, is opening. The shifting forms of sovereignty mark the change of Empire's achieved time of consolidated conquest into the restless networks of American hegemony, an entanglement that also yields the times of Charles Mingus and Thelonious Monk, of Louis Zukofsky and Robert Creeley, of Philip K. Dick and Diane Williams. The entanglement of resistance. The entanglement of restless imagination. The entanglements of the prodigality of the opening, the projective.

Taking his lead from the mathematics of Bernhard Riemann and the process philosophy of Whitehead, and locating them in the strangeness of Bohr's quantum physics, Olson wrote the end of a world of discrete objects and temporal progression and in its stead wrote world as a dynamic creative manifold emergence. Olson moves beyond modernity's space/time binary and establishes a

continual dynamic of manifold congruences that express the open where *spacetime* emerges as/in liberty, undetermined. We are returned to discovery as event, our event. In this sense there is no “history” in *The Maximus Poems*. Even with their incessant attention to the minutia of America’s past as he located it in often obscure texts, the past does not unfold in a meaningful order. There is only the discovery of this moment in all its richness.

The texts remain, remnants of the multiplicity of *spacetime*’s diverse emergence. And the texts, when deployed within another text, begin to embody *spacetime* in complexities of relation that undo past-present-future – say, on Madam Gross’s lawn in *Maximus III*.135, *wherewhen* a world is played as on strings: “even as that fox / was seen by me, that what // I offer you as now out of my right eye myrtle / flower and leaf are loud by presence solely // and gone in the thought.” Even as Olson is decentered by the fox, objectified, recomposed in that entanglement of forms of being, he is (dis)located by the mass of recorded details of events that are gone but that are here, that *are here*, as related in the previous three pages of the (not) past that are entangled in the moment on the lawn. The event is discovery, surprise, projective, liberty.

In the 1960s and into the 70s, resistance to the brutality of U.S. hegemonic violence spread around the globe even as the two superpowers competed for dominance: the armed struggles in South East Asia; the anti-Soviet movements in Eastern Europe; the anti-colonial wars in Africa, the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist student uprisings in Europe and the Americas, black militancy and self-defence in the United States. The disciplinary orders of the hegemonic powers began to lose their hold.

Various forces intersected in this event in the United States: the spread of the counter-culture, the New (and elements of the Old) Left, the women’s movement, various identity groups, artists and writers of many stripes, and ordinary people who, confronted by Selma, My Lai, and Kent State, had had enough and were energized to fight for justice on multiple fronts. This world-wide mass movement included diverse modes of resistance. Because of its nature as *mass*, no single interest or issue, no single demand or orientation, no single strategy or tactic, dominated. It opened forms of life into the multiplicity of their actual composition in resistance to the law’s containment. One of its prods was the continued thinking of liberty and of a lost or undiscovered America.

Among writers and artists living and working in some state of resistance to the hegemonic apparatus, *The New American Poetry 1945-60* became a significant provocation, offering a focus for one range of resistance to what Hardt and Negri call “the mass refusal of the disciplinary regime.” Barney Rosset’s Grove Press, which published *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* in 1960, was active in opposing U.S. hegemonic ambitions on multiple fronts, both political and artistic. In addition to the *New American Poetry 1945-1960* and books by Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Leroy Jones/Amiri Baraka, Jean Genet, Michael Rumaker, and Octavio Paz, Grove published Regis Debray’s *Revolution in the Revolution* (1967), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1967), *Fidel Castro Speaks* (1970), Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), *Che Guevara Speaks* (1968), and numerous other works that were central to the resistance. Because of this the CIA targeted Rosset and the press in Operation CHAOS, its domestic espionage program.

Part of the hegemonic program of the U.S. involved monopolizing information dissemination, maintaining control over the representation of its violence and the resistance to it. *The New American Poetry* was implicated in the push to resist that control. Every word assaulted U.S.

expansionist violence and the empire of forms central to its cultural control mechanism. Olson's essay, "Projective Verse," became a celebrated articulation of an opening beyond that constricted real. If the book raised the American flag (or a fragment of it) on its cover, it was to recall the myth of revolutionary intent entangled in the nation's confused thought of itself. To undertake to rewrite America remains an American thought if only because the original claim was textual. The poets in *The New American Poetry* did that repeatedly, leading to a proliferation of radical poetics that quickly spread beyond its initial limited (mostly white male) contributors to include a diverse uproar, including, as Ammiel Alcalay has pointed out, Ann Charters, Hettie Jones, D.H. Melhem, Joanne Kyger, Diane diPrima, Susan Howe, Rosemary Waldrop, Alice Notley, Eileen Myles, Ann Waldman, Daphne Marlatt, Kathleen Fraser, Diane Wakoski, and many others. One of the centers of that uproar, one of its provocations, as Amiri Baraka confirmed, was Olson's projectivist poetics, which in his autobiography, Baraka described as a bible that gave "voice to feelings I had about poetry and about society."

But Olson's sense of politics extended his poetics beyond the poem into the meat of the day with which the poem is entangled. As Baraka went on to note, "What fascinated me about Olson was his sense of having dropped out of the U.S." At the Berkeley poetry conference in 1965 (in the midst of the international political uproar), Olson introduced this politics into the mix, resisting the institutional inertia that threatened the conference itself with becoming integrated, despite its content, into the disciplinary regime, in this particular case, of Literature.

In 1962 at Goddard College Olson announced that poetry readings had become a bore: ". . . it's become a performing art, you feel as though you have an audience, and as if you're supposed to do a concert or something." His unease had to do with the loss of poetry's contact with the immediate, the revelation of language's naked entanglement with liberty. The projective, not as an idea, but as exposure, the dynamic of exposure and the refusal of the disciplinary regime that emerges to limit its opening by commodifying it, institutionalizing it. In Berkeley, after several days and a series of conventional readings, Olson took to the stage with a bottle of Cutty Sark and famously held it for over three hours. It was a stunning – performance is the wrong word – present-ing, presencing, a revelation of mind at work in all its flawed but beautiful amplitude, an offering of contact, or as Al Glover proposed, a spontaneous recital in Avicenna's sense of ta'wil as the revelation of the soul's ascent.

Olson came to Avicenna through Henry Corbin's work in 1960 in the essay, "Cyclical Time in Mazdaism and Ismailism." Three days before his event while in Berkeley, he read from Corbin's *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* regarding the two groups of terrestrial angels: the ones on the right who know and order and the ones on the left who act and obey and who are the titular spirits of writers. The Avicennan notion of the ta'wil, according to Corbin, "usually forms with tanzil a pair of terms and notions that are at once complementary and contrasting. Tanzil properly designates positive religion, the letter of the Revelation dictated to the Prophet by the Angel. It is to cause the descent of the Revelation from the higher world. Ta'wil is, etymologically and inversely, to cause to return, to lead back, to restore to one's origin and to the place where one comes home, consequently to return to the true and original meaning of a text." Olson's Berkeley ta'wil stunned an audience waiting for a poetry reading (including Olson's friend, Robert Duncan, who famously walked out in the middle of it). It was a marvellous moment in which Olson's politics/poetics came together in a stunning "admission:" "You know—I'm the white man. I'm that famous thing, the white man. The

ultimate paleface. The noncorruptible, the good. The thing that runs this country, or that is this country.” Olson’s revelation comes in the midst of an admission of a sense of inadequacy and jealousy: “And I sat in Gloucester, suffering, suffering! That the world had been captured by Allen and Peter and Gregory, and in fact, their own master (like my Pound), Burroughs.”

Coming from someone considered by many to be one of the most powerful men in the world of contemporary poetry, a patriarchal figure, this confession in itself was deeply political in its self-exposure of the poet’s weakness and humanness. It was a public outing of the duplicity of the image of implacable masculine authority. He went on to mention Gregory Corso’s reading in Buffalo earlier in 1965, and revealed one source of his sense of inadequacy to be his “protected” existence: “I never read in a coffee house in my life. I never spent an hour in jail.” The statement about being a white man follows, which in this context, seems to be a confession of his understanding of the way his “social identity” (big white male) has negatively limited his experience of the world, including access to funky reading venues. He goes on: “And in fact, the only advantage I have is that I didn’t [run the country], so I can stand here among men who have done what I couldn’t do, can’t do,” acknowledging his rejection of that powerful role in the post-war Democratic party, and his solidarity with those who never had the choice.

Beyond that, the implications call attention to Olson’s growing consciousness and acknowledgement of the emerging democratic diversity of voices rising in America (and around the world), the eruption of contradiction into the body politic, out of the resistance to American hegemony (many inspired and provoked by *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*) and his desire to stand among them. It announces his awareness of the inequity at the heart of American life. A few minutes later he responds to Ed Sanders, saying, “I don’t like that first Maximus. I never have, because of that goddamn principle which is phallic—I mean, it’s like a phallic image. And, you know, that’s a lot of bull shit . . .”

Around this time Olson was composing the Maximus poem that begins, “I have been an ability—a machine—up to / now. An act of ‘history’, my own, and my father’s, . . .” He goes on to identify his own immigrant past: “my father a Swedish / wave of / migration after / Irish? like Negroes / now like Leroy and Malcolm / X the final wave / of wash upon this / desperate / ugly / cruel / Land this Nation / which never / lets anyone / come to / shore . . .” If it is a “filthy land,” a “foul country” where “human lives are so much trash,” (the eternal disappointment) it is also still potential – the United States does not, in other words, control the final determination of America, that endless potential of liberty: “And an end to Hell / --end even to Heaven / a life America shall yield / or we will leave her / and ask Gloucester / to sail away . . .”

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