

Introduction

Per Winther

University of Oslo

"The Re-Mythologizing of America" was the subject of a mini-conference at the Department of British and American Studies, University of Oslo, in May 1997. The papers read there make up this "Special Issue" of *American Studies in Scandinavia*.

Nations generally require, and therefore construct, some set of cultural imperatives, or mythology even, to make sense of, or to justify, aspects of the national experience. Central planks in the USA's ideological platform— notions like "the American Dream," "American Exceptionalism," and "the Melting Pot"—have in recent decades increasingly come under attack as inadequately reflecting American reality. The idea behind the conference was to take a closer look at some of the ways in which writers and cultural critics now talk about the American experience. Rather than one or two master narratives, we presently have a series of competing ones. These frequently have a basis in increased awareness of ethnic and other differences. A range of new collective narratives perceived to be more in tune with the lived experiences of different groups of Americans are being constructed.

The papers that follow describe the contents and problematize the manner of some of these new narratives. Among the questions addressed are the following: How is the interpretation of the laws of the country affected by multicultural awareness? What effect did the experience of Vietnam have on American self-understanding, self-imaging? How does the current absence of collectively embraced national myths influence the ways social policies are shaped? May the lack of consensus in fact threaten some of the liberal objectives behind the challenging of received notions of what constitutes American reality? Does a poststructuralist/postmodernist debate

over the terms of national self-understanding among intellectuals perhaps divert their attention from the real political issues of the day, leaving the political arena to the forces of the market-place? One common denominator of several of the papers is the canon debate, which has proved to be an ideological battleground of the first order. If a cultural center no longer is seen to hold, should that fact dictate what material gets taught in Academe in the sense of making room for a high number of "non-canonical" texts, or should a more traditional educational focus-privileging the classics, say—be allowed to govern the nation's educational agenda?

The papers vary in the attention paid to the theoretical climate surrounding, and at times directly influencing, how one thinks about collective self-understanding, even though all touch on theory in one way or another. In several papers, however, matters theoretical are expressly foregrounded. Three of the articles address, often with a feminist emphasis, how blacks, American Indians, Mexican- and Asian-Americans talk about themselves and discuss how these groups theorize multi-cultural self-presentation. The categories and language used to talk about individual and collective self and other are put under scrutiny. What role does theory play in texts authored by non-mainstream writers? What happens when writers celebrate non-Western difference employing the critical vocabulary of Western modes of cultural analysis? The relationship between man and nature has given rise to considerable mythologizing in American writing how does the language employed in nature writing affect that relationship?

In the opening paper, entitled "The Passing of Anglo-America," Paul Christensen sketches some general patterns of mythologizing. One central reason for mythmaking, he points out, is a need to justify morally the colonizing of other peoples' land. Colonizers have typically assured themselves of the ethical timbre of their exploits by constructing narratives which portrayed them as bringing civilization to an uncivilized world. In his article he traces some of the forms which this type of mythmaking has taken in the US. With the rise of postmodernism, however, a splintering of central myths occurred, giving rise to "a deluge of counter-mythologies revamping, developing, nurturing the identities of newly liberated minorities, racial and religious, and an overwhelming tide against white male hegemony." Christensen's paper provides a broad historical perspective on the role of mythologizing in an American context.

As the title of Ole Moen's "The U.S.A. in the 1990s: Monolith or Mosaic" suggests, he assumes a narrower chronological perspective. The paper falls into two parts. The first gives an outline of the canon debate in American education, as represented by two works, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* and Gerald Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. Schlesinger's central argument is that multiculturalism results in divisiveness and that the medicine for this problem is to re-establish some central "American Creed; Schlesinger wants the emphasis on ethnic cultures reduced in curricula and a return to a canon of texts which would focus more squarely on the traditional values of the American liberal tradition. To Graff this is not a question of either/or. University reading lists should be revamped to include texts that reflect a modern, multicultural reality but care should also be taken to include "Great Books." In the second part of his paper Moen reviews the history of Civil Rights legislation, showing that the pendulum has swung between a restriction of rights up until the late 1930s, over to a "Civil Rights Revolution" in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, before taking a swing in the opposite direction in the 80s and 90s. Moen's conclusion is nevertheless that the recent conservative swing falls short of reinstating a monolithic understanding of what constitutes central American values. Like Paul Christensen, he sees the American 1990s as a highly fluid social and political scene.

In "Vietnam and the Death of Heroism? Critical Approaches to a Critical Era," Adi Wimmer discusses how post-Vietnam War America had to look again at national mythologies because the notion of America as an international benefactor was effectively annulled by the experiences of the war and the ensuing political mobilization on the political left. Reviewing a series of literary texts and films, he shows how responses range from seeing the survivors as estranged anti-heros, as victims of a Cold War rhetoric painting the fight against communists in Asia as a latterday version of the Medieval Crusades, to a kind of mythical heroizing of war in itself. Wimmer shows that in a number of texts a re-masculinization of America is advocated, for instance by portraying the war as a theater for male bonding through shared acts of extreme violence. Recently this latter line of thinking has come under attack from feminist critics. Wimmer makes the point that the Vietnam

War is unique in its potential for calling into question central aspects of what was till then a widely embraced national ideology.

It is no accident that the various forms of re-mythologizing taking place in the US in recent decades have coincided with the so-called theoretical revolution; after all, one of the functions of theory is to provide tools for exploring received notions of reality. Certainly the attention to theory has influenced multicultural thinking, as witnessed by Clara Juncker's article, "Womanizing Theory." Her main focus is on Alice Walker's special version of black feminism, for which Walker coined the term "womanism." Juncker situates this stance in the wider theoretical debate, especially the discussion surrounding African American aesthetics and feminist theory. She finds that Walker's attempts at "gendering theory" represents a willed step *away from* academic theory in its usually abstract and linguistically dense form. Juncker sees Walker as an incarnation of H elene Cixous' mythical Promethea, a woman who refigures theory by writing her own body, employing "an intimate, autobiographical mode of expression that blends with other women's voices into a maternal signature." In Walker's essays storytelling thus becomes theory. She is not alone in choosing this alternative approach; Walker, Juncker shows, is joined by other writers of color in privileging storytelling over high theory in constructing their mythologies of an ethnic self.

Faced with the massive stereotyping in the movie industry and in the culture at large, American Indians have also sought ways in which to refigure themselves, especially since the 1970s. And they, too, have done so by telling stories about themselves, fictional and non-fictional. Russell Duncan's "Risen from the Dead: American Indian Mythmakers" offers a discussion of some of the forms this storytelling has taken. His main emphasis is on two autobiographies in the oral "as-told-to" tradition: those of the prominent American Indian leaders Wilma Mankiller and Russell Means. Duncan reminds his readers that autobiographies- "fictions of the self" in H. David Brumble's phrase-are unreliable historical documents. However, they are indicative of what myths the subjects of the autobiography would like to construct about themselves and history. These life narratives represent two opposite poles in American Indian self-pr esentation: Mankiller emphasizes the communal aspect of her Cherokee heritage, while Means seeks the confrontational, playing up his

role as political activist. Both invoke various elements of native tradition in telling their stories. Using these two autobiographies as examples Duncan explores how narratives of self rooted in tradition undermine mainstream stereotyping of ethnic minorities.

In "Cultural Studies and the Problems of the Political," Mark Luccarelli takes as his premise the often rehearsed position that a sense of American national identity has been lost in times of cultural pluralism. He engages in a discussion of how to "ground multiculturalism in a larger process of national redefinition." The answer, he asserts, cannot be found in cultural studies with its "hermeneutics of suspicion." What is needed among academics and intellectuals is a more direct and pragmatic engagement with political events and socio-economic realities than postmodern cultural criticism has provided so far. Postmodernist debunking of all ideologies amounts to a de-mythologizing of America but the cultural critics have failed to put their perspective "from below" and their wealth of "local knowledge" to good political use. This failure of political nerve, Luccarelli argues, has left the field of politics to the monied professional class. The question of distribution of wealth is back on the political agenda with a vengeance. In his discussion of recent books by Kevin Phillips and Michael Lind, which address this political issue, Luccarelli supports their notion that some sort of pragmatic ideological consensus must be sought to solve pressing political problems related to distribution. The suggested remedy is a new version of liberal nationalism which would include a return to "yesteryear's reformism." Luccarelli suggests-and he invokes Christopher Lasch - that the current political malaise may be conquered through a re-examination of history, a mining of the nation's memory, as it were, a "reassessing [of] current social and political arrangements" in light of historical knowledge.

Fredrik Brøgger's article, "Writing about Writing about Nature: Searching for an Alternative to Traditional Essentialism and Postmodern Constructivism," also engages postmodern theory. Observing that nature has been one of the main sites for mythologizing the American experience, for instance the Anglo-American white male "civilizing" the wilderness, Brøgger wants to examine the ways in which the language one uses in talking about nature is a constitutive factor in the act of myth-making. On the one hand, there is the essentialist position, attributing to

nature certain absolute meanings: to the Puritans the wilderness represented savagery and evil, to the Romantics it embodied God and therefore absolute goodness. On the other hand, there is the post-modernist position that any narrative about the other, e.g. nature, represents not absolute truth but constitutes interpretation, is a "product of our own constructions, our own myth-making." Brøgger positions himself somewhere in between these opposites, exploring modes of writing about nature which will also "take account of nature as subject, as something that is given, however modified by human intervention." Brøgger is trying "to avoid the dichotomy between a constructivist and essentialist stance" by adopting a model of communication "which incorporates the idea that the world speaks to us in non-verbal ways that fundamentally shape our verbal response to it." The phenomenal world affects us physically – rain, cold, heat, etc. – and to "think of verbalization as our predominant way of responding to the world is to radically impoverish the idea of our communication with it." Brøgger avails himself of the analytical categories of recent linguistic philosophy – "responsiveness" and "creativity" – in his attempt to bridge the gap between an essentialist and constructivist position. He adopts the position of contemporary nature writers like Aldo Leopold, Gary Snyder and Barry Lopez, who write back/respond to rather than seek to objectify the natural world. Instead of "replacing one myth with another ... [these writers] attempt to resist mythologizing as far as possible." Bringing this perspective to nature writing, Brøgger argues, helps the reader avoid the dangers of anthropocentrism/ anthropomorphism. He finds essentialist attitudes reflected in the works of Emerson, but sees Thoreau and Whitman as early practitioners of response-oriented forms of writing.

Hans Lofgren's "Representing America: Some Aspects of the Literary Canon Debate" also examines ways in which writers speak about the American experience, seeing the ongoing re-mythologizing as a question of representation, but "not only about what but also whose representations and who is affirmed as representative." Lofgren is interested in what he calls "the politics of the imaginary," the ways in which mythologies compete for legitimacy. Discussing in some detail the positions adopted by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Trin T. Minh-ha in *Woman, Native, Other*, he expresses his admiration for the way these writers seek new artistic modes of expression – genre crossings, reaf-

firming myth and storytelling – when they assert the legitimacy of their voice in reporting the American experience. However, he finds a weakness in their theoretical positions. When they express their opposition to the logocentric approach to cultural representation typical of Western/First World writings – arguing instead for the wisdom of a non-logocentric stance which they associate with Third World cultural expressions – they do so using the critical categories developed by the very thinkers they attack. In the second half of his essay Lofgren engages some further aspects of the canon debate, using several essays in the book, *American Modernisms: Revaluating the Canon*, as illustrations. His main point is that "the postmodern revaluating of the canon is merely a rewriting of traditional canonical arguments under new forms, merely a saving of the canon as the expression of hegemonic values." The adoption of a canon never escapes the politics of the imaginary. Therefore, according to Lofgren, "the critical intellectual ... must center on a critique of the politics of representation, the politics of the production of the image."

There are numerous topical links between the essays collected here. There is a consensus that re-mythologizing is taking place. The question of cultural cohesion is raised repeatedly, along with matters of cultural self-expression and the literary canon. But obviously these papers discuss only some of the possible angles. Further examination of the terms and manifestations of American re-mythologizing is necessary. Consider the power of names. As it happens, I was in Canada when I wrote this introduction. Telling my friends there about the collection and its contents, they asked if any of the papers discussed Canada and why "America" really meant "the US" in this context. This is but one example of the many other possible parameters in the debate. However, the present collection of essays should give the reader a platform to work with in thinking further about these questions.