Toward a Topography of National Trauma: Mapping the Past onto the Future of American Nationalism.

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Abstract:

Since the inception of the United States, many of those who have spoken for and to the nation have struggled to define and defend a coherent American nationalism. This paper proposes that one of the reasons for this lies in the fault lines inherent in the invented traditions that underpin American, as many other nationalisms. Determined by warfare and by the desire for land, and frequently defined in racial terms, they have undermined more than they have stabilised the nationalist structures they seek to support through what they have excluded from the national imaginary. In common with other settler nations, arguably with most Western nations, in fact, America’s nationalist narratives struggle to serve as cohesive foundation myths. They represent the lasting legacies of national trauma derived from the nation’s violent colonial past and the severing of the imperial bond in the eighteenth century, chattel slavery and the civil war it caused, and Westward expansion and the imperative toward hemispheric control. Through the mapping of a topography of national trauma predicated on these national traditions and located within the tensions arising from warfare, land, and race, scholars can better comprehend the still frequently acrimonious debates over American nationalism that persist today.

Key Words: American nationalism; land; warfare; race; trauma.
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‘No government is more complex and difficult of preservation than a republic, and in no political associations do little adverse causes produce more disastrous results. Of all the influences, none is more pernicious than a corps of men acting systematically and perseveringly for its own ends upon a community unapprised of their doings, and undisciplined to meet and counteract them.’

(Beecher, *Plea for the West*, 62)

‘I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States.’

(Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 210)

‘…that is the same with all quilts, you can see them in two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light.’

(Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 187)

Reviewing the British Museum’s 2017 exhibition, *The American Dream: Pop to the Present*, Guardian journalist Jonathan Jones equated the artworks on display to the ‘ruins of a lost civilisation.’ The ‘archaeological atmosphere’ of the event produced more than an ‘uneasy nostalgia’ in Jones. Faced with America’s most powerful twentieth-century art, he
‘understood two things very clearly. There is such a thing as American civilisation. And we are watching it die’ (Jones 2017). Reports of the death of American civilisation may turn out to be an exaggeration, or they may, more pessimistically, prove to be prescient. Either way, both popular cultural and scholarly debate on the subject tends to invoke the concept of the ‘American Dream’ as both shorthand and synecdoche for a more complex and frequently far from coherent nationalist narrative that seeks to counteract and subsume, by its very vagueness, the contradictions that created the national creed.

It should come as no surprise that the ‘American Dream’ can sometimes seem more like a nightmare. Writers as ideologically distinct as Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher and poet Walt Whitman, quoted above, shared both a firm faith in the vitality of the American republican dream and fears for its future survival: Beecher in the context of the nation’s demographic growth and westward expansion after 1830; Whitman in the context of the era of financial and political corruption that followed the Civil War of the mid-nineteenth century. Consequently, current concerns about America’s apparently rapid right turn may plausibly be located within the ‘generative matrix’ described by Slavoj Žižek. The nation’s shift, in 2016, toward the politics of populist nationalism is very much ‘an event that is entirely inscribed in the logic of the existing order,’ even as it ‘is (mis)perceived as a radical rupture’ by many scholars and journalists (Žižek 2012: 1). Following the election of Donald J. Trump, one of America’s leading newspapers, The Washington Post, adopted the tagline ‘Democracy Dies in Darkness.’ Arguably, however, in the case of the United States, it was born in darkness too.

In etymological terms, a symbiotic relationship pertains between dream and nightmare, memory and trauma. In America’s case, this juxtaposition of hope and horror predated the establishment of the political state itself. It can be traced back to the mysterious and unsettling disappearance of the ‘Lost Colony’ of Roanoke Island in the late 1500s. It took
visual form over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in depictions of Spanish atrocities against native peoples juxtaposed with Biblical imagery that rendered the New World as a new Eden, but one ripe for economic exploitation. And it was inscribed in the blatant disconnect between the financial ambitions of the merchants and investors who founded the Virginia Colony in the early seventeenth century and the harsh lives of those who struggled, and frequently failed to survive there. ‘Capitalism,’ according to historian Carl Degler, ‘came in the first ships.’ From the outset, he argued, ‘the main business of America has been business,’ with all that this implied in terms of the emergence of economic elites and their exploitation of those who worked on but had no proprietorial claim to the land and, simultaneously, the eradication of those whose ancestral claims to the land were simply voided through violence (Degler 1983: 2, 6; McCraw 1998: 303-304).

In 1609, the Second Virginia Charter lauded the colony’s success, ‘so excellent a worke, much pleasinge to God and profitable to oure Kingdomes.’ In that same year, the propagandist pamphlet *Nova Britannia* promised potential colonists that Virginia was an ‘earthly paradise’ abounding in everything needed ‘for the sustentation of man.’ But the onset of the ‘Starving Winter’ at year’s end saw some two thirds of the colonists die from starvation or native attack (Quinn 1985; Johnson 1609: 6, 10).

For those who arrived later, the Puritans, whose settlement in 1620 in what became New England was equally fraught and, in their first winter, almost as fatal, the duality at the heart of what became the ‘American Dream’ was sharpened by the faith-based strictures that they brought with them from Britain (Cronon 1983: 36). Reflecting its religious origins, refracted through an increasingly racialized lens, and refined over the course of the following century, the Puritans’ self-defined ‘Great Migration’ carried within it the seeds of both triumph and tragedy, spiritual salvation and ‘secular calamity’ (Bercovitch 1978: 9; Miller 1956). The ‘new worlds of wonder’ contained witches; but they were of the colonists’ own
making, a tangible expression of the trauma attendant upon the search for salvation in a sinful world (Hall 1990: 7-8; Gorski 2017: 37; Stannard 1992: 230-232).

Physical trauma derived from the struggle to survive in a landscape both passively and actively hostile. The threat of starvation was compounded by the periodic episodes of brutal warfare that marked the deteriorating relationship between the settlers and the native peoples. Over time, both the myths and the memories associated with such violence filled what Max Lerner defined as a ‘psychic need’ on the part of the Puritans and their progeny to verify the ‘heroism and virility’ of the nation’s earliest experiences, to provide, in effect, a ‘native background for an American Pilgrim’s Progress’ (Lerner 1957: 14). Long before these early colonists’ descendants conceptualised the need for the type of ‘political religion’ described by Anthony Smith as one designed ‘to evoke a sense of unitary culture in societies which lacked even a semblance of unity,’ ethnic, racial and religious divisions had destabilised not just the colonial experiment but the likelihood of any such ‘unitary culture’ ever emerging; divisions that the Revolution of the eighteenth century distracted from but never fully resolved (Smith 1999: 167).

It is in those divisions, however, that we can identify both the central core and individual components of American nationalism, and also begin to compile a vocabulary capable of interrogating and explaining the demagogical, populist turn that the nation took in 2016. ‘The language of failed states,’ as David Runciman noted, lets us down ‘because it conjures up images that are completely inappropriate for a society like the contemporary United States’ (Runciman 2016: 5). Smith’s concept of a ‘nation of intent,’ however, may prove the key to the development of a new, national linguistics. Approaching nationalism as a continuous journey whose direction is determined and defined by both political and public discourse highlights those elements of trauma that either threaten national existence overtly or contradict national ideologies covertly. But by trauma is not meant what Ernest Renan
defined as the ‘national sorrows’ that were ‘of more value than triumphs.’ The trauma derived from the violence that attended the birth of most nations too readily becomes transmuted into a ‘sentiment of sacrifices’ that underpins rather than undermines national identity (Smith 1999: 167; Renan 1994 [1882]: 17). America’s trauma, by contrast, inhere in that uneasy tension maintained between past and present, sacrifice and suffering, and memory and forgetting in the United States, particularly in relation to warfare, land, and race.

Our ability to navigate the nationalist nuances of what Seymour Martin Lipset described as the ‘first new nation’ may be enhanced by adopting a forensic approach to the cracks that exist in America’s national landscape (Lipset 1979). Just as a structural crack can reveal information about a physical building and the ‘force contradictions’ that, over time, reveal themselves in its fabric, so the traumas arising from conflict, geographical expansion, and racial divisions represent ‘the most precise records’ of the nation’s social and political environment. Following these through the structure of America’s history to map a topography of national trauma may provide valuable gridlines for future attempts at analysing the determinants and the direction of its nationalism (Weizman 2017: 53).

To this end, this paper develops Connerton’s concept of ‘repressive erasure’ in the context of America’s past (Connerton 2008: 60). Beginning where the nation itself did, with its mid-eighteenth century revolution, and examining those elements of trauma within what became national narratives of triumph, it is possible to trace an alternative nationalist trajectory for the United States; one structured around the Freudian idea of fragmented memory as this is conceptualised by scholars studying traumatic stress in individuals (van der Kolk and Fisler 1995: 505). This trajectory of trauma follows the fissures created by the unresolved racial, sectional, economic, and martial tensions arising out of the Revolution, race and the Civil War, and Westward expansion. Taken together, these form the watermark behind the blueprint for the nation drawn up by the Founding Fathers: a form of shadow-
nation, in effect, under which the modern American state, divided as this still is along social, racial and gendered lines, still functions, but with ever-decreasing nationalist returns.

*Thirteen Clocks*

The American Revolution served notice on the world that a new nation was fighting for its existence on the North American continent. It was, at this juncture, clearly a ‘nation of intent,’ predicated on a republican ideal that had its roots in both the idea of the Reformation as a ‘people’s movement’ and in the writings of Whig political thinkers in England who promulgated ‘a civic and patriotic ideal in which the personality was founded in property, perfected in citizenship but perpetually threatened by corruption’ (Smith 1999: 167; Hall 1990: 8; Pocock 1975: 507). On paper at least, this New World national imaginary conformed closely to Hans Kohn’s definition of nationality as a state of mind ‘striving to correspond to a political fact’ even before the nation in question had been secured (Kohn 1945: 19).

The scholarly response to American nationalism has often taken its cue from that nation’s colonial past, and echoed English radical Thomas Paine’s assurance to those British subjects contemplating a severing of colonial ties that theirs was ‘the cause of all mankind.’ There is certainly some merit in adopting a transnational approach to the formation of the United States. Colonial revolutionary thinkers were drawing on European-wide theories of state formation that privileged and predicted ‘a world of exclusive nations,’ each ‘with a distinctive individuality.’ Further, the very notion of a ‘common cause’ gained widespread transnational traction in the eighteenth century: a rallying cry for unity on religious and secular grounds alike, and a potent means of obscuring class and social distances, its ‘multivalent fuzziness,’ as historian Robert Parkinson points out, certainly ‘worked to the patriots’ advantage’ as they sought to make the case for separate nationhood. Yet it remains
the case that, in 1776, Paine named a nation that had not yet been created, and identified British colonial subjects as *Americans* – previously a designation Europeans applied only to the native inhabitants of the continent – long before any such identity could plausibly exist (Smith 1999: 231; Parkinson 2016: 6; Paine 1987 [1776]: 65, 81-2).

‘No sense of loyalty to America filled the hearts of the colonists before the Revolution,’ Kohn stressed; ‘America as a political concept, as a center of allegiance, did not exist.’ Such ‘is the difference of character, of manners, of religion, of interest, of the different colonies,’ Andrew Burnaby, the vicar of Greenwich, mused following his visit in 1759, ‘that I think…were they left to themselves there would soon be a civil war’ (Kohn 1945: 282; Jensen 2004: 33-34). Nevertheless, scholarly fascination with the forces that secured colonial solidarity has sometimes side-lined those that pulled it apart. In the words of John Adams, one of the authors of the Declaration of Independence and second president of the United States, the American Revolution was ‘a singular example’ of nation-formation, a moment when ‘[t]hirteen clocks had been made to strike together,’ but their chimes signalled the death-knell for a fully inclusive American nationalism even as they announced the birth of a nation predicated on and ostensibly committed to freedom and equality (Adams 1851 [1818]: 282-3; Parkinson 2016: 261).

In part, the problem inhered in the methods deployed by the American patriots to secure a separate state. The American Revolution, as Adams emphasised, was distinct from the Revolutionary War itself; had, indeed, taken place ‘in the minds and hearts of the people’ long before said people took up arms against colonial authority (Adams 1851 [1818] 282). But securing hearts and minds, as the modern American military has learned to its cost, can be a traumatic process. In the eighteenth century, the construction of the American nation first involved the destruction of long-held trans-Atlantic ties grounded in families and friendships, cultures and communities, and histories and traditions stretching back centuries.
and their rapid replacement by what was, in effect, an ideological commitment to what Abraham Lincoln later defined as the ‘proposition that all men are created equal.’

Paradoxically, however, the patriotic potency of this proposition was predicated on prejudice, particularly racial prejudice, the American nation’s original sin (Basler 1953, VII: 17-18; Parkinson 2016: 21, 24).

Structured around the heavily freighted figure of the Minuteman as the embodiment of this invented ideal, the new national faith conceptualized the state not as a product of civil violence but an outgrowth of political and personal voluntarism, the fullest expression of civic virtue. A crucial component of this was the precedent provided by the famous Roman consul, Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, whose willingness briefly to abandon the ploughshare for the sword in defence of Rome represented the ideal to which the new world republic aspired. This ‘symbolic link between patriotism and the plough’ proved a potent and persistent one, particularly for the Civil War generation of the nineteenth century; but it was a point that was made obvious at the time in the establishment by elite revolutionary war veterans of the Society of the Cincinnati in 1783, and the naming of two settlements for the Roman senator (Linenthal 1982: 51-2; Shy 183; Kammen 1978: 100; Smith 1988: 231; Snyder 1999: 86).

The Cincinnatian paradigm appeared to be an appropriate one for a new nation whose citizens epitomised Aristotle’s zoon politikon in a modern military and national context. Yet there are grounds for querying the long-term efficacy of this national narrative, predicated as it was not on hope but on fear. Less a promise than a threat, it was not a republican dream that the patriots promised but rather a nightmare of marauding natives and murderous slaves unlikely to dissipate once the former colonial power had been expelled. Far from locating the other in the form of unpopular imperial control, patriot propaganda combined both the myth and the memory of colonial violence to establish a tradition of trauma that, further inflected
by the realities of the revolutionary war itself, privileged conflict as the original nationalist determinant of the United States. But in the case of the revolutionary war, the trauma did not derive from the physical violence alone. It was located in the uneasy relationships that the revolution highlighted between the elites and the masses, centre and periphery and, above all, revolutionary rhetoric and racial realities (Shy 1990: 243; Kestnbaum 2000: 21-22).

Future generations lauded the notion of the people in arms, and made of the Minuteman a symbol of both martial power and national pride. The reality during the Revolution was widespread hostility and suspicion on the part of the elites towards those men who fought to create the nation. In part the fear stemmed from a transnational suspicion of military power. The belief that Standing Armies posed a threat to civic society was common currency across the Atlantic world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. ‘It is absolutely impossible,’ argued English Commonwealth-men John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, ‘that any Nation which keeps them amongst themselves can long preserve their Liberties.’ But they accepted that the solution to the dangers of military power, an active militia, might not prove ‘as serviceable as an Army kept to constant Discipline’ (Trenchard 1697: 23; Linenthal 1982: xvi, 1).

Washington’s disenchantment with such forces as were available to him during the Revolutionary War is well-documented. Volunteer troops, he advised Patrick Henry in 1777, were ‘repugnant to order and subversive of discipline’ (Sparks 1853: 361; Herrera 2001: 27). Militiamen who supposedly epitomised the republican ideal, often seemed, to white elites, furthest removed from it. The Revolution changed little in this respect, except to refine such exclusionary views and render them official by preventing the enrolment of ‘any stroller, negro, or vagabond’ into the Continental Army. This was recognized by some at the time as a self-defeating decision. ‘Many northern blacks were excellent soldiers,’ noted one early
historian of the famous Bunker Hill battle, ‘but southern troops could not brook equality with negroes’ (Maslowski 1972: 17-18; Quarles 1961: 18; Swett 1826: 25).

Revolutionary racial exclusion did not go unchallenged at the time. The militia service of black Congregationalist minister Lemuel Haynes ‘as a common soldier in defence of his country’ during the Revolutionary War provided him an apparently unassailable platform from which to disseminate a republicanism predicated on liberty and equality for all, a ‘black republicanism’ challenging the white elite version. Haynes’ was not a vision of republican virtue, however, that the new nation was prepared to pursue. Haynes’ first biographer confidently described him as ‘a disciple of Washington,’ but as far as citizen service was concerned, the slaveholder Washington had a rather different kind of disciple in mind (Cooley 1837: 45-46, 169; Saillant 1994: 294).

As the patriots’ dream of a new republic took shape, other dreams died. White Revolutionary elites, and their nineteenth-century progeny swiftly silenced men like Haynes, and achieved discursive hegemony over the national narrative. On its racial and class compromises and contradictions they were, perhaps inevitably, silent. It may be no surprise, therefore, that the Civil War of 1861-1865 is sometimes referred to as the Second American Revolution. The historical page upon which America’s civil war was inscribed was, to borrow David Armitage’s analysis of modern revolutions, a palimpsest underneath which the nation’s founding conflict remained clearly visible (Armitage 2017: 124). Occurring as they did less than a century apart reinforces the sense that, in nationalist terms, the Revolution and the Civil War were complementary conflicts. The latter revealed the extent to which the former had failed to produce ‘a single moral community of the faithful’ in the United States. It suggested that the American Constitution, a founding document with near-mystical authority in nationalist rhetoric, was inadequate to the task of serving as a truly nationalizing code, and highlighted the depth of the divisions within American civil religion in its racial,

It was slavery, the most overt moral and ethical challenge to America’s civil religion, that brought about the Civil War; but slavery within the context of the political and territorial integrity of the nation, slavery as it underpinned but also complicated competing nationalisms north and south of the Mason-Dixon line, not slavery within the context of some mythical covenant that the nation had negotiated with the Creator far less one drafted by the Founders, who retained their own slaves even as they constructed a republic dedicated to liberty (Cook, Barney and Varon 2013: 4-7; Grant 2000: 150-152). In this respect the presumption, best summed up in the title of sociologist Robert Bellah’s famous study The Broken Covenant, that there was or ever had been a covenant to break, may be both misplaced and misleading as far as American nationalism is concerned (Bellah 1992; Smith 2003: 54-5; Gorski 2017).

In ‘terms of the dialectic of covenant and chosenness,’ Bellah argued, the Civil War ‘was a kind of culmination’ (Bellah 1992: 52). But there are grounds for arguing that there was no national covenantal concept in the Civil War era. There were, rather, two contrasting ‘sectionally unifying grievance narratives’ working to rupture an already fractured nation (Cook, Barney and Varon 2013: 7). Both drew on nationalist behavioural and belief patterns that had long been in place, patterns predicated on the nation’s colonial and revolutionary past and, in their racial and religious structures and strictures, predictive of its future. But a pattern is not a promise. And America, for many of its inhabitants, was certainly not the Promised Land.

*Westward the Course of Empire*
Territorial trauma – the initial seizure of land by white settlers in the seventeenth century, the desire for more of it as the nation expanded, and above all, the slave economy built upon it – was the basis upon which the American nation was founded, the rock on which it was built and upon which, in the mid-nineteenth century, it almost foundered. Land may have been ‘the American Dream in its earliest form,’ but it was also its earliest source of trauma (McCraw 1998: 303; Baptist 2016: 320). This particular trauma derived from the colonial era, and the swift discovery, by European migrants, that not only was the land not the prelapsarian paradise that they had been led to expect but that, given America’s geographical, geological and climatic conditions, simple survival was a struggle. They nevertheless attempted to transcribe an ancient tradition as well as their now distant homeland onto the landscape. They named it for home, Virginia, New England, and located it in Christian scripture as the ‘land of destiny,’ a New World Israel set apart for the benefit of a modern chosen people. In the decades following the Revolution, they invoked it both visually and verbally, in paint and in print until it became, in every sense, an article of national faith (Smith 2003: 49; 2005: 101; Boyer 1992: 74; Longley 2002: 101-103).

This was neither a perspective nor a process unique to America. The ‘Chosen People’ paradigm is an integral aspect of what Smith has described as the ‘profoundly secular’ and yet spiritually inflected world of the modern nation state (Smith 2003: 21, 63-65; Cauthen 1997: 107; 2004: 19-21). With its initial emphasis on a separate, settler people moving through a hitherto undiscovered, by them at least, landscape, the idea of a Chosen People is effectively a stranger in a strange land narrative trope as applicable to the Boers in South Africa or to the Scots in Ulster as to America’s white settlers (Kuzio 2002: 34). In both South Africa and the United States, this particular narrative served a secondary but crucial function as a conduit between the incomers and the land itself. It thereby solved what Steven Grosby identifies as the ‘sociological problem’ at the heart of the nation: namely that ‘both of its
referents – people and land – must achieve a degree of conceptual stability’ and, ultimately, assert ‘a territorial kinship’ (Grosby 2006: 110).

In the American case, by the mid-nineteenth century this traditional trope was as common as it was convoluted and contrary. Less grounded than scrambled in scripture, American elite and public discourse alike swung between the Mosaic and the Noahic Covenants in an attempt to sacralise both the genesis of the nation in conflict and its now ‘Manifest Destiny’ to expand westwards. ‘The seeds shown by the Mayflower,’ opined New York lawyer Jonathan Prescott Hall in 1847, ‘shall be borne and wafted on the gentle winds of heaven, to every part of this vast continent.’ The Revolution, in Hall’s rather loose interpretation of scripture, was America’s very own flood: the ‘dove which went forth from the Mayflower, carried in her beak a leaf of the olive which was to be planted, and take root, and grow and flourish,’ he enthused, ‘after the great waters of toil, and suffering, and trial, and Revolution, should have subsided.’ Hall accepted that the land was not Anglo-Saxon by right. ‘Our tears did not water it, our blood did not nourish it, our toil did not smooth down its surface,’ he admitted. But he claimed it nevertheless in the name of the ‘blood, and the tears, and the toil of our fathers’ whose progeny, Hall anticipated, ‘will put a girdle around the earth, and yet come back to the rock of Plymouth, from whence they originally set forth’ (Hall in Brainerd 1901: 78-79).

Hall’s description of the land itself was profoundly contradictory, simultaneously as ‘fertile and pleasant as the garden of the Lord’ and entirely ‘sterile’ (Hall in Brainerd 1901: 79). But Hall’s perspective simply echoed that of his colonial forebears, whose understanding of the country’s prospective bounty, and desire to secure it for themselves, transformed a land of plenty into a legal wasteland, ‘a vast and emptie Chaos’ as one phrased it (Winslow 1865: 150). And out of this chaos the first colonists brought a European-inflected, early capitalist order predicated upon land ownership and property rights distinctly at odds with the types of
land use and animal husbandry already in place on their arrival (Fields 2017: iii–iv, 8; Cronon 1983: 130).

Power, as Foucault noted, is fundamentally a spatial phenomenon, so it was perhaps inevitable that boundary lines and borders marked the American landscape from the outset (Fields 2017: 7). Boundaries not only demarcated ownership in a capitalist, economic sense but control in an environmental one. Nature, according to New England statesman and noted orator Edward Everett, was in essence ‘picturesque.’ It was ‘shady walks, winding through groves carefully cleared of…thorns and brambles,’ and ‘grand sea-views from the cool porticoes of marine villas.’ It was, in short, ‘nature brought into loving union with the skilful hand and tasteful eye of man, the great “minister and interpreter of nature,”’ and not ‘the terrific wilderness’ inhabited only by ‘the savage and the wild beast’ (Everett 1855: 32).

For colonial settlers, as historian William Cronon has stressed, fences were ‘the most visible symbol of an “improved” landscape’ and for Puritan spokesman John Winthrop, not the least of the evidence for native backwardness lay in the fact that ‘they inclose noe land’ (Winthrop in Cronon 1983: 130). The pattern for America’s future westward expansion was outlined in Winthrop’s words, but it was not a pattern unique to the United States. Comparing America with South Africa, George Fredrickson emphasised ‘the common fact of a long and often violent struggle for territorial supremacy between white invaders and indigenous peoples’ in these nations. In both cases, not only was land seizure ‘essential to the material success of these settler societies,’ but the Chosen People paradigm served as justification for conquest and the subsequent creation of ‘unequal racial orders’ in the Boer Republics and United States alike (Fredrickson 1981: 4–5; Du Toit 1983: 927).

The seizure of the land by white incomers, however, combined with the racial inequalities that informed it, brought no long-term stability to nations such as South Africa or the United States. Indeed, drawing Fredrickson’s comparative approach forward, Danelle van
Zyl-Hermann finds clear similarities among the various white populist movements as these have emerged globally, but especially in South Africa and the United States, in the twenty-first century (Zyl-Hermann 2018: 2674). In the American case, the destructive potential of both market-based capitalism and white supremacy almost destroyed the republic long before the rise of populist forces in either the post-9/11 United States or post-apartheid South African landscapes. It grew out of the land itself, specifically the political and increasingly sectional battles over it that arose as America expanded westwards and the new territories began the legal process of transmuting into fully-incorporated states of the Union.

Settler seizure of the land in America’s colonial era initiated a process through which the definition, and the defence of the land itself almost tore apart the nation created upon it. Taken west along with the population movement of across the Alleghenies, the capitalist concept of an improved, monetised landscape served two distinct agendas in America’s evolving national narrative. In the West, and encouraged by legislation such as the Indian Nonintercourse Acts (1790 through 1834) and Homestead Act (1862) that opened up vast tracts of land to white settlement, the colonial trope of incomer supplanting and improving indigenous land was retained, and rolled out still further, to even greater destructive effect, in the Plains Wars of the later nineteenth century (Cozzens 2017: 4 and passim). In the settled eastern portion of the antebellum United States, by contrast, the distinctions revolved less around the juxtaposition of indigene and incomer, the ‘civilised’ and the ‘savage,’ and focussed on the divisions between free soil and slave, between those states where the slave population grew through the early to mid-nineteenth century and those where it declined and, after 1830, effectively disappeared; divisions that, in 1861, led to civil war. And in large part, these divisions were not just moral, but material. They inhered in the land itself.

In the nation’s early years, the passage of the Northwest Ordinance (1787) attempted to draw a dividing line on the map between slavery and freedom; at first in respect of the
Northwest Territory, and with a view to future geographical expansion, but subsequently in relation to the political balance of power in Congress between the free and slave states beginning, in 1820, with the Missouri Compromise. After this point, the distinction between slavery and freedom was, both literally and figuratively, grounded in the landscape (Armstrong 2017: 39). And the implications of this were as obvious to outsiders as they were to Americans themselves. For French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville, from the perspective of the early 1830s the Ohio River, the boundary between the free state of Ohio and the slave state of Kentucky, offered a crucial marker of the distinction. ‘Upon the left bank of the stream the population is sparse,’ he noted, ‘from time to time one descries a troop of slaves loitering in the half-desert fields; the primeval forest reappears at every turn; society seems to be asleep, man to be idle, and nature alone offers a scene of activity and life.’ On the right bank, by contrast, ‘a confused hum is heard, which proclaims afar the presence of industry.’ There, Tocqueville observed, ‘the fields are covered with abundant harvests; the elegance of the dwellings announces the taste and activity of the laborers; and man appears to be in the enjoyment of that wealth and contentment which is the reward of labor’ (Tocqueville 1945: 376-377).

In the juxtaposition of the bountiful against the blasted land, Tocqueville not only harked back to colonial interpretations of the landscape and the rights of ownership accorded those who laboured on it. He also adumbrated a capitalist-inflected, environmental trope that, in the three decades between his visit and the outbreak of civil conflict, was increasingly invoked in northern critiques of the South (Grant 2000: 41-48). And the geographical reach of this sectional distinction expanded, as the nation itself did, to encompass a West whose future prospects depended on whether the landscape of the new nation’s increasingly ambitious imagination would be slave or free. But if the West was the battleground, politically and often practically, upon which the nation’s future was decided, it was an ever-
shifting landscape, expanding exponentially and, some believed, to the detriment of national sentiment and security. Tocqueville had noted as much when he concluded that ‘the greatest peril’ facing the American state was ‘the continual displacement of its internal forces’ westwards. If, he pointed out, change was ‘gradual, so that each generation…might have time to disappear with the order of things under which it had lived, the danger would be less; but the progress of society in America,’ he observed, ‘is precipitate and almost revolutionary’ (Tocqueville 1945: 414, 417-419).

Tocqueville’s opinion was echoed by many of the leading lights of northern society in the years prior to the Civil War. New England author Nathaniel Hawthorne questioned how much ‘Southern soil…we can hope to digest into freedom’ if the nation continued to expand westwards, taking slavery with it. Unitarian minister David Atwood Wasson, similarly, admitted to harbouring fears that the nation’s ‘extension will be purchased with its freedom – the quality debased as the quantity increases’ (Stewart 1937: 98; Wasson 1858: 519). His fellow clergyman, Henry Whitney Bellows, developed this line of thinking further during the war itself. Public virtue, he argued, ‘was not strong enough to bear such a territorial stretch’ as the nation had experienced over the decades prior to the conflict. The ‘sparse and backward’ landscapes of the ‘thinly-settled and distant States,’ he proposed, had ‘gradually swamped the elevation, culture, and earnestness of the more moral and religious portions’ of the nation, producing ‘an average tone of vulgar mediocrity’ that ‘has not merely outbalanced what is best, but gradually corrupted it and converted it to itself’ (Bellows 1863: 5).

For men like Bellows, the war’s outcome may have witnessed a victory of sorts for the ‘moral and religious portions’ of the nation. The cost of that victory was high; over 600,000 dead, and as many maimed. But one of the responses to this national trauma of lives lost and landscapes blighted was inscribed on the national cultural and commemorative landscape and the land itself: first, in the form of President Abraham Lincoln’s appointment
of a ‘Day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer’ at the end of March, 1863 and, later that year, his ‘Proclamation of Thanksgiving’; and, second, in the form of national cemeteries that became, in time, the spiritual heart of those national battlefield parks constructed around them. These were the first assertions of federal space on the national landscape, crucial sites around and upon which the post-war culture of reconciliation could be structured, but also contested (Kammen 1993: 106-109; Cook 2017: 191-192; Janney 2013: 33; Grant 2005: 511-517).

In announcing a National Fast Day, Lincoln drafted the colonial covenantal trope into the service of the Union at war, drawing, in effect, a sixteenth-century construct of religious repentance into the spiritual space of the nineteenth. It ‘is the duty of nations as well as of men,’ the president declared, ‘to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgression, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon’ (Basler 1953, VI: 155-156). He reinforced this message, his assurance that America was the ‘New Israel,’ in his ‘Proclamation of Thanksgiving,’ issued on October 3rd, 1863, that was fully in tune with the religious tradition of Thanksgiving, now harnessed through inevitable association with the Union cause (Basler 1953, VI: 496-497). And in the following month, inaugurating the Union cemetery at Gettysburg, Lincoln gave his by now most famous address, sanctifying the sacrifice of the ‘honored dead’ of the Union and assuring his audience that the nation, ‘under God, shall have a new birth of freedom’ (Basler 1953, VII, 22; Bellah 1967: 16; Gorski 2017: 91).

Both Lincoln’s words at Gettysburg and the location itself became a form of lodestar for the post-war nation, an attempt to process the conflict that produced both constructive and destructive outcomes. But this, too, was very much in the national tradition. America, as Viet Thanh Nguyen notes, ‘is a landscape that remembers war and holds it close’ (Nguyen 2016: 25). It is therefore unsurprising that after 1865 America’s Civil War, to echo British author
Elizabeth Bowen’s observations about London after the Blitz, ‘moved from the horizon to the map.’ It was, as Bowen understood, when ‘you no longer saw, heard, smelled war, that a deadening acclimatization to it began to set in.’ And it was from the ‘echoless propriety of ruins that you breathed in all that was most malarial,’ and turned instead to national slogans, ‘desperately reworded to catch the eye, requiring to be pasted each time more strikingly onto hoardings and bases of monuments’ (Bowen 1998: 92-93).

Yet there are grounds for questioning the popular efficacy of such national slogans as ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’ for Americans at the time. Public fascination with the monuments and memorials of the Civil War has inevitably attracted the interest of historians whose work has unearthed the fragmented memories, racial, gendered, and class-based, produced by that conflict. Memory, as Caroline Janney reminds is, ‘is not a passive act,’ and calls for reunion in the aftermath of the Civil War were not the same thing as calls for reconciliation (Janney 2013: 3, 5). What she, and others, have highlighted are the ways in which the trauma of wounds, physical and psychological, that never healed created an only partially coherent national narrative. At best, the Civil War produced ‘dissociated’ examples of traumatic memory, retained, by the American state as much as by individuals, ‘as sensory fragments without a coherent semantic component’ (Van der Kolk and Fisler 1995: 518). The public narrative of a (white) brothers’ war may have achieved a surface cohesion – at least until the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s dramatically exploded it – suitable for both national and international consumption, but its private, structural underpinnings, riveted and riven by race, were far from stable (Blight 2001: 365-368; Cook: 2007: 3-6; 227-229; Cook 2017 passim).

For many postbellum Americans it was the West that held out the promise of a unified, national future. For Whitman, who had served as volunteer medical support during the war, the post-war years witnessed a turning away from the eastern landscapes of violence and destruction and toward a West still viewed through a colonial, idealistic lens as a late-
nineteenth century iteration of the Promised Land. Whitman, indeed, almost sounded like a colonial propagandist himself when he waxed lyrical about the ‘inexhaustible land of wheat, maize, wool, flax, coal, iron, beef and pork, butter and cheese, apples and grapes,’ of the West, with its ‘ten million virgin farms – to the eye at present wild and unproductive – yet experts say that upon it when irrigated may easily be grown enough wheat to feed the world.’ He could praise the ‘real geographic, democratic, indissoluble American Union,’ and enthuse about the railroad’s role as ‘conqueror of crude nature,’ but only after a brutal, internecine conflict had almost dissolved his indissoluble ideal (Whitman 1995: 150, 156).

What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?

Whitman’s optimism about the democratic strength of the Union encountered an outright challenge, however, from those who, like African American spokesman and former slave, Frederick Douglass, were focused not on the fertility of the frontier but on the inexorable erosion of the emancipatory promise implicit in the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, and the Constitutional amendments that ended chattel slavery and secured citizenship rights for all. Speaking in 1852, Douglass had castigated the nation in the name of the some four million slaves excluded from the polity, from all political and human rights, and from the American national narrative. Victims of a vicious, but economically vigorous variant of modern, slave-labour capitalism, America’s African-American slaves were defined by what historian Ed Baptist terms ‘entrepreneurial enslavers’ as both property and person. This commodified identity constitutionally codified in the three-fifths clause that secured greater political power to the slave states was not corrected until the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment (Baptist 2016: 26). Indeed, as historian Eliga Gould reminds us, ‘slavery appeared in all three of the Union’s founding documents – the Declaration of
Independence, the Anglo-American Treaty of 1783, and the Constitution of 1787 – and each presented chattel servitude as a legitimate, if cruel and unfortunate, institution’ (Gould 2014: 147).

Slavery was not a solution to the land/labour imbalance in the United States alone. ‘From the earliest time,’ as America’s foremost nineteenth-century poet and philosopher observed in the context of emancipation in the British West Indies, ‘the negro has been an article of luxury to the commercial nations’ (Emerson 1911: 102). At the same time, the United States had proclaimed at its inception, and reiterated on the anniversary of that event every year since, its devotion to both liberty and equality. Yet as the nation expanded so too did the economic power of slavery, the result of a symbiotic relationship that revolved around ‘a new, highly dynamic form of capitalism’ itself dependent upon ‘the exploitation’ and ‘disruption of African-American bodies, lives, and families’ (Baptist 2016: 421; Fredrickson 1981: xix). It was hardly surprising, therefore, that Frederick Douglass demanded of his nation ‘[w]hat to the American slave is your Fourth of July?’ beyond ‘a day that reveals to him…the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim’ (Douglass 1855: 445).

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 was, therefore, for Douglass, ‘a vast and startling’ development. All Americans, he believed, were ‘liberated by this proclamation…The white man is liberated, the black man is liberated, the brave men now fighting the battles of their country against rebels and traitors are now liberated’ (Douglass 1863). Like black minister Lemuel Haynes before him, Douglass enunciated a black republicanism that argued for racial inclusion in the nation on civic rather than covenantal religious grounds; on the premise that the United States was an exceptional nation capable of surmounting the social dynamics of race, the ‘discourse of power’ that functions ‘as a
principle of exclusion and segregation and, ultimately, as a way of normalizing society’ (Foucault 2003: 59-60).

But Douglass was exhibiting what Van der Kolk and Fisler describe as the ‘significant narrowing of consciousness’ that trauma can produce, a form of what Connerton terms ‘repressive erasure.’ The trajectory of trauma followed by Douglass’ nation from its colonial beginnings, in respect both of native and enslaved peoples, provided little in the way of evidence that there ever could be a ‘cultural discarding’ in the context of racism that would enable the United States to match its ideals to its realities (Van der Kolk and Fisler 1995: 511; Connerton 2008: 60, 64). What evidence there was suggested quite the contrary. The struggle to construct new nations across the Atlantic World in the eighteenth century, and the ultimate success of the slaveholding republic that was the United States in that regard, had always been a racially-inflected process; arguably ‘neo-colonial’ in the shift from ‘liberationist’ rhetoric to racial domination on the part of the postcolonial power (Gould 2017: 750).

Although America’s third president, Thomas Jefferson, bemoaned the fate of the ‘aboriginal inhabitants of these countries,’ he concluded that they had simply been ‘overwhelmed by the current’ of European migration (Jefferson 1805; Bellah 1967: 10). By the mid-nineteenth century, Jefferson’s regret found its echo in the words – but certainly not the actions – of another president, Andrew Jackson, who stressed his determination to ‘reclaim’ the native inhabitants ‘from their wandering habits and make them a happy, prosperous people,’ but simultaneously expressed his conviction that their time had passed. Humanity, he declared, ‘has often wept over the fate of the aborigines of this country, and Philanthropy has been long busily employed in devising means to avert it, but its progress has never for a moment been arrested…the ‘waves of population and civilization are rolling to the westward,’ Jackson averred, and it was ‘a source of joy that our country affords scope
where our young population may range unconstrained in body or in mind, developing the power and faculties of man in their highest perfection’ (Jackson 1830).

Following Jefferson and Jackson’s arguments, leading author and medical doctor Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., dismissed America’s native peoples as ‘half-filled outline[s] of humanity,’ nothing more than a ‘sketch in red crayons of a rudimental manhood’ devised simply ‘to keep the continent from being a blank until the true lords of creation should come to claim it’ (Brainerd 1901: 298). In the same way as white, British colonizers of Australia accorded the Aboriginal peoples an identity only as a ‘dying race,’ so Holmes narrated a process by which, on the American continent, ‘the red crayon sketch is rubbed out, and the canvas is ready for a picture of manhood a little more like God’s own image’ (Lake 1992: 305-306; Brainerd 1901: 298; Goetz 2016: 2).

For Holmes, the ‘white man must be master,’ but he had an obligation to ‘do right by the Indian, the African [and] the Chinese’ (Brainerd 1901: 298-299). And questions of aboriginal title and native sovereignty were certainly addressed in several of the most contentious early Supreme Court cases, including Johnson vs. M’Intosh (1823), Cherokee Nation vs. Georgia (1831), and Worcester vs. Georgia (1832). Such cases, testing as they did the very ‘principles that governed the conduct of the United States,’ were, at heart, ‘debates over property,’ but property as defined by the white society; consequently, they did little to stem the tide of settler intrusion into native spaces (Scheckel 1998: 9).

White control of the land, firmly codified in the Indian Removal Act of 1830, effected the enforced removal of many of the native nations from their ancestral homelands in the southeast and their relocation, west of the Mississippi, to what became designated Indian Territory. The now infamous ‘Trail of Tears’ that came to be associated with one of the last of these enforced relocations, that of the Cherokee in Georgia, epitomised a process that, over the course of almost a decade, resulted in the deaths through disease, malnutrition and simple
exposure of, in some cases, around 47 percent of the native people affected. Many more died defending the land and their right to remain on it in the so-called Second Seminole War, a series of violent confrontations between federal forces and the aboriginal peoples in Florida between 1835 and 1842 (Stannard 1992: 312, 124).

By the time of the Civil War, some of the native nations were prepared to fight in the hope that by so doing, land rights would be restored; or at least not further compromised through legislation such as the 1862 Homestead Act, designed to facilitate western settlement. Yet only two years after the war, the purchase of Alaska from Russia was concluded in a treaty that excluded the ‘uncivilized native tribes’ of that region from ‘the enjoyment of all the rights, advantages, and immunities of citizens of the United States’ and instead rendered them ‘subject to such laws and regulations as the United States may, from time to time, adopt in regard to aboriginal tribes of that country’ (Seward and Stoeckl 1867: 542).

Abstracting the Civil War from such wider national developments has enabled scholars to focus on the supposed ‘apocalyptic character’ of that conflict, arguing that it was the nation’s ‘first refounding’ (Bellah 1992: 52-53; Gorski 2017: 9). ‘The Civil War and Reconstruction periods,’ Gorski argues, ‘strengthened and transformed American religious nationalism,’ the locus of which moved from New England to the South ‘where it arguably still remains – the source of the pervasive militarism, hyperpatriotism, and Christianity’ that defines that section still (Gorski 2017: 106). Arguably, scholars have pursued this line for too long. We have too readily located the angst of post-Civil War America solely within the confines of the South, its battle over memory, its political compromises, its racial violence and ethnic exclusiveness, its gradual yet inexorable undermining of the hard-fought rights of former slaves to secure a functioning form of freedom. The national implications of these struggles are too often side-lined in favour of a sectional approach to the trauma of the past, a
fragmentation of the national narrative that originates in the fragmenting of historical memory itself.

The fragmentation of historical memory may be a necessary component of national unity, especially in the aftermath of a civil war. In the ‘transition from conflict to conflict resolution,’ as Connerton argued, ‘there may be no explicit requirement to forget, but an implicit requirement to do so is nonetheless unmistakable’ (Connerton 2008: 62). In the case of America’s civil war, reconciliation between the former foes reached for an uneasy moral equivalency that interpreted the conflict ‘almost schizophrenically, both a triumph of union and a noble lost cause’ (Conn 2002: 37). Spokesmen like Douglass fought against such forgetfulness and interpretative fragmentation. We ‘must not be asked to say that the South was right in the rebellion, or to say that the North was wrong,’ he insisted. ‘We must not be asked to put no difference between those who fought for the Union, and those who fought against it’ (Douglass 1878: 1). In the absence of any kind of post-Civil War ‘conflict resolution,’ however, in the United States Connerton’s seventh type of forgetting, the ‘humiliated silence,’ remains both culturally isolated and racially riven; a facet of the former Confederacy rather than an integral part of the nation (Connerton 2008: 64).

The South, too often disaggregated from the national story in respect of its racial and social dynamics, functions as both simulacrum of and deviation from a supposed national norm; a negative iteration of the idea of American exceptionalism, but American exceptionalism nonetheless (Bercovitch 1978: 176). Yet there is little that is truly exceptional about America’s national narrative. From its colonial origins, the nation pursued a path more typical than otherwise in its racial, conflict, and landscape components. The tensions inherent in the indigene/incomer encounters of what became the United States were replicated in other countries, other cultures, and on other colonial and post-colonial frontiers; everywhere, in fact, where settlers sought to establish themselves in a landscape ‘for which other people
already [had] stories’ (Rose 2004: 183; Fields 2017: ii). Other lands, too, experienced the gradual erosion of their native landscapes as the dramatic changes in land use introduced by incomers rendered the soil itself inhospitable for ‘many of the species and habitats that supported indigenous life’ as that life was gradually removed and eventually replaced by European settlement (Rose 2004: 172-173; Cronon 1983: 147).

The justification behind American expansion is too readily accorded the status of a ‘civil religion.’ Drawn from traditional Biblical archetypes but largely cohering around ‘Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth,’ it has nevertheless been described as simultaneously ‘genuinely American and genuinely new,’ despite its very obvious parallels with other peoples, other nations (Bellah 1967: 17; Smith 2003). The Exodus story is certainly capable of adaptation by and adoption across a wide American demographic, moving in both time and space across the national landscape. From white colonial settlers to African American slaves, to the westward growth of the nation, the delivery of a chosen people from bondage, their acquisition of a Promised Land, and their rebirth in that land provided a narrative arc along which many Americans could travel (Gorski 2017: 31, 59, 77-79). However, with the native nations entirely excluded from it, former slaves invoking it in the face of physical and political attack, and immigrants increasingly compromised in their attempts to access it, it was, and in many ways remains a story of trauma as much as one grounded in hope and opportunity: a fractured narrative for a still fragmented nation.

**Conclusion**

The United States originated in and arguably still functions on the cusp of the ‘two great morphologies’ of historical discourse identified by Foucault: ‘the Roman history of
sovereignty’ and ‘the biblical history of servitude and exiles’ (Foucault 2003: 77). Racism, interpreted by Foucault as ‘revolutionary discourse in an inverted form,’ was woven into the national body from the start; but the trauma this produced, and produces, inheres in far more than ‘the shadow of slaves’ chains falling across the American soul’ (Foucault 2003: 81; Lerner 1957: 7).

Tracking this trauma through some of the fault lines that fracture the national landscape of the United States is not simply an exercise in debunking national myths; neither is it an attempt to recraft the American Dream as a national (or even international) nightmare, nor an argument that American nationalism is in any way weaker than that of other nations. Contemporary scholars, however, are in danger of moving in ever-decreasing circles in the attempt to uncover a coherent national narrative capable of providing ‘an interpretation of the past that generates a vision of the future’ (Gorski 2017: 31). Like Southern author William Faulkner, who condemned his characters, and his section, the South, to a form of stasis created by the Civil War, work on American nationalism struggles to move on from the proposition that ‘the past is never dead, it’s not even past’ (Faulkner 1996: 85; Gorski 2017: x).

In recent years scholars have worked to nuance, sometimes openly challenge previous generations’ assumptions about the civic state. They seek instead to trace an ‘evolutionary process’ whereby Western nations have moved from ethnic to civic, the better to understand the persistent tensions that exist between any state’s ‘universalist liberalist and national particularist components,’ and the ways in which ‘civic values’ can coexist alongside both ‘ethnic nationalism and racism.’ In the American case, however, the assumption still prevails that the move away from the civic base is a consequence of fixed periods of crisis, rather than a perennial manifestation of substrata national trauma (Kuzio 2002: 21, 36; Gorski 2017). Consequently, the interpretative frameworks proposed for the American nation – either the
sense that ‘the United States is the reality and the infrastructure…America is the mythology and the façade,’ or freedom as simultaneously ‘mythic idea’ and ‘living truth’ – are suggestive, but arguably not constructive of the unifying story we seek for a nation in search of its narrative (Nguyen 2016: 199; Foner 1998: 35).

To advance the argument further requires building on the work of those who have begun the process of locating the United States more firmly in the landscapes of other settler, civic nations, but also drawing on the language of those landscapes to describe the American experience. In the twenty-first century, the vocabulary of failed states, the language of trauma, may be of value not as critique but as corrective to the cyclical conversations over American nationalism, compromised as this still clearly is by race and ethnic divisions (Runciman 2016: 5). Recognising that eighteenth-century America was a post-colonial state that became in almost all racial respects a neo-colonial nation, that segregation is simply a softer word than apartheid, but that enslaver is a more accurate term than master, and that truth and reconciliation may be words to ponder in future analyses of American nationalism may advance the debate (Gould 2017; Baptist 2016). Mapping the topography of the traumatic elements of America’s national landscape, extracting the stories of those displaced from the national imaginary, enables us to understand better the recurrent crises revolving round race and class, gender and ethnicity that America experiences. It suggests, too, the ways in which America’s recent return to and revolution around historical narratives in the service of a new, populist politics is not necessarily a sign of resurgent triumphalism, but a symptom of an as yet unresolved national, and nationalist trauma.
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