

Identifying Universal Particularities

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John Michael. *Identity and the Failure of America: From Thomas Jefferson to the War on Terror*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 320 pp.

At its heart, John Michael's *Identity and the Failure of America: From Thomas Jefferson to the War on Terror* is about the conflict between a national identity that promises justice to all and the various identities that have experienced America's failure to make good on that promise. Though sometimes venturing into 20th century literature and global culture, *Identity and the Failure of America* mostly focuses on race and gender in 19th century American canonical, and canon-revisionist, novels, essays and speeches. By viewing these discursive acts as instances that either unwittingly commit or attempt to rectify America's failures of justice, Michael works toward a conception of identity that is both universal and mindful of difference.

To define the parameters of his analysis, Michael divides American identity into two distinct senses: the abstract universal and the corporeal particular. The abstract universal is generally understood as the discourse based on appeals to an inclusive and just lawfulness. Careful to avoid the pitfalls of classifying it in terms of the nationalism of Postwar American Studies on the one hand, and the "indifference to difference" generally attributed to "post-identity" scholars such as Walter Benn Michaels, Ross Posnock and Philip Fisher on the other, Michael explains his universal identity as a cosmopolitan set of principles that have been a part of the United States' intellectual history since the Enlightenment. Much of his work here is in the vein of Kwame Anthony Appiah's writings on cosmopolitanism, ethics and identity. In contrast, the corporeal particular involves "identities involving race and ethnicity or class and gender, borne by peoples who have met injustices and suffered discrimination" (3). Within the field of American Studies, this sense of identity is evident in the multicultural or pluralist critiques of Hortense Spillers, Dana Nelson, Russ Castronovo and others. What sets Michael's book apart, however, is not its consideration of both sides of American identity—though such an acknowledgement is becoming increasingly rare in American Studies—but its focus on the interplay between America's universal principles and the particular identities.

The text begins with an exploration of Thomas Jefferson's obsession with race, an obsession, Michael argues, that is still present in America. That Jefferson, the embodiment of the universal ideals of liberal equality and republican benevolence, owned slaves is a contradiction that has vexed Americans for over two centuries. However, Michael is interested in how this contradiction influenced Jefferson's views on race. In a biographical reading of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Michael explains that Jefferson is terrified by the failure of American virtue. As such, Jefferson refuses to recognize the extent to which he and his state depend on enslaved Africans and that slavery violates their most basic principles and compromised their benevolent promise; doing so would "make the nature of his own and his nation's fears and failings clear" (57). Jefferson's consideration of race is, in this sense, characterized by a subliminal pathos and a blindness akin to Du Bois's veil of ignorance: he is blind to himself as the origin of violence, and, by projecting inadequacy on those to whom the violence is committed, blind to the slaves' true identity. Only by acknowledging this failure and exploring the interplay between abstract cosmopolitan principles and particular identities, Michael argues, can there be any progress. Michael's discussion of Frederick Douglass best elaborates the workings of this relationship.

Though the slave may have been made into a man at the end of 1845's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Michael shows how, ten years later in *My Bondage, My Freedom*, Douglass realizes that he can never forget that he was once a slave. Instead, as a public figure, Douglass must maneuver between the cosmopolitan ideal and the particularities of race. On the one hand, as a public intellectual, Douglass claims a sort of universality that transcends race. On the other hand, "he himself embodies the particularities expressed by the injustices perpetrated on the black bodies by a slave system" (208). His scars mark the wounds of a particular identity and the limit of the cosmopolitan universality. Ultimately, this interaction is where Michael's theory becomes praxis, and it is to his credit that, by dwelling in contradiction and failure instead of abstracting them away, his book often forgoes intellectual removal, opting instead for pragmatism.

Michael explores the concrete implication of his theory by recasting the failed interactions of universal and particular identity as failures of justice. Though identity and justice are generally considered to be antithetical—the liberal tradition, for instance, requires that justice dissolve all particularities to enact universal and equitable lawfulness—,when considering the reality of everyday life, identity works to ground justice in the actual occurrences. Instead of ignoring identity, justice, in fact, asks the subject to both ignore her own identity, as well as imagine herself in the position of the other. It requires each subject to ask: "what would this proposition or situation look like to me if I were, for example, poor or rich, white or black, or male or female, because those demarcate some of the situations of identity and exclusion requiring judgment"

(18). Imaginary identification with particular identities is, therefore, crucial to justice in much the same way that it is a requirement for literature; both require an imaginative placing of oneself in the embodied place of the other. *Identity and the Failure of America* investigates this “power of sympathy” most fully in the chapter on Lydia Marie Child. Her *A Romance and the Republic*, an exploration of the complexities of deceit, misrecognition and misidentification of the self and of others that existed in the antebellum South is, according to Michael, a rare book that “offers one of the most compelling and one of the truest—in an importantly ideal sense—visions of American identity ever produced” (128). More importantly, *A Romance and the Republic* is ruled by a logic in which “anyone may find him- or herself in the place of the oppressed and ... [therefore] justice is not an abstract or abstruse concept ... [but] an existential requirement in the ethical life of a republic” (135). In Child’s universe, the only means of confronting this reality is through a cosmopolitan identification with the Other, and each character’s success or failure is contingent on their ability to identify with those who have met injustice, as well as their willingness to explore and celebrate these identifications.

Although Child is able to construct a national identity based on the comingling of passionate principles and sympathetic identification, in the end *A Romance of the Republic* is just that, a romance. Exploring the various ways 19th century and contemporary writers identified with the slave revolts of John Brown and Nat Turner, Michael suggests that perhaps the only way to enact real-world change may be through violent means. Here, Michael compares Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* and William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Stowe’s treatment of *Dred*, the titular character is based on Nat Turner, is “a creation of remarkable depth, power, and achievement, a triumph of identification that leads the reader far beyond the simple comforts of self-reflective sympathy to contemplate a dangerous encounter with one justly enraged by the injustices he suffers” (152). Appropriating the republic’s values of justice, *Dred* represents the terrifying truth that, in a slave state, there is “a perpetual state of war in which the master, by essentially violent means, attempts to subjugate the slave,” and therefore violence against the master is justified (147). Unlike Stowe, who is willing to forgo “feeling right” to fully understand her characterization, Styron refuses to confront his fear of just violence. If identification depends “on who is telling the story and on his or her willingness to entertain identifications that may reflect poorly on his or her own identity,” Styron fails to recognize that it is not his place to “feel right” as he attempts to identify with Turner (163). Michael argues that *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, its subsequent stormy reception, and Styron’s inability to understand his own failure ultimately represent the treacherous nature of cross-racial identification.

In what is perhaps the book’s most intriguing chapter, Michael considers Ralph Wal-

do Emerson's activism—not altogether unfamiliar territory for Michael whose work in this topic began with 1988's *Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World*. For Emerson, as for Child, national identity depends not on blood or geography but on principle, and, as such, these principles are not—as many of Emerson's critics have claimed—an abstraction away from reality, but a system created to understand America's failure. Without access to interpretations rooted in principled feeling beyond the empirically perceptible, Michael argues, “no justice and no amelioration of society are possible” (122). Emerson, well aware that he lacks both political authority and personal experience with oppression, knows that he can only address a heterogeneous and conflicted public as a concerned citizen. In this sense, the only rhetorical power available to him rests upon the nation's putative belief in its universal principles. In a slave state, however, where injustice is part of everyday life, the nation's principles have been violated and ultimately perverted so that any appeal to these principles is questionable. Understanding this situation is, for Michael, essential to understanding Emerson's precarious role as a public intellectual, and for reassessing Emerson's perceived failings, including his elitism, his reliance on aesthetics and his transcendent idealism. Ultimately, what is generally understood as Emerson's failures is, in actuality, the failure of the nation to adhere to its own principles.

Though it is never as fully developed as the failures of identity and justice, the failure of American masculinity is something that Michael remains mindful of throughout his book. He addresses this issue most explicitly in his discussion of *Moby Dick*, reading the character of Captain Ahab as representative of the paradox of American masculinity. Though his autonomy, desire for dominance, and rejection of sentiment embodies the normative masculinity of the antebellum period, Ahab's true power resides in his ability to manipulate the crew. While masculinity of this sort claims autonomy, in actuality it depends on a “prosthetic relationship to the world” for whatever power it can realize (87). Michael continues this meditation in his reading of Child's *Hobomok*. The antithesis of Ahab, Hobomok is the “poster boy for male masochism—understood as self-abnegation and the renunciation of sadistic patterns of patriarchal power” (107). However utopian this new masculinity may be, it is divested of any power to resist opposition or demand justice and is therefore unable to enact any sort of social reform in a world of violent subjugation. Douglass's conflicted cosmopolitan identity returns as the bookend to Michael's masculinity narrative. Though Douglass shares the utopian vision of Child, he realizes that competitiveness and aggressiveness may be the necessary means to progress toward that goal. Acknowledging that vigor and virility is a requirement for all growing societies, “Douglass tries to maintain a difficult balance between struggle and conquest on the one hand and respect and reciprocity on the other” (219). As such, Douglass represents the small space between monomania of Ahab and the submission of Hobomok wherein American masculinity can serve as the catalyst for positive reform.

Utilizing the schema developed throughout the text, Michael concludes by re-imagining America's antebellum failures as the modern, global failures of the "War on Terror." Though ultimately an unsatisfying attempt to contemporize his work, the section does point toward a new way of understanding the conflict between Western neoconservative ideology and Arab identities. Many Westerners, unwilling to "honestly consider that their own failures to be just and to eschew unnecessary violence have bred the violence of Iraqi resistance," exhibit the same blindness today as Jefferson at the turn of the 19th century (241). When viewing our current situation in this light, it becomes clear that the failures of antebellum America are our own, and perhaps that is why facing the failure of America is all the more necessary.

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