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18 FEB 93

## ***DREAMING AMERICA***

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SPHEX Club

February 18, 1993

The aboriginals of Australia tell us of a time before the beginning, when animals, plants, and people first began to work out their relationships among one another. This time, they tell us, was the Dreamtime, or the Dreaming.

But, these original Australians say, the Dreaming is not over. It continues even now, as long as these relationships among God's creatures continues to evolve, shift, grow, fracture, and change. And change they do, for the nature of any dream is that until the final interruption, it remains full of possibility, danger, and promise. And it can always change its shape, rework its story, reassess its aims. A dream is exciting, a bit harrowing, and its end is never predictable, perhaps never even in sight.

This makes me wonder if Shakespeare, for once, got it wrong:

To die, to sleep -  
to sleep - perchance to dream:  
ay, there's the rub,  
for in that sleep of death what dream may come  
when we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
must give us pause.

For Shakespeare, whom most aboriginals (as much as it pains me to say) never knew and apparently never needed, the dreaming came after this life - and a not very happy prospect it was. But the Australian cosmology holds that the Dreaming came first, and even now envelops us - here, as we breathe - a short, precious, irreplaceable moment of opportunity, risk, and possibility.

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Nobody should understand this quality of living as dreaming better than an American.

At least two things make a dream: newness; and a sense of spirituality, some sort of moral core, whether good or ill. The American dream - or, perhaps more accurately, the dream of America - contains both. "We have it in our power to make the world over new," Tom Paine is supposed to have said. "We shall be as a city upon a hill," prayed John Winthrop, dubbing America a new Jerusalem. "The eyes of all people are upon us." America is not simply a spot on the map. Its distinction, its burden, long has been that it is also a potentiality, a set of hopes, a dream.

--Tell Haiti story --

I have thought about all of this a good deal lately, because of the work to which I devote my life, which in turn has helped create and recreate my life:

(1) For three years now I have directed something I conceived at Randolph-Macon Woman's College, the junior-year American Culture Program. This innovative, one-of-a-kind program, noted in The New York Times, the Chronicle of Higher Education, and National Public Radio, seeks to draw students into the same sort of concentrated, interdisciplinary analysis of a national culture that happens in the best junior-year-abroad programs. Combining classroom work and experiential learning, the students meet literally hundreds of widely different Americans during the year, and take to the road numerous times -- north to Philadelphia and the Amish country, south to the South Carolina sea islands, west to Cumberland Gap, east to the Dismal Swamp and the Chesapeake Bay -- on journeys that last from a few hours to ten days. In other words, more than before, my day-to-day job requires me to think about the basic question, far deeper than the individual events of American history, of what the United States is.

(2) I am currently under contract with the University of North Carolina Press to write a comprehensive history of Virginia, the first detailed treatment since Virginius Dabney's 1971 effort, and the first by a professional historian since 1937. In this work, I am determined to move away from an overly provincial treatment that portrays Virginia outside a broader American context, or that exaggerates distinctiveness at the expense of illuminating those themes that tie Virginia firmly to United States history and to American culture.

(3) I have very recently signed on to be co-curator of a new exhibit at the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond, which will be the only permanent exhibit in their newly renovated, expanded galleries. Like the book, the exhibit will focus on Virginians as Americans.

In all of these tasks, I've had to think about the cosmic questions that have shaped our country and our culture - and, like the people, plants and animals of the Australian Dreamtime, that continue to interact with one another in an ever shifting, sometimes beautiful, sometimes mysterious, sometimes alarming, and always fascinating pattern of relationships.

To tell the story of this Dreaming America - a process that in itself inevitably extends and affects the dream by virtue of creating a story about it - one must tell of democracy, and individualism, and religion, and capitalism, and race. One must tell of class - for this has never been a classless society - and of gender. And one must speak of the nationalism of the last two centuries, along with issues of environment and community (i.e. our kinship with that environment and with one another).

None of those things exists alone and independently. To understand America, and the ever-mutating dream of Dreaming America, we must always look at connections -- and the ever-present tensions -- among them. And the connections and the tensions are everywhere.

--Show Sholl's Cafeteria leaflet--

For example, as a historian, I must think about religion all the time. My mentor at Johns Hopkins (Willie Lee Rose) told me that if I wanted to write of the nineteenth century I had to keep two books on my desk: Richard Morris's Encyclopedia of American History and the Bible. And she was right. (Certainly I couldn't have written about abolitionism without knowledge of the Bible and the American Protestant tradition.)

But we must, if we wish to get the story right, remember its complexity. Remember, after all, that Virginia was settled by the Virginia Company of London -- that even Massachusetts Bay was settled by a profit-seeking corporation.

Listen to John Smith:

*We did admire how it was possible such wise men could so torment themselves and us with such strange absurdities and impossibilities: making Religion their colour, when all their aime was nothing but present profit...For I am not so simple to think that any other motive than wealth will ever erect in Virginia a commonweale.*

Has spirituality driven America? Absolutely.

Has money driven America? Absolutely.

And therein lies one of the central tensions at the heart of the American story, and some of the crucial questions: How do we freely pursue economic comfort and independence without coming to think of ourselves as economic units rather than spiritual beings? How do we permit great economic liberty without producing an anti-democratic economic oligarchy? (Over 160 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville warned that this was the likeliest way that democracy in America would be effectively destroyed.) And how do we keep the production of consumer products today, along with the shared experience of consumerism, from being mistaken for democracy?

*"You know that the President drinks Coke," says Andy Warhol, "Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke. ... All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good."*

Is this the face of democracy at the end of the twentieth century?

In Virginia, of course, the quest for profit led not to gold or silver, but finally to tobacco. Not everyone applauded: even King James I denounced smoking (anonymously) as "hateful to the eye, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs." But as we know, Tobacco "took" - not even the King's displeasure could prevent the ultimate addiction of millions, and the rise of Virginia to be the richest of the original thirteen states, the carved tobacco leaves on the ceilings and walls of countless planter mansions attesting to the source of that wealth as well as the source of those planters' own power - power still seen in the formidable tobacco lobby to this day, impervious to attack in the legislative session now ending.

As with other lucrative but morally problematic industries, some fall back on wishful thinking to justify continuation of something that kills and cripples while filling bank accounts or padding employment rolls. Witness the daydream of one Garland H. Dunbar of Mechanicsville in today's Richmond Times-Dispatch:

*EDITOR, TIMES-DISPATCH:*

*Tobacco, one of Virginia's money crops and an important source of employment for many years, has gotten a lot of adverse publicity the past several years.*

*People smoke because they want to smoke; no one makes them smoke, use snuff, or chew tobacco.*

*I read recently that tobacco products are being used for medicinal purposes. Wouldn't it be wonderful if a cure for AIDS could be developed from a tobacco product? This would eliminate so much criticism.*

Others, less imaginative than Mr. Dunbar, resign themselves to putting up with an undesirable institution because it does, after all, generate money and, in any case, we're stuck with it. It's not unlike Jefferson's famous comment on slavery: "We have the wolf by the ears; we cannot safely hold him, nor safely let him go."

Ah, slavery. In Virginia, we owe that to tobacco, too - at least the magnitude to which the institution grew.

At first, Virginia tried to keep the work force largely white, via indentured servitude. But gradually, things changed. In 1670, black slaves were only 5% of Virginia's population (2000 out of 40,000). But by 1710, they were over one-third, and by 1750, over 40%.

Nearly two hundred years after the American Revolution, a great American

dreamer would invoke the words of another great American dreamer, and exhort us all to take those words seriously:

*I have a dream. I dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the full meaning of its creed. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

Martin Luther King, Jr., had his critics, we know, from the left as well as the right, and from within the black community. "What is looked upon as an American dream for white people," said Malcolm X, "has long been an American nightmare for black people."

You can't talk about this Dreaming America without talking about race - "the fishbone in the nation's throat," Robert Lowell called it. And not just race by itself, but race in connection with all those other things that make America.

On an obvious level, slavery made this great engine of commercial capitalism possible. On another obvious level, our racial history certainly is in tension with our history as a torchbearer of liberty in the world. Not that it makes the democratic rhetoric of our founding documents bogus - but it does make American democracy problematic.

An even more disturbing, if less obvious, connection lies in the thought that racism and slavery may actually have made American democracy possible. This, at least, is argued by Edmund Morgan of Yale in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, American Slavery, American Freedom. Morgan argues that permanent, hereditary, racially-based slavery solved the labor problem while at the same time eliminating the danger of a resentful free white proletariat made up of disgruntled former indentured servants unable to acquire land. Slavery, he contends, both reduced the number of these potential white trouble-makers over the course of time, and gave all white people a sense of shared superiority -- an incipient feeling of egalitarianism -- based on their color.

But whatever connections one makes, it is clear that this issue must never be left out of the story. And as this ever-written story evolves, America -- including Virginia -- must never again be portrayed as a white, Anglo-Saxon place, in which nonwhite or non-English people were simply reactors and bit players. Why not? "Political correctness" - a very real phenomenon, and one I abhor, in academia today - has nothing to do with it. The reason is plain, sheer accuracy. It's just factually wrong.

Consider Matthew Page Andrews' Virginia: The Old Dominion (1937), which the author dedicated to three champions of worldwide Anglo-Saxon dominion, Lord Bryce, Charles Francis Adams, and Thomas Nelson Page:

*These transplanted blacks were being brought over from the jungles of a barbarous continent and immediately thrown into contact with a highly developed civilization, under which the condition of the Africans...was infinitely improved...The Negro...was grateful for protection and care...As far as the Negro was concerned, the plantation system has solved the problem of old-age security.*

Andrews repeatedly refers to Indians as "savages," without any informed discussion of Indian culture whatever. Even in the 1971 history by Virginius Dabney, a distinguished journalist and consummate gentleman, Indians are simply "rampaging redskins," with their culture, along with that of African-Americans (though Dabney does note the cruelty of slavery) still undiscussed.

It's not only these sorts of books that need transcending, but presentations at tourist attractions as well.

(Here discuss the legacy of the colonial revival of the 1920s; Virginia House in Richmond, and the internal battle over how to present the past at Carter's Grove.)

At the tercentennial celebration of Jamestown in 1907, Thomas Nelson Page said: "[Because of Jamestown] this country belongs to the English speaking Race and the civilization which it represents." A monument there, dedicated by Queen Elizabeth in 1957, essentially echoed that sentiment.

In 1916, a black college asked the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities for permission to erect a monument to the first North American blacks, landed at Jamestown in 1619. The APVA responded:

*Jamestown was the first permanent Colony of the English speaking people in this Country...and the incident of bringing the negroes by Dutch ship to Jamestown forms no such part in the life of the Colony as will justify our granting permission to erect a memorial to that event.*

As issues of race must be attended to, and in new ways, so too must those of us seeking to understand America, and dream it, must notice issues of gender. As a historian, I have come in the past fifteen years to be acutely aware of how much difference this makes.

(Here discuss how attention to gender is affecting our image of what a "Southerner" is.)

American history has generally been about men, and about politics, war, and diplomacy. These things are extremely important. But why is it important for my students at Randolph-Macon Woman's College to learn about the Jay Treaty and the Battle of

New Orleans, but not important for students at Hampden-Sydney to learn about how people cooked and ate in the past, or raised their children? I think we have reached the point in our understanding at which there is no longer a satisfactory answer.

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Somewhere in all this lies America. Amid the interplay of race, gender, religion, capitalism, democracy, individualism, community, we find our culture, and ourselves. But what we find changes, partly because values and priorities change as generations pass, and also because of the very nature of the American dream. America was founded by dreamers who wanted something better, materially and spiritually, (Columbus thought the source of the Orinoco River lay literally in the site of the Garden of Eden.) America - that Dreaming America - is still in search of that better something. And it had better be. For the search, the dream, is the essence of America, and the further we get from our essence, the more peril we are in. For those of us whose goal it is - or perhaps even whose job it is - to understand America, we must avoid the banality of mere romance and celebration. We must get it right. We must not avoid the complexity of it all because it is hard, tiring, disillusioning, or uncongenial. In fact, if we do get it right, if we can get it right, within our own intellectual and moral limitations, what we'll find is something grander and more uplifting than any Fourth-of-July display: the spectacle of a nation no longer young, clearly never innocent, battered by its own paradoxes and contradictions, endangered by its own material successes, but still recognizably a nation formed at Dreamtime. A nation with less to apologize for than any other great nation. A nation still honestly trying to "live out the true meaning of its creed." A Dreaming America that is never more lovable or more productive of true human hope, than when it is dreaming America.