

## EARTH/ATMOSPHERE: THE LEONID METEOR SHOWER, 1833

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Since 1777, the union of the United States had been represented by an arrangement of stars. In that year, the wartime Continental Congress ordered that the US flag display ‘thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new constellation’ (United States Continental Congress 1907: 464). Indeed, many in the late eighteenth century regarded the new nation through the metaphor of a ‘constellation’. One of the original six frigates built for the United States Navy was called the USS *Constellation*, and an early set of coins bore the Latin inscription ‘*Nova Constellatio*’ (Footner 2002; McCarthy 2017). The metaphor was apt. As historian Jill Lepore has pointed out, the United States that emerged from the American revolution cannot be understood as a nation-state, a cultural group whose members imagine themselves into relation with each other and form a government. Rather, it was what she calls a state-nation: a political and legal confederacy whose leaders attempted to form a single national culture from disparate parts (Lepore 2019). Independent bodies (stars or states) were brought together by the fiction of perspective, enabling some observers to see in separate political communities a mythic national body. Reflecting on how the United States of America was and is a constellation – a myth, a contingent arrangement united by the position of observers – reveals at once the problem of treating it as an object of study. Look closely at the United States, and you will see that it is neither as united nor as bounded as it first appears.

And scholars have looked closely, indeed. The myth of the US nation-state has been decisively demythologised. At least since the so-called ‘transnational turn in

American Studies' – which can be dated to the end of the Cold War era, although the period would not receive its present name until 2004 – scholars and critics in the field have challenged national frameworks: temporal, historical, geographical and definitional (Fishkin 2005: 17–57).<sup>1</sup> This effort to demythologise the nation has ushered in an age of permanent revolution, an era that Hester Blum describes in *Turns of Event* as enabling not only the transnational, but also the hemispheric, postnational, spatial, temporal, post-secular, aesthetic and affective 'turns'. For Blum, these deviations from past practices have been a boon, a 'constitutive strength' of a field on the move (Blum 2016: 2–3).<sup>2</sup> And yet as illiberal political movements from Brazil to the United Kingdom to Hungary to the United States have met with electoral success, many scholars have turned with new attention to the guiding constellations of liberal patriotism.<sup>3</sup> Christopher Castiglia, for instance, has proclaimed in an echo of Granville Hicks that 'I like America'. 'America', in Castiglia's formulation, functions as an empty signifier that allows 'citizens to define, support, and organise themselves locally under the rubric of the nation' (Castiglia 2017: 43). The United States of America – that constellated illusion of perspective – functions as an organising principle around which emancipatory movements might coalesce. As Lepore tersely explains: 'When serious historians abandon the study of the nation, when scholars stop trying to write a common history for a people, nationalism doesn't die. Instead, it eats liberalism' (Lepore 2019). Scholars such as Lepore and Castiglia have called for a renewed consideration of the United States not because it has represented an emancipatory past, but because in its mythic potential it might represent an emancipatory future. They have called for a consideration of the US nation that recognises it as an illusory formation, but that nonetheless enables individuals, including scholars, to love it.

But what might it mean to recognise the United States of America as a constellation, an illusion of perspective, and yet to treat it as an organising principle for scholarly inquiry – or even for love? And what might it mean to be clear-eyed about the crimes perpetrated in the name of the United States of America, and yet to declare – with Hicks and Castiglia – that 'I like America' for its possible future, if not its often catastrophic and inhumane past? In the pages to follow, I will offer a provisional answer. And my answer begins, appropriately, with the stars. Stars were central to the contingently adopted liberal patriotism that characterised the labours of dissident nineteenth-century authors such as Frederick Douglass or even Harriet Jacobs, both of whom I will consider briefly below. I will suggest that the plasticity of the constellation metaphor has enabled people across time to radically rewrite the national project. Constellations are fictions of perspective, illusions onto which people project collective meaning. But fictions are not lies. They are instead shared inventions through which individuals narrativise their relation to the world, to the universe and to each other.

## WHEN THE STARS FELL

In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Frederick Douglass adds an astronomical detail omitted from the version of his life story published a decade earlier. In this latter account Douglass explains that, in 1833, he witnessed the ‘gorgeous spectacle’ of the Leonid meteor shower, the November display of shooting stars seen that year by observers throughout North America. Meteor showers such as the Leonids are caused by the earth’s passage through a stream of debris left behind in the trail of a comet: in this case, the comet Temple-Tuttle. As the earth’s atmosphere collides with this trail, the debris vaporises – producing the flashes conventionally known as shooting stars. There were thousands of such falling stars that November in 1833. They blanketed the sky and appeared to observers to radiate outward from the constellation Leo (Douglass 1855: 186 and Jenniskens 2006: 99).

Douglass recalls this moment – watching the ‘sublime scene’ at dawn – as a time of spiritual doubt, but also one that augured catastrophic wars. He writes,

of that strange phenomenon, when the heavens seemed about to part with its starry train. I witnessed this gorgeous spectacle, and was awe-struck. The air seemed filled with bright, descending messengers from the sky. It was about daybreak when I saw this sublime scene. I was not without the suggestion, at the moment, that it might be the harbinger of the coming of the Son of Man; and, in my then state of mind, I was prepared to hail him as my friend and deliverer. I had read, that the ‘stars shall fall from heaven;’ and they were now falling . . . and I was beginning to look away to heaven for rest denied me on earth. (Douglass 1855: 186)

Douglass sees in the disturbance of the heavens a sign of his own spiritual doubt and despair. Seeking in his then limited reading a corollary to what he sees in the natural world, he reaches for an explanation from Christian scripture: ‘And the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken’ (Mark 13: 25). In Douglass’s narrative, this memory ostensibly serves as a marker of time. He knows that he left for the village of St Michael’s in 1833 because the meteor shower appeared most spectacularly in that year.

But Douglass’s reference to the Leonid meteor shower does more than locate him in time. As Anna Mae Duane and Robert S. Levine have separately observed, Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* – published ten years after his *Narrative* (1845) – can be read as an elaborate response to the fractious politics of the 1850s: the emergence of race science as a powerful, mainstream discourse, the increasing interconnection of Black activists, and the increasing radicalism of the abolitionist movement (Duane 2010: 461–88 and Levine 2016: 163). The

Douglass who recalls in 1855 the falling stars of two decades before is reminding his biblically literate readership that such sights augur apocalyptic conflict, a time when ‘nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom’ (Mark 13: 8). Indeed, Douglass and others often spoke of celestial appearances as a means of highlighting the precarity of the US national project. He would go on to note in 1860 that news of the revolutionary abolitionist John Brown and his raid on the federal armory at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, ‘flashed across the oceans and continents like a splendid meteor’ (Douglass 1999: 412). And Douglass was far from the only abolitionist to remind white Americans that their nation, represented by a constellation of stars, was as impermanent as the turbulent heavens. In *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859, 1861–2), Martin Delany’s novel of Black emancipation, the revolutionary protagonist Henry Blake ‘stood motionless in wonder looking into the heavens’ from the deck of a riverboat, witnessing celestial movement that held ‘more than ordinary importance’ for his revolutionary project (Delany 2017: 125; Rusert 2013: 820). And in the pages of the *Liberator*, editor William Lloyd Garrison published a parody of the US national anthem that mocked the American constellation: ‘Oh, say do you hear, at the dawn’s early light | The shrieks of those bondmen, whose blood is now streaming | from the merciless lash, while our banner in sight | With its stars mocking freedom, is fitfully gleaming?’ (Atlee [1844] 1988: 156–7). Douglass recognised – just as many other antebellum writers recognised – that inexplicably falling stars could easily symbolise a threat to the constellated republic.

Numerous, strange celestial appearances during the antebellum period fuelled the suspicion that the United States might not long survive. The Black revolutionary Nat Turner began his August 1831 rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, shortly after seeing the sun turn a shade of green, likely caused by the eruption of a far-off volcano (Allmendinger 2014: 312, n. 55). This event was closely followed by the Leonid meteor shower in 1833, a particularly dramatic appearance of the Northern Lights in 1837, and the so-called ‘Great Comet’ of February 1843, the brightest visible comet of the nineteenth century. William Miller, who founded the apocalyptic Christian sect that predicted that the end of the world would come about in 1843, did not specifically point to these celestial phenomena as auguring the end times, but many of his followers nonetheless did (Aveni 2016: 22). Even the authors of fiction joined in the predictions of cosmic doom. In a short story entitled ‘The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion’, Edgar Allan Poe depicted a comet striking the earth, igniting the atmosphere and killing all human life (Poe 1839: 321–3).

Abolitionists, radicals and revolutionaries throughout the antebellum period capitalised on the close association of the United States with the stars. ‘[C]an you not think the . . . strange appearances about this time in the heavens might prompt others, as well as myself, to this undertaking,’ the Black radical Nat Turner asked

an interlocutor shortly after he had been captured and imprisoned (Gray [1831] 1999: 45). In other words, Turner suggested that he was not the only enslaved person who might look to the sky and see in its strange transformations a prophecy of national doom. If the stability of the United States was made visible in the radiant permanence of the stars – what Daniel Webster called ‘the American constellation’ – then disruptions in the stars prefigured disruptions on earth. And, indeed, many were hoping to see such disruptions (Webster [1826] 1828: 245). As Douglass explained in a 5 July 1852 address, the ‘Star-Spangled Banner and American Christianity’ were ‘co-extensive’ with slavery. ‘Where these go’, he said, ‘may also go the merciless slave-hunter’ (Douglass [1852] 1999: 199). American stars were the symbol of slavery and empire, but such stars were not as permanent as they appeared. Indeed, they could fall from the heavens and vaporise, and their fall could fulfil biblical prophecies of civil war, revolution and the return of Jesus Christ.

Yet the emancipatory potential of the American constellation changed decisively with the US Civil War. Suddenly, abolitionist writers did not find themselves hoping to see stars fall from the sky. The US flag no longer featured ‘stars mocking freedom’ (Atlee [1844] 1988: 156–7). Rather, the 1777 constellation, which had symbolised the unity of former colonies in the face of the British empire, became instead the symbol of a very different struggle for justice. It became the symbol of a constellated, composite nation.

#### SOLDIERS YOU HAVE MADE IT

The author and educator Harriet Jacobs stood before a Colored Infantry Regiment in Union-occupied Alexandria, Virginia, on 1 August 1863, and she delivered an address marking the emancipation of enslaved people in the British West Indies. But her address also marked the presentation of an American flag, which was to be given to the Union hospital in Alexandria. ‘Three years ago,’ Jacobs explained to the gathered soldiers,

this flag had no significance for you, we could not cherish it as our emblem of freedom. You then had no part in the bloody struggle for your country, your patriotism was spurned; but to-day you are in arms for the freedom of your race and the defence [*sic*] of your country – to-day this flag is significant to you. Soldiers you have made it the symbol of freedom for the slave, unfurl it, stand by it and fight for it, until the breeze upon which it floats shall be so pure that a slave cannot breathe its air. (‘Flag Presentation’, 1864: 1)<sup>4</sup>

Jacobs was generous when she said that, in prior years, the flag had ‘no significance’. Indeed, it had great significance – as a symbol of slavery, dispossession and empire. The flag, she had written in 1853, ‘should be [called] stripes

and scars' because it represented a nation of enslavers (Yellin 2004: 123 and Perry 2008: 597). And yet here Jacobs appropriates and reinterprets the mythic symbology of the American constellation. The 'scars' that flew above 'the merciless slave-hunter' as he scoured the countryside are reimagined by Jacobs in 1863 as a 'symbol of freedom' for the enslaved (Douglass [1852] 1999: 199).

Jacobs would not be the last to reinterpret the American constellation, to remake an eighteenth-century symbol of revolution into a nineteenth-century symbol of emancipation. 'Notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation,' Douglass had explained in his July 1852 oration, 'I do not despair of this country' (Douglass [1852] 1999: 204). And he didn't. When war broke out, Douglass described a 'revolution' in northern sentiment, explaining: 'Every pulsation of our heart is with the legitimate American Government, in its determination to suppress and put down this slave-holding rebellion. The *Stars and Stripes* are now symbols of liberty' (Douglass [1861] 1999: 445). Douglass's about-face was, like that of Jacobs, symbolic. The flag that had flown above the slave hunter now flew above an army arrayed against the slave power, and so he seized upon the potential force of this symbol and deployed it for his own purposes.

In part, this was because constellations are contingent arrangements, visible only from a particular time and place.<sup>5</sup> The problem for the wartime Continental Congress in 1777 had been that of uniting disparate colonies. The problem for the emancipationist project would be that of uniting people across the divisions of race and legal status. In pursuing this goal, Douglass took up whatever symbols were available. And the constellation was a useful and powerful symbol. In a later address, Douglass explained that the future of the United States would be that of a 'composite nation', a nation not only of white and Black people, but of people of Chinese, Japanese, Irish, German, Polynesian and other descents. The United States was already 'the most conspicuous example of composite nationality in the world', Douglass explained. He went on: 'We shall spread the network of our science and civilisation over all who seek their shelter whether from Asia, Africa, or the Isles of the sea. We shall mold them all, each after his kind, into Americans' (Douglass [1869] 2018: 302–3). This was the virtue of the constellated, composite nation. Symbolised by a contingent arrangement, it could be endlessly renewed, expanded and transformed to describe the composite present. Soldiers made the US constellation a symbol of freedom, but so could Indigenous peoples, slaves, immigrants and the poor.

#### THE INDIFFERENT STARS

When the earth passed through a stream of debris left behind by the comet Temple-Tuttle in November 1833, individuals throughout what we call the United States of America reacted differently. Frederick Douglass recalled the

Gospel of Mark and wondered if the falling stars might prompt wars between nations and peoples, foretelling the return of Jesus Christ (Douglass 1855: 186). In Combahee, South Carolina, a white enslaver heard people reacting to the shooting stars and believed he was going to be attacked. He took up his sword and ran outside ('Letter from Combahee, S.C.', 1833: [3]). In Port Tobacco, Maryland, a young, enslaved girl named Jane Clark was walking to fetch water when she saw the meteor shower, and she recalled later to an amanuensis that she 'ran along trying to catch the stars as they fell' (Bernstein, 2018). Captain Gideon Parker, commanding the ship *Junior* in the Gulf of Mexico, attempted to estimate the number of shooting stars, but lost count. And a woman milking cows on her farm in upstate New York came to believe that the meteors fell all the way to the earth, leaving on the ground a lumpy paste that looked like 'boiled starch' (Littmann 1999: 13). What did it all mean?

Nothing and anything. The heavens were, and are, indifferent to human desires and narratives, and vaporising particles from a comet are only noteworthy from a particular viewpoint at a particular time. Falling stars, like constellations, are a matter of perspective. And yet from their perspectively limited observations of the heavens, human beings ultimately *do* produce narratives, stories and meaning. The meanings that we project onto an indifferent universe are not mistaken or false, but they are fictional. And fictions have a tremendous power in unifying or dividing people, in producing functional political communities or dismembering them.

Today, I suggest, we need renewed fictions. The end of the Cold War inaugurated a fundamental transformation in the field of American Studies. A discipline that in the 1950s featured what one scholar of that generation called 'quasi-official State Department connections' had by the 1980s and early 1990s come to regard itself as complicit in the project of American empire (Marx 1999: 43 and 48).<sup>6</sup> As the field made its 'transnational turn', its practitioners came to regard themselves first and foremost as critics of various US hegemonies: military, economic, political, cultural and linguistic, among others. As Amy Kaplan wrote in her preface to *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993), that volume aimed to take up subjects that had been 'relegated to the unnarrated background' of American cultural studies: the 'multiple histories of continental and overseas expansion, conquest, conflict, and resistance which have shaped the cultures of the United States and the cultures of those it has dominated within and beyond its geopolitical boundaries' (Kaplan 1993: 4). In short, American Studies would reveal what American imperialists had long sought to conceal: the nation's role in the work of empire.

But while American empire has persisted, political conditions have changed. The period immediately following the end of the Cold War was the apotheosis

of a neoliberal order that acted through misdirection, conflating human freedom with market liberalisation and communicating through racial dog whistles. This order has given way to an oligarchic populism guided by leaders who straightforwardly avow their hatreds. As a result, Americanists find themselves at yet another moment of transformation. A fundamental question about the future of the United States has been clarified: Shall it be a composite nation, a constellation of peoples from Africa, Asia, Europe, Oceania, Australia and the Americas, as Frederick Douglass urged? Shall it be a unifying fiction around which we might organise new forms of human freedom and imagine new possibilities? Or shall it, instead, come to represent the ‘merciless’ use of US power against the poor, the desperate and the weak? This is a question not merely, or even primarily, for scholars. But it is a question scholars will play a role in answering.

A great deal is at stake in how we answer. For better and often for worse, nations remain what Douglass called the ‘grandest aggregations of organised human power’ (Douglass [1869] 2018: 280). Nation-states produce the laws, armies, police forces, bureaucracies, prisons and schools that shape the lives of individuals. And to define a nation is to exert power through it. Americanists in the early decades of the twenty-first century have been dedicated to a long-term project of unsettling the exceptionalist mythology of the United States. As Janice Radway explained in her presidential address to the American Studies Association, our aim has been to ‘complicate and fracture the very idea of an “American” nation, culture, and subject’ (Radway [1998] 1999: 17). And yet this work of fracturing breaks apart the imagined community to which people might pledge themselves. I am proposing here that we in the field of American Studies consider the work of remaking the composite America by examining its imagined and yet unrealised potential. We should, in essence, study a dream from the past – the dream of a constellated, composite nationality.

In 1998, the same year as Radway’s presidential address, Leo Marx described a conversation he had four decades earlier with Richard Hoggart, the British scholar of literature and cultural studies. Hoggart was confused by the American Studies movement, particularly after having met a young practitioner. It was not, Hoggart suggested, methodologically distinctive. Marx recalled the British academic’s litany of complaints: ‘Combining the study of history and literature? We’ve been doing that for generations, said Hoggart. Studying the culture as a whole? Nothing very new about that either, said Hoggart. After many attempts, in a fit of exasperation, Hoggart’s eager but frustrated American interlocutor exclaimed: “But you don’t understand, I *believe* in America”.’ Like Christopher Castiglia or Granville Hicks or even, sometimes, Harriet Jacobs, the Americanists who emerged in the period after the Second World War shared a commitment to ‘American nationhood’ as a premise and a promise (Marx 1999: 47).

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But their liberal patriotism was hardly unique. Others had believed in America, or liked it, or made meaning from it.

Douglass and Jacobs understood that the American constellation was both everything and nothing. As an illusion of perspective, it had no substance at all. And yet, as a thing without substance, it provided the empty field onto which individual people could project dreams of solidarity and interdependence. Nationality based not upon descent but upon shared enterprise was a new endeavour in 1777, when the Continental Congress decided to describe the union of former colonies as a ‘constellation’ and to represent that union with stars. In the intervening years, the proliferation of stars in the American constellation has represented the geographic expansion of an imperial power. It has represented the domain of slave hunters and oligarchs. And yet this constellation has *also* represented the efforts of those soldiers who, as Harriet Jacobs said, ‘made it the symbol of freedom for the slave’ (‘Flag Presentation’, 1864: 1). It has represented a nation that Granville Hicks could declare that he liked, and that Frederick Douglass could describe as ‘the most conspicuous example of composite nationality in the world’ (Castiglia 2017: 43 and Douglass [1869] 2018: 285). The discovery that national myths are in fact myths can foster disillusionment, but it should not. It should, instead, prompt us to recover from the past those unrealised dreams projected onto a fiction in the sky. It should prompt us to carry those dreams forward by telling new stories about the United States – that illusion of perspective, that constellation of imagined stars, that potential composite of peoples.

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## NOTES

1. Fishkin's address to the American Studies Association, in which she named the 'transnational turn', was dedicated to Gloria Anzaldúa, whose *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) emblematised the transnationalism Fishkin described.
2. The phrase 'permanent revolution' has roots in Marxist philosophy, but it has also been used to describe the birth of liberalism. See Simpson 2019: 29. Blum is careful to distinguish between scholarly 'turns' and 'revolutions' because the former do not return scholars to points of origin. Rather, 'turns' are 'extrapolations or deviations' from earlier forms.
3. The study of such liberal patriotism was formerly a central project of American Studies scholarship. F. O. Matthiessen, for instance, read in the work of Walt Whitman an identification of a central problem for the future of the United States – the conflict between individualism and national-scale mutuality, or patriotism. Whitman suggested that the problem could one day be resolved. See F. O. Matthiessen [1941] 1968: 591, n. 8.
4. For a discussion of this incident, see Perry 2008: 595–605.
5. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin struck on this when he suggested that the historian who abandons narrow 'historicism' (*Der Historismus*) – in essence, who stops narrating a chain of causation – is able to think instead in terms of constellations formed by the present and the distant past. Benjamin writes of such a historian: 'He grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along

with a very specific earlier one' (*Er erfasst die Konstellation, in die seine eigene Epoche mit einer ganz bestimmten früheren getreten ist*). See Benjamin 2006: 397 and Benjamin and Adorno 1992: 153.

6. As Leo Marx explains, the field began with the work of left-liberal scholars committed to the principles of the New Deal, but its institutional mission was advanced in the 1950s by institutional leaders guided in their funding decisions by an 'excessive, chauvinistic emphasis on ideas and things American'.