Redeemer Nation in the Interregnum
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Dedicated to Paul Bové, Daniel O’Hara, and Donald Pease,

the profane Trinity—
the nothing, the fire, and the unholy bird—
whose polyvalent force has guided me
in my destruction of the American world I live in
and my imaging of the polis that will arise from its ashes
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William V. Spanos’s *Redeemer Nation in the Interregnum: An Untimely Meditation on the American Vocation* brings to fruition and provides the coda for a series of remarkable volumes—*The Exceptionalist State and the State of Exception: Herman Melville’s “Billy Budd, Sailor”* (2011); *Herman Melville and the American Calling: The Fiction After “Moby-Dick,” 1851–1857* (2008); and *Shock and Awe: American Exceptionalism and the Imperatives of the Spectacle in Mark Twain’s “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court”* (2013)—in which Spanos undertook a radical critique of American exceptionalism. In conducting that ongoing critique, Spanos brought together two critical dispositions—Gramsci’s dismantling of hegemony as a “coercive ideological project that represents itself as universal truth and finds its fulfillment in the ‘end of history’” and Heidegger’s destruction of “the global triumph of the imperial logic of hegemony.” This study continues Spanos’s critical *destruktion* of American exceptionalism, but it differs from its precursors in that Spanos attests to the emergence of a way of being that coincides with the revocation of the American exceptionalist calling.

The phrase “An Untimely Meditation on the American Vocation” indicates what sets this volume apart from Spanos’s preceding volumes. In *Redeemer Nation in the Interregnum*, Spanos engages the polyvalent ideological connotations that resonate around “American exceptionalism” when it is understood as the foundational trope of the American national identity. Whereas the vast majority of commentators on the term have interpreted American exceptionalism as an ideological mystification
of imperial predation, Spanos constructs a genealogy of American exceptionalism that teases out its polyvalent ideological implications by finding them at once condensed yet concealed in the idea of an American calling or vocation. Spanos's genealogy of American exceptionalism as “the American calling” discloses how it functions simultaneously as an ontological, a moral, an economic, a racial, a gendered, and a political phenomenon.

According to Spanos, American exceptionalism is not a conscious and articulate ideology. It is an ethos in Rancière's sense of the word, a polyvalent discourse that works as an apparatus of capture—a whole way of life—that saturates the American body politic right down to its capillaries. In light of Spanos's genealogy, American exceptionalism should not be construed as a corrigible ideological screen. Its inordinate invisible power cannot be resisted by direct confrontation undertaken in the name of an identity, no matter whether working class, racial or gendered minority, or ethnic constituency. This exceptionalist ethos continues to determine the worldly mission of the U.S. imperial exceptionalist. But it cannot be opposed in the name of any of these identities because identities are the means whereby the exceptionalist state apparatuses are programmed to operate in a decisively effective way.

From the monograph's opening chapter, Spanos explicitly links this argument with claims he previously laid out in *Shock and Awe: American Exceptionalism and the Imperatives of the Spectacle in Mark Twain’s “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court.”* Spanos specifically reveals the way in which the spectacular show of force Mark Twain staged in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* uncannily anticipated the post–9/11 global American cultural-political occasion. Twain’s Hank Morgan also prefigured Bush’s desire to transform the exceptionalist national ordinance into an absolute spectacle. When it pursued the logic of American exceptionalism to what Spanos calls its “fulfillment” in an apocalyptic spectacle, the Bush administration revealed the sublime violence that the benign discourse of the “redeemer nation” had previously covered over.

Characterizing George W. Bush’s War on Terror as the paradoxical fulfillment of the exceptionalist narrative, Spanos conducts a compelling reenvisioning of the whole arc of American culture. Spanos describes what’s different about the discursive structure of the Bush administration’s Project for the New American Century as its total reification of the temporality of being into an absolute spectacle. “At this liminal point, the nothingness of being, which is ontologically prior to its thingness, is dis-
“When George W. Bush’s shock-and-awe war in the Middle East rendered the long-disavowed violence of the state spectacularly visible to Americans and the world, the entire buttressing logic of U.S. exceptionalism “self-de-structured.” In the interregnum precipitated by its coming to its completion, that which American exceptionalism always disavowed and rendered “invisible”—that specter which, in fact, always haunted it—has manifested itself, contrapuntally, as the Other that American exceptionalism covered over.

Spanos’s exposure of the centrality of American exceptionalism to the discourse of the American political class has been echoed in the work of a generation of scholars in New American studies who endorse Spanos’s critique of U.S. exceptionalism. But after persuasively demonstrating how the American exceptionalist ethos continues to determine the mentality of the policy-makers responsible for articulating America’s mission in the world, Spanos devotes the entire third chapter of this untimely monograph to a prolonged chastisement of a constellation of “New, New Americanist” scholars—Russ Castronovo, Malini Schueller, Brian Edwards, Wai Chee Dimock, Paul Giles, Dilip Gaonkar, Paul Jay, and John Carlos Rowe—for their premature celebration of the demise of American exceptionalism.

Spanos generously acknowledges the praiseworthy achievements of these transnational American studies scholars: in uncovering the underside of U.S. imperial exceptionalism, they exposed the violence that the hegemonic exceptionalist discourse has disavowed; in interpreting the history of U.S. imperial exceptionalism from the standpoint of its victims, they also enabled the silenced peoples of the world to speak for themselves; and in so doing, they made it possible to think an alternative to the U.S. imperium. But in Spanos’s view, the antiexceptionalist discourse of these scholars remains too parochially within the American exceptionalist problematic they call into question and too indifferent to the critical imperatives of the voices of the exile or outside Others silenced by imperial American exceptionalism.

Spanos is particularly incisive in his criticism of the tendency of scholars involved in transnational American studies—myself included—to privilege the global at the expense of the local and thereby diminish the significance of the new manifestation of post–9/11 exceptionalism. Arguing that transnational American studies’ deterritorialized and panoptic perspective is itself enabled by the exceptionalist standpoint of the imperial hegemon, Spanos goes on to characterize transnational “re-mappings”
of the field of American studies as one of the means whereby American
exceptionalism has effected its acts of imperial capture in the post–9/11
epoch.

As warrant for this critique, Spanos represents the Global War on Ter-
ror as the harnessing of its exceptionalist calling to the U.S. imperial
state’s endless errand into the world’s wilderness. For Spanos, the Global
War on Terror cannot be distinguished from the planetary spectacle of
the exception. In his view the global war and the planetary spectacle are
equivalent outcomes of the universal adoption of the exceptionalist ethos.
It was the local U.S. exceptionalist state, as the agency responsible for the
post–9/11 Global War on Terror, that precipitated the ominous normal-
ization of the state of exception. Although transnational American stud-
ies scholars may claim that the exceptionalist center has been decentered,
it is in fact the imperial state’s exceptionalist center that has made possible
their positioning themselves outside the local. According to Spanos,
rogue states, the wilderness of failed states, and transnational American-
ists’ deterritorialized perspective were all made possible by the exceptional-
ist ethos. By collapsing the distinction between U.S. imperial exceptionalism
and the exceptionalisms that defined other nation-states, transnational
American studies scholars have refused to acknowledge the fact “that
their deterritorialized panoptic perspective is facilitated by the exception-
ist paradigm of the imperial hegemon they have disavowed.” Transna-
tional Americanists’ tendency to overdetermine the global perspective all
but obliterated the actual history of a post–9/11 world, which is “bearing
witness to an uneven struggle between the United States and a multitude
of deracinated people, unhomed by the depredations of exceptionalist
nation-state imperialism.”

On encountering this compelling critique, a reader might wonder, as I
did, how Spanos excepted his exposition from the impasses to which he
consigned transnational American studies scholars. Spanos engaged this
question head-on in the chapter that rests at the theoretical core of his
“untimely meditation.” Spanos begins “American Exceptionalism and
the Calling: A Genealogy of the Vocational Ethic” by restating his foun-
dational insight: the global war’s “fulfillment” of the United States’
“errand” effected a universalized state of exception that revealed the noth-
ing at the core of the U.S. exceptionalist calling. Then Spanos describes
the interregnum that emerged in and as a revelation of this nothingness
as “humanity’s radically secular ontological condition, its total untether-
ing of its fate from any transcendental higher cause, whether deity or his-
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Spanos believes that it is from the existential now-time of this interregnum that we must take our critical directives addressing the globalizing occasion.

Spanos has written *Redeemer Nation in the Interregnum: An Untimely Meditation on the American Vocation* from within and as an attestation to the truth of the interregnum in the present destabilized planetary occasion. From the time of the nation’s founding, the American exceptionalist calling to a higher cause effected the postponement of the “untimely” time of the now. Spanos’s study describes the real event of the post–9/11 occasion as the emergence of “the now-time” of the interregnum as what is disclosed as and through the nothingness at the core of America’s global exceptionalist calling. The interregnum is unlike the American calling in that it brings about the vocation of the “exilic consciousness”—the calling to be both inside and outside the world, at home yet not at home, at once a part of and apart from the world. By disrupting the relay between the elect, exceptionalism, and the vocation of the calling, the exilic consciousness renders inoperative the interpelling ethos of American exceptionalism.

Spanos’s critique of transnational American studies scholars was necessitated by his conviction that their fascination with the globalized world order blinded them to the emergence of the interregnum and rendered them deaf to the vocation of the exilic consciousness. Spanos designed his critique to awaken the exilic consciousness that lies dormant within transnational American studies scholars so that we might join him, as this foreword has, in bearing witness to the critical imperatives of the interregnum.
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This book had its immediate origins in President Barack Obama’s fulfillment of President George W. Bush’s promise to the American people in the wake of September 11, 2001, that he would “track down” Osama bin Laden and “get him” in the end. The ensuing “search-and-destroy” mission reminded me in an uncannily precise way of what has been a guiding ontological directive of my criticism of the Western onto-theological tradition from virtually the beginning of my career. I am referring to the Kierkegaardian/Heideggerian notion that anxiety or dread (Angst), unlike fear (Furcht), has no thing, which is to say, nothing (das Nichts) as its object, and its corollary, that the West, from its origins, has defined itself as that global space that has had as its fundamental vocation the objectification of this nothing to render it comprehensible (take-holdable, manageable):

In anxiety, we say, “one feels ill at ease [es ist einem unheimlich].” What is “it” that makes “one” feel ill at ease? We cannot say what it is before which one feels ill at ease. As a whole it is so for one. All things and we ourselves sink into indifference, this, however, not in the sense of mere disappearance. Rather, in this very receding things turn toward us. The receding of beings as a whole that
closes in on us in anxiety oppresses us. We can get no hold on things. In the slipping away of beings only this “no hold on things” comes over us and remains. Anxiety reveals the nothing.¹

This contemporary American search-and-destroy mission also reminded me of what I take to be the enabling moment of Herman Melville’s fiction, the moment when, with the American exceptionalist ethos in mind, Ishmael informs the reader of the origin of the name—Moby Dick—that Captain Ahab gave to the white whale:

All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the white whale’s hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart’s shell upon it.²

The more general origin of this book, intimately related to the immediate one, was my uneasiness about the tendency of recent New Americanist studies to overdetermine the global perspective at the expense of the local in its effort to place America in the present destabilized planetary occasion. As I observed in the Preface of my last book, Shock and Awe: American Exceptionalism and the Imperatives of the Spectacle in Mark Twain’s “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court”:

¹In attempting to demonstrate that American culture is not historically exceptional or, to put it alternatively, is multicultural and geographically diverse, unstable, and fraught with tensions—this revisionary critical initiative has tended to efface the reality that the fiction of American exceptionalism became in the process of American history by way of the power of what I will call, with Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser in mind, interpellation. It is, therefore, imperative, at least, for the foreseeable future (that is, as long as the waning concept of the nation-state survives), that American studies address the local (national) / global (transnational) opposition not as an ontological binary, as it now tends to be, but as an indissoluble dialectical relation. It is, indeed, true that America is plural in its origins, that the exceptionalist national identity it has claimed for itself is myth. And these origins should not be minimized. But it is equally true that this myth had become reality in the sense that it has contributed fundamentally and enormously to the making of (an unjust) historical reality on an increasingly global scale.³
This book is essentially a sequel to that Twain book and three of my previous works in American studies: *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam* (2008); *Herman Melville and the American Calling: The Fiction after “Moby-Dick,” 1851–1858* (2008); and *The Exceptionalist State and the State of Exception: Herman Melville’s “Billy Budd, Sailor”* (2011), all of which were intended to trace the origins of the American exceptionalist ethos—a way of life, a vocation (in the Puritan sense of the word)—that surfaced as an ideology at the liminal point of the development of its exceptional logic—that is, in the wake of September 11, 2001, and the United States’ brutal, spectacle-oriented global War on Terror and the tacit normalization of the state of exception in the name of homeland security. Unlike its predecessors, however, which were devoted to studies of heretical literary texts of the American past that were proleptic of the disclosures of post–9/11 American globalization, this study addresses the complex polyvalent role American exceptionalism continues to play in the world in the present post–9/11 occasion. I mean the in-between time I call the “interregnum” to underscore, against the tendency of the New Americanist studies to overdetermine the global (world literature), the indissoluble relationship of the local and the global, the national and the transnational, that constitutes the historical reality of the time in which we precariously live.

The chapters of this book can be read independently of each other, since they treat semi-autonomous topics—the reduction of the sublime (the nothingness of being) to spectacle (a simulacrum that robs the spectator of speech) in behalf of America’s “errand in the [world’s] wilderness”; the universal adoption of the exceptionalist ethos by the Americana political class in the wake of 9/11, when the term emerged as an ideological concept from its invisible hegemonic status; the tendency of recent New Americanist studies to overdetermine the global at the expense of the local; a critical genealogy of the contemporary discourse on the American calling; and an interview concerning the American debate world and the making of the American political class. But because the deeper purpose of the individual chapters is to tease out the complex, polyvalent ideological implications of the term “American exceptionalism” in the face of the prevailing simplistic meaning that posits the United States as superior
to the nations of the rest of the world, “the nation of nations,” I have organized the many facets of language pertaining to the exceptionalist ethos to incrementally accumulate this polyvalent ideological resonance around the idea of the “America calling” or “vocation,” which is the topic of the last summary chapter. Thus, I think, reading the chapters consecutively would be preferable.

Chapter 1, “The Nothingness of Being and the Spectacle: The American Sublime Revisited,” as the subtitle suggests, constitutes a genealogy of the highly prized American sublime that locates its origins in the exceptionalist logic of the American exceptionalist ethos—that is to say, in the reduction of the wonder-provoking sublime to the spectacle in Guy Debord’s sense of the word—the enchanting simulacrum that strikes the spectator dumb (robs him/her of speech and thus of a polity)—and the harnessing of its inordinate power to the American exceptionalist imperial “errand in the [world’s] wilderness.” Beginning with a survey of the canonical American literature (prose and poetry) and painting from the Puritan era to the present post–9/11 occasion that spectacularizes (nationalizes) the sublime in the name of the American errand, this genealogy then goes on to epitomize the cultural history of the American sublime by way of an extended comparative analysis of representative works of two “quintessential American writers”: Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* and Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, which address the question of American exceptionalism in the light of its relation to the sublime and its simulacrum, the spectacle. This comparative reading shows that, in deliberately distinguishing between the sublime and the spectacle, Melville’s texts were proleptic not only of Twain’s later canonical appropriation of the spectacle (his signature narrative strategy of staging for effect), whose origins extend back through the conquest of the Wild West to the Puritans’ extermination of the Pequots, but also of the post–9/11 America’s exceptionalist “errand [in the contemporary world’s] wilderness.”

Chapter 2, “American Exceptionalism in the Post–9/11 Era: The Myth and the Reality,” demonstrates the pervasiveness of the reality of the myth of American exceptionalism in the discourse of the contemporary American political class (Republican and Democrat) even after the fall of the Bush administration. Undertaking close readings of speeches delivered at the Republican and Democratic presidential conventions of 2012 by prominent members of both parties (Republican Senators John McCain and Marco Rubio and Democratic Senator John Kerry and President
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Barack Obama), this chapter shows not only the solidarity within the political class to its commitment to the American exceptionalist ethos but also its incredible obliviousness to its violent dark side, exposed by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of 9/11 and recorded and theorized by the growing counter-mnemonic scholarship of the New Americanists.

Chapter 3, “The Center Will Not Hold: The Widening Gyre of the New, New Americanist Studies,” undertakes a symptomatic critique of the tendency of recent New Americanist studies (under the influence of proponents of world literature [Weltliteratur]) to overdetermine the global at the expense of the local, the planetary over the national. It shows that this transnationalizing tendency overlooks the stark realities of the contemporary post–9/11 occasion: that we live in an interregnum, an unstable in-between time characterized by the dying (but not yet death) of the nation-state and a new, alternative world struggling to be born. As a consequence of this disabling oversight, this new New Americanist initiative not only deflects attention from the urgent task of avowing the mythic status of American exceptionalism—and the violence that it has always disavowed; in minimizing the Puritan and the frontier theses about the origins of the American national identity, it also suggests, erroneously, that America has always been pluralistic, multicultural, hybrid—that is, not exceptionalist.

Chapter 4, “American Exceptionalism and the Calling: A Genealogy of the Vocational Ethic,” constitutes a genealogy of American exceptionalism that finds its source in the Puritan concept of the “calling.” I mean specifically the election by God that not only gave the Puritans their exceptionalist status but also rendered their vocation as a covenantal people unequivocally a matter of servitude to a higher cause. This genealogy is undertaken by way of the witnesses of three prominent continental theorists of modernity—Max Weber, Louis Althusser, and Giorgio Agamben—all of whom locate the origins of the spirit of democratic capitalism in the Protestant work ethic and of that minoritarian American counter-memory that is embodied in the Melvillian tradition, which includes Ralph Ellison, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, William Gaddis, Donald Barthelme, Kathy Acker, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison. What this genealogy discloses is that the American exceptionalist calling (interpellation) produces subjected subjects whose vocation in life is undeviating service to a higher cause or telos: not only the postponement of the profane or existential time of the now, “ho nyn kairos,” in Giorgio Agamben’s radically subversive reading of St. Paul’s calling (klēsis) by the
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Messiah on the road to Damascus, but also the ruthless elimination of all those infidels who interfere in their redemptive errand in the world’s wilderness. As such, the last chapter brings the particular topics concerning the exceptionalist ethos explored contrapuntally in the previous three chapters into its polyphonic orbit.

The last section of this book, “Appendix,” consists of an interview with Christopher Spurlock, a member of the American college debate world, who, in opposition to its disinterested framework, asked me to speak to this issue on behalf of the multitude of high school and college students who enter the debate circuit without any awareness of the mind-numbing consequences of the protocols of this traditional framework. My main point in this interview is to show that the disinterested framework of the institutionalized debate world is, in fact, ideological, that it reproduces what throughout this book I call “the American political class,” a class that makes its decisions on the basis not of the actual radically uneven conditions of modern American life, but according to the naturalized supernatural imperatives of the American vocation.