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## Horizons of Enchantment

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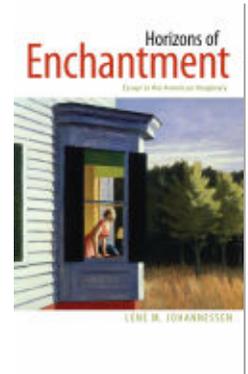
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**THE IMAGINARY***A Cold and Broken Hallelujah*

To introduce the more strictly methodological concerns of this chapter, I want to briefly consider Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden's baseball film *Sugar* (2008).<sup>1</sup> Its engagement with the religious metaphoricality of the game itself, ambivalence of purpose, frustration, and, ultimately, questions of interpreting the signs of magic, may serve as an appropriate lead-in to the broader issues at stake. *Sugar* traces the fictional story of a young Dominican pitcher's entry into the American major leagues; the film immediately found its place in the hall of fame of baseball movies. However, unlike classics such as *Eight Men Out* (1988), *Bull Durham* (1988), *Field of Dreams* (1989), *The Natural* (1994), *The Rookie* (2002), and *The Sandlot* (1993), to mention several, *Sugar* is not really about the game itself, and it certainly does not proffer the classical, home-run ending. Instead it ends on a rather hesitant note that comments with profound insight on the limitless possibilities held out by the prospect of playing in the major leagues, which is, of course, a trope firmly lodged within the larger one of advancement and aspiration.

The story is familiar: dreaming of fame and glory at Yankee Stadium in New York, Miguel "Sugar" Santos lives and breathes baseball. The epitome of his dream is to buy a Cadillac that runs on water, an absurd contrast to the impoverished streets he hails from. The film opens with Santos's practicing pitching in one of the major leagues' many "academies," or "factories," where, as Andrew O'Hehir puts it, the Dominican Republic's "raw talent is nurtured

for North American harvest in a sort of plantation system controlled by Major League Baseball teams, in the movie the fictitious Kansas City Knights.”<sup>2</sup> And Santos makes it. A scout drafts him for a minor-league spring training camp in Arizona, and from there he goes on to a small town in Iowa to play for a Single-A, minor-league club. The process is matter-of-factly narrated: there are no melodramatic scenes of outright exploitation or abuse. If anything, the viewer is offered a rare glimpse into the detached workings of the system of big-league business. The directors know the game, and so do the protagonists. The game is about winning or losing: baseball can never end in a tie, and it is all about numbers. As one character tells Santos, “Life gives you many chances; baseball gives you only one.” Santos harbors no illusions of easy success. He knows the odds, and early on, while he is still in the Dominican Republic, a friend lets on that he, too, once dreamed of the major leagues. He went and returned. The exchange, whereupon Santos confidently proclaims that, unlike his friend, he will succeed, lends a lingering ambiguity to the story’s pace.

Having pitched a number of excellent games for his new team in Iowa, Santos begins throwing wild. At one point the manager yanks him and replaces him with another recently arrived Dominican sensation. In a moment Santos sees just how expendable he is, that any number of guys just like him are ready to take the mound, and that managers will not hesitate to bring in fresh arms and new blood. He decides to quit the team before the team quits him, and he goes to New York to join a former teammate who was sent packing after getting hurt in a game. The last part of the movie takes place in the Bronx, in one of New York’s Dominican neighborhoods. It ends there, with Santos pitching again, on a playing field at Roberto Clemente State Park.

The depiction of Miguel Santos may be fictional, but that fiction has thousands of counterparts in real life, as the public’s reception of Boden and Fleck demonstrated when the movie was first screened in Santo Domingo: “they got it right.” What they got right, among other things, are the rather deplorable facts pertaining to how, as O’Hehir puts it, “a beloved American game has become a peculiar quasi-colonial enterprise.”<sup>3</sup> Much could be said about this enter-

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prise and the economic, political, and cultural system it both feeds and feeds off of. A comment made by Cuban baseball historian Roberto González Echevarría illuminates some of the stakes involved:

I take a dim view of what the major leagues are doing in the Dominican Republic with these so-called baseball academies, where children are being signed at a very early age and not being cared for. Most of them are providing the context for the stars to emerge; if you take 100 baseball players in those academies, or 100 baseball players anywhere, only one of them will play even an inning in the major leagues. The others are there as a supporting cast.<sup>4</sup>

*Sugar* illustrates Echevarría's pessimism with objective accuracy and without judgment, but certain inferences are hard not to draw. The dialogue following the injury of Santos's friend and his subsequent dismissal from the team, for instance, has disturbing undertones. Santos wonders aloud how they can be treated as animals. If one bears in mind that the name for the roster of relief pitchers, as well as the actual area where they sit and warm up during a game, is the "bull pen," Santos's comment assumes a darkly dehumanizing tenor. The growing realization of how easily Santos and his countrymen can be discarded and the dire consequences of failure are contrasted with the situation of another teammate, drafted from Stanford University. If he fails in the minor leagues, he can go back to studying history; if Santos fails, he must return to a poverty-stricken and jobless Dominican Republic.

The most eloquent and startling scenes in *Sugar* are those set in New York, where Santos gets a dishwashing job and begins a new life. At no point in this part of the movie do we hear English spoken, and the range of the many characters' places of origin, and their varieties of Spanish, constitute a curiously and genuinely pan-American scene. The wide shots of New York streets give the city's "original," Anglo-Saxon identity away, but letting the Latino conglomerate literally overlay that cultural character produces an effective commentary on what has become known popularly as the changing face of America. The dialogues between the protagonists reflect the diversity hidden by the visual images and bring home the multifariousness of a group commonly perceived

simply as Latinos, or, in some cases, collapsed into the single category “Mexican.”<sup>5</sup>

A Spanish version of Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” accompanies some of the last shots, making a compelling and deeply touching comment on the destiny of Santos and so many of the other characters. The repetition in the lyrics of “it’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah” brings to the narrative the seriousness of undisclosed truth. The line plays with the ambiguity of a defeat that is simultaneous with a kind of victory by evoking the original promise of potential advancement and the disappointments to be maneuvered through. Moreover, the song foreshadows the full impact of the very last scene. Having found his friend, Santos is encouraged to come and play ball in the neighborhood ballpark. Several other players are there when he arrives, and they introduce themselves in a touching and powerful sequence of close-up frames, each listing his name, field position, former minor and major league teams, and country of origin. The catalogue impresses on the viewer the countless players such as Santos whom the academies have trained, tried, and thrown away, and it reminds us that, as former pitcher for the San Diego Padres Brendan Sullivan III puts it: if they avoid returning home to “the poverty they came from [they can] try to eke out an existence at menial labor in the States, with nothing left over except tales of their playing days chasing the dream.”<sup>6</sup> The last shot of the movie shows Santos on the bench with an inscrutable look on his face. A quiet smile slowly spreads over his face, perhaps in recognition of a renewed love of the game itself, and, oddly, of the team he has now been drafted onto. It is, finally, no coincidence that the field they play on is named after the legendary Puerto Rican right fielder Roberto Clemente, the first Latino player to make it to the Hall of Fame.

*Sugar* is a curiously apt illustration of the American imaginary in its subtle engagement with the sacred and secular trimmings of structural embedding, all at once. Two figures stand out. One is the repetition of “Hallelujah”; the other is the structure provided by the game of baseball itself as a metaphor for the dream and promise that America continues to offer. These are well-worn phrases, but it would be foolish not to recognize the abiding authority they hold,

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now as much as ever. All of this may sound like a rehashing of old tropes, of the presumed universalism of things American. The argument, however, is broader than that, observing that the pace of modern processes quickens and slows, and that some tracks have struck a balance between understandings of individual and communal obligations and responsibilities in ways that attract and accommodate more easily than other tracks. What that means is that we find our places within different imaginaries differently. In *Sugar*, the baseball field and its potential become metaphors for the sacredness of the communal conviction that the game is right, even as they invite individual performance and aspiration within its rules. As the film closes with the catalogue of frustrated hopes that have been collated into a team that continues to play the game, it tactfully remarks that the game “supports a sense of uniformity, a sense of belonging to a vast, extended American formality that attends the same church.”<sup>7</sup> The hallelujah may be cold and broken, but it is still a form of praise. The unresolved continuity of this particular variation is the same as that lodged in the vague certainty of the American imaginary, which we now approach from a more methodological angle.

### *Imaginary/Image*

The imaginary is one of those concepts we intuitively use and know. One of its common interpretations is that of mirroring, the imaginary as an image *of* something. As a consequence, the use of the term often slips into a repertory of more or less vague significations, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But in the discussions that follow, I spend a little time on getting at its more exact contours, to the extent this is possible. I employ the imaginary in specific ways, relying mainly on Charles Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries* and Cornelius Castoriadis’s *Imaginary Institution of Society*, as well as some of the latter’s essays gathered more recently in *Figures of the Thinkable*. The excavations of the idea and manifestations of the imaginary in these two thinkers complement and diverge from each other in interesting ways, even as their overall assessments are nearly identical. I begin with Taylor’s general definition of the social

imaginary: “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.”<sup>8</sup> Such characteristics are shared by all societies as the necessary understanding of the glue that keeps the village, the group, or the nation reasonably coherent in culture and politics, in relation to different understandings and glues. Thus far the description roughly conforms to Benedict Anderson’s seminal observations on imagined communities, which Taylor also acknowledges. One reason why the concept of the imaginary tends to erode is the slippage in its usage to the specular, which is associated with the root “image” and its derivatives “imagine” and “imagination.” The boundaries here are of great concern especially to Castoriadis, who stresses that “The imaginary of which I am speaking is not an image *of*. It is the unceasing and essentially *undetermined* (social-historical and psychical) creation of *figures/forms/images*, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question of something. What we call ‘reality’ and ‘rationality’ are its works.”<sup>9</sup>

“Creativity” here is related to what Castoriadis later refers to as radical imagination, denoting the human faculty to produce images, to create *ex nihilo*, a uniquely human ability that precedes and conditions everything else we are capable of:

I call that imagination “radical” because the creation of representations, affects, and desires by the human imagination is subject to conditions, but never predetermined. . . . [It] is also at the root of another extraordinary ability of human beings; the ability to symbolize. It is thanks to the radical imagination that human beings are able to see a thing in another thing.”<sup>10</sup>

It is important that we maintain the distinction between imagination and imaginary in these senses fairly rigidly before us; their variation does have consequences for how we proceed to understand the imaginary in relation to what Taylor calls embedding and even enchanting functions. What may be broadly characterized as a Lacanian specular interpretation of the imaginary is not of use here, even if we do not agree with Castoriadis that it is “vulgar reductionism.”<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the implications of “imaginary”

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in nonspecular usage are related, and the following passage elucidates their proximity, as well as their complex relationship. It also speaks more generally to Castoriadis's stance on the concept of the imaginary:

I talk about the imaginary because the history of humanity is the history of the human imaginary and its works (*oeuvres*). And I talk about the history and works of the radical imaginary, which appears as soon as there is any human collectivity. It is the instituting social imaginary that creates institutions in general (the institutions as form) as well as the particular institutions of each specific society, and the radical imagination of the singular human being.<sup>12</sup>

The distinction resides, then, in a split between the individual as carrier of radical imagination and the collective as carrier of the imaginary, but with the two simultaneously, inextricably linked in a co-constitutive, creative relationship. For the purposes of this study, which not only explores how literary texts and cultural forms imagine their spaces in relation to those of others in the context of "America" but also more concretely examines the ways they refract, uphold, and as literary realities modify and calibrate the historical society they partake in, the idea of the imaginary is useful. My aim here is not to focus on imaginaries of completely different origination, which represent alternative ways of being in the world in relation to the American imaginary. Rather, it is to pursue readings of active responses to and participation in the ongoing process of the "creation of figures/forms/images" within it. Such (literary) encounters in turn test and gauge the continuities and possible aberrations of the currents and sensibilities that constitute the American imaginary. Hence, my readings attempt to calibrate how the imaginary's contours materialize, or, in Castoriadis's terminology, are instituted. In this respect, the strategy of reading *for*, instead of reading *of*, takes a cue from the core principle underlying Mikhail Bakhtin's work, which, in relation to a culturological project, is best expressed as follows:

The problem of any particular domain of culture taken as a whole, whether it be cognition, ethics, or art, can be understood as the prob-

lem of this domain's boundaries. . . . every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries, and it derives its seriousness and significance from this fact. Separated by abstraction from these boundaries, it loses the ground of its being and becomes vacuous, arrogant, it degenerates and dies.<sup>13</sup>

The social imaginary—the history of human collectivity and the radical imaginary—similarly cannot exist in isolation. Whichever society and institutions we talk about, they feed off of a multiplicity of encounters, remakings, and reimaginings, which they in turn feed, for the defining and renewing potential inherent in each hinges on its ability to react to, respond to, and, finally, accommodate a querying outside. Hence, attention must be paid to the always-creative potential of the encounter and the space that opens up on variously emergent boundaries.

That stated, it is obvious that the particularly American social imaginary is also a rather disorderly one, because there is not one American social imaginary, but several. Or more correctly, there is one, but it operates on a different level, as what I suggest is a master imaginary, a canvassing trope that has a seemingly unlimited capacity for engendering other, alternative imaginaries out of its fold, depending on what it mirrors. This master imaginary stretches outward as irresistible promise, and is refracted in all its vastness in the simple phrase: “You have to go where your advancement is.” Not knowing what he did, the elderly man spoke a remarkable sentence that taps into the very heart of the American master imaginary's magic: obligatory self-interest combined with the idea of moving forward and ahead for the common good, a duty to be performed, embedded in the simple last words of the Declaration of Independence, “and the pursuit of happiness.” The sentence, as Taylor notes, resonates with the purpose of the nation itself, but more than that, it constitutes the kernel of a modern social imaginary through which the individual, free from traditional conceptions and restraints of religious or divine law, as well as the duties of order handed down from centuries of traditions and civic laws, can pursue his or her own interpretation of roles and society. What is most compelling about such a scenario is that the perpetuation of ideas that spawn this purpose,

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this very particular kind of liberty and experiment, forms a set of beliefs that is strangely sacred in all its secularity (I am not referring to the strong position of religion in the United States, which is unique in an otherwise rather secular West) and may place American culture closer to other faith-based communities than its Western cousins. It accounts for the extremely flexible, yet universal and eternal, appeal of the said project, which always invites and indeed accepts new interpretations—up to a point. For the imaginary and its magic never lose sight of the anchoring in the rules of the game for which they provide the playground. In Sacvan Bercovitch's words, "America" is a "language game of malleable beginnings and possible futures," quite different from its "old world" relatives, where nationality "remains an endgame puzzle: identity to be resolved in three or four moves." This is another way of approaching the genius of what Bercovitch refers to as the variation, its magic as perpetually recommencing, or as he elegantly phrases it, newness as a "continual movement toward endings that issues in an endless affirmation of beginnings." The variation therefore continues to have a powerful capacity to raise possibilities even as anticipations and beliefs in the rules of the game abide: they must "apply situationally, hence malleably."<sup>14</sup> There is of course nothing particularly magical, in the sense of elusive and supernatural, about chess or baseball; there is, however, something magical about what Bercovitch calls the "American game," or what I here call the American imaginary, as a totality of combined individual and communal conviction, presents. Much of it has to do with what Taylor calls *enchantment*, but understood here in an oddly modern manner.

### *Imaginary and Symbolism*

Let me backtrack a little. To go on about the magic of the American imaginary would return us squarely within the range of the American dream, to say the least. As I have already suggested, I do not see this as inherently useless, for on some level that dream is the life-blood of the American imaginary. And it bears repeating that, while all societies are orchestrated according to imaginaries peculiar to

their specificities, not all societies are structured on an idiosyncratically elusive concept such as a dream: to speak of the Swedish dream, the Greek dream, or the Guatemalan dream does not evoke the slightest signification. The applicability of this peculiar variation is therefore restricted, for it does not transfer in the entirety of its embedding potential to other spaces, except in cases of self-conscious attempts to adapt and emulate similar structures of feeling. Then, however, we would speak not of whole societal or cultural complexes but of isolated occurrences in which the American dream is re-presented as an image *of*. This is important, because an image *of* lacks the dynamism of reciprocity and portability that is key to the continuities of any living culture. This would echo the reductionism of the specular that Castoriadis attributes to Lacanian interpretations of the imaginary. The many images of something in this case are like snapshots in a wallet, put away and usable as reminders, but not as active participants in the life of what they reflect. From the outside, and, in reality, from within, the dream as image *of* occupies a somewhat static sphere of potentiality and reference. The fault line between it and the imaginary as yardsticks for making the comparisons and calibrations between participants runs along the institution, to which we now turn in more detail.

Castoriadis's general position and departure point on the imaginary have already been noted, but to understand his observations on the institution we need to begin with the arguments he makes regarding the symbolic. Castoriadis is adamant that "the imaginary has to use the symbolic not only to 'express' itself (this is self-evident), but to 'exist', to pass from the virtual to anything more than this."<sup>15</sup> The elucidation of this relationship runs along a track on which the symbolic and the imaginary are inextricably interwoven: the imaginary has to use the symbolic in order to pass into actualization, and the imaginary faculty is an absolute prerequisite for bringing symbols into being in the first place, at which point the institution of those images can follow. Castoriadis cites religion, which is universal to human cultures, as one of the more apposite examples, and the following quotation concerning Mosaic law makes clear the kinds of questions he pursues:

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It will be said that at one stage of the evolution of human societies, the institution of an imaginary possessing a greater reality than the real itself—God, or, more generally, a religious imaginary—“conforms to the ends” of society, follows from real conditions, and fills an essential function. . . . Why do we find, in every case, at the heart of this imaginary and in all of its expressions something that cannot be reduced to the functional, an original investment by society of the world and itself with meaning—meanings which are not “dictated” by real factors since it is instead this meaning that attributes to these real factors a particular importance and a particular place in the universe constituted by a given society—a meaning that can be recognized in both the content and the style of its life[?]<sup>16</sup>

This argument posits that what essentially begins in and as the imaginary, once it gets a foothold explaining functionally the realities of a given society, immediately proceeds to institute itself, to transpose itself into the very real parameters within which people orient themselves. In the concrete case of religion, the manifestations of this process lead to churches, to certain everyday customs that must be observed, to hierarchical structures that uphold the various parts of the now instituted imaginary that its members take for granted as reality.

There is consequently a very serious aspect to these nuances, for if we conflate imagination, the dream, and the imaginary, we risk relegating particular cultural and institutional practices and understandings to a backseat, which may lead to neglect, politically as well as sociohistorically. The specular imagination and the dream are not capable of producing change or influencing the life of a society until they are instituted as imaginaries, when they immediately become pillars of real and realizable cultural constructs. In other words, if we persist in referring to imagination and the dream, we absolve the institutions of the cultural body of a society or a nation, which are after all where sociohistorical decisions are made or not made. Beneath the grids that uphold the instituted imaginary, which Castoriadis terms “second-order imaginaries,” there is a central imaginary that has orchestrated into being entire such complexes of societal structures. I shall return to the more detailed aspects of

Castoriadis's elaborations throughout individual chapters. Here I note that the imaginary and the symbolic are, ultimately, never very far apart: they relate to each other as coterminously instituting and instituted, inseparable, and traceable only in retrospect, through the practices that institutions promulgate.

The main difference between Taylor and Castoriadis lies in their perception of and attention to the symbolic, and this has particular consequences. In an impressive survey spanning centuries and nations, Taylor in *Modern Social Imaginaries* tells the story of what he calls the long march of modernity, a tour-de-force history of the roots, beginnings, and perpetuations of Western civic and political societies as we know them today. It is important to note that he prefaces the book by saying that he focuses only on the modern social imaginary as this develops in the West, not on the trajectories of cultures and imaginaries other than the Western, which have necessarily resulted in other types of marches and modern social imaginaries. What, more specifically, is Taylor's modern social imaginary? A useful place to begin is with the distinction he makes between the social imaginary and social theory:

I adopt the term imaginary (i) because my focus is on the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.<sup>17</sup>

Herein is really contained the entirety of the social imaginary as what we may think of as enabling and enabled filter, from which Taylor then develops the account of the long march of Western modernity. The ingredients of any given imaginary of course vary, but in the case of the Western, modern social one, certain aspects are unyieldingly crucial: a new moral order deriving from emergent theories of natural law, which, first through Grotius and then through Locke, become the first building blocks for a normative

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contract between individuals “even prior to or outside of the political bond,” and which rest on the idea that “human beings are rational, sociable agents who are meant to collaborate in peace to their mutual benefit.”<sup>18</sup> What comes from this is radical: conceptions of legislative and governing legitimacy as handed down from time immemorial come into question, as does the hierarchical understanding of how members of a community relate to each other, and this rests on the questioning of similar ideas of order handed down from some unquestionable source of justification that lies above and beyond the community or culture.

The new moral order, Taylor goes on to state, is for the here and now rather than the ultimate (as a key to understanding reality), and if it is for the here and now, it may be either hermeneutic or prescriptive, something not yet realized but demanding to be integrally carried out. As the centuries progress the implications of this difference filter into more and more spheres of social life (property rights, gender roles, questions of equality, and so forth), and they travel, as Taylor puts it, along several axes, but finally order themselves as the background for a modern social imaginary that rests on the following understandings and their practices:

(1) the order of mutual benefit holds between individuals (or at least moral agents who are independent of hierarchical orders); (2) the benefits crucially include life and the means to life, although securing these relates to the practice of virtue; and (3) the order is meant to secure freedom and easily finds expressions in terms of rights. To these we can add a fourth point:

These rights, this freedom, this mutual benefit is to be secured to all participants equally. Exactly what is meant by equality will vary, but that it must be affirmed in some form follows from the rejection of hierarchical order.<sup>19</sup>

Among the revolutionary developments that ensue and that we, incorporated as we are in our modern social imaginary, perhaps do not realize, are the phenomenal effects of the new moral order and its social imaginary in terms of the “progress of disenchantment,” the secularization of everyday life, the “disembedding, the eclipse of the world of magic forces and spirits.”<sup>20</sup> The shift is an inevitable

consequence of the new moral order, and it takes place in tandem with other modifications described earlier.

These are Taylor's main points of engagement with the relationship between imaginary and symbolism, understood here as centering on a kind of enchantedness that is cut off from rationalization and the new moral order that arranges agents in completely different relations and hierarchies. This difference between Taylor and Castoriadis is also the difference between their two projects: whereas Castoriadis elucidates the principles of the instituting imaginary of any society, across centuries and continents, Taylor specifically traces the trajectory of one such manifestation, the modern Western one. Thus, the idea of *embedding* figures as inherently enchanted, religious in a primary sense, serving as a moral compass that individuals and cultures abide by without self-consciously reflecting on it. Castoriadis is not oblivious to this: "A 'primitive' who would want to act not taking into account the distinctions between clans, a Hindu of the past who would decide to ignore the existence of the castes, would most likely be mad—or would soon become so." However, while this is part of Castoriadis's broader argument that we ourselves are incapable of letting go of our own imaginary as we peer into the past and therefore cannot help but apply the modern imaginary of ultimate rationalization to archaic societies, he does not view the form per se of past imaginaries as inherently distinct from the modern: "despite, or rather due to this extreme 'rationalization', the life of the modern world is just as dependent on the imaginary as any archaic or historical culture. What is presented as the rationality of modern society is simply a matter of form, externally necessary connections, the perpetual dominance of the syllogism."<sup>21</sup> Hence, disenchantment and magic not only do not figure in Castoriadis's work, the imaginary is a universal and inherent, if ever malleable, structure in which the formal underpinnings are constant, even if the content is not.

In one of the more interesting points of engagement between the two thinkers, it also follows that individuals are always embedded, or in Castoriadis's terminology, instituted. In Taylor's view, embeddedness is inherently linked to enchantment, to the sacred, or to magic, to a sense of self that is porous: "the enchanted world was

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one in which these forces could cross a porous boundary and shape our lives, psychic and physical. One of the big differences between us and them is that we live with a much firmer sense of the boundary between self and other. We are ‘buffered’ selves. We have changed.”<sup>22</sup> We, the moderns, are a new kind of individual, placed among other individuals in new and very differently arranged constellations, and grounded in a rational conception of individualism (which means only a novel way of being an individual, not individualism in the common sense of the word). To this Castoriadis might retort that we are not essentially different, we are merely exponents and fragments of imaginaries that embed us (or institute us) differently, but that nevertheless embed us as thoroughly as any archaic society would. We are just not, in Taylor’s language, enchantedly embedded anymore.

### *The American Master Imaginary*

If it is true that we are entrenched in our own modern social imaginaries, how can we even begin to consider their gestalts in a remotely objective manner? For instance, as a Norwegian, I am quite aware that I, as one of the fragments of that particular imaginary, carry with me the traces of an understanding of a background and its practices that reach back to a peasant culture with rather unmodern habits. Those are small things, of course. The very fact that I can write that sentence makes me at the same time very much a modern, rational being—one of Taylor’s buffered selves—capable of assuming a critical position outside the parameters of the imaginary to which I belong.

This leads, finally, to the specifically American social imaginary: could it be that the American one in certain crucial ways differs from its cousins in Europe? And, if that is so, is it possible that it has precisely to do with the kind of enchantment or magic to which I alluded initially? For it is not entirely true that the modern social imaginary rests only on the pragmatics of practices and understandings unhinged from their roots in a past embedded system and torn loose from great time in a narrow focus on the here and now. New sacred, symbolic references and spaces surely emerge; they are not

necessarily grounded in religious time or origins but are symbolic and mythological nevertheless. More importantly, these emergent spaces are capable of building momentum as well as attaining features not entirely unlike the embedded structures of a not-too-distant past. The American imaginary comes trailing something that may paradoxically be situated precisely in what Taylor calls “time out of mind.” This something has a mythological quality in that it presents itself as a symbolic structure over and above actual place, nation, or even people. Preceding the cultural nation’s actualization are ideas of a utopia awaiting discovery and realization, and the combination of these two constitute an important reference point for what I have called the master imaginary. The mythical element in this can certainly be located in what Taylor refers to as “the story (or myth) of progress, one of the most important modes of narration in modernity,” which the American most definitely shares with Europe.<sup>23</sup> But something else is at work here, too, and it resembles a more archaic, more traditional conception of order that has been handed down.

It bears repeating: America named an idea that long preceded its actual coming into being as the nation we know today. Djelal Kadir thus argues that “America” signifies an interesting tension between the “new land” that is “clear,” “bright,” “shining,” “ever young,” “ever fair,” and “Nowhereland,” a utopia, a place that is no place.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps we could say that it is when this myth merges with the emergent drive of a new moral order, which in the end leads to a new kind of individualism, that we get the contours of a potent imaginary specific to “America.” It holds out the promise of progress and the unbridled pursuit of aspiration and potential happiness, and it spreads quickly into the world. It draws into its fold spaces far away, and it feeds and is fed by that part of imaginaries elsewhere that dreams of aspiration’s free reign. This enables a distinction between, on the one hand, the bounded national space of the United States (the nation), and, on the other, the compelling attraction and signification within the modern social imaginary that the American one projects and finds projected back onto it in turn.

The already mythological or symbolic quality furthermore explains the unflinching perpetuation of this precise imaginary as we

have witnessed it throughout past centuries. Also, precisely because it is a structure of signification residing in both the symbolic (myth) and the real (the instituted imaginary), it accounts for the spawning of a slew of minor, alternative imaginaries which the extreme interpretative flexibility of the master imaginary at once instantiates and subsumes under its particular and universally resonant tenor. And this is where the concept of the imaginary proves so useful as a tool of calibration: it enables the epistemological oscillation between the idea or ideal—the image *of*—on the one hand, and the “real” as it materializes in practices and understandings, on the other. If we compare this to the American dream, we see that the latter is a very different creature: not only is it not transferable to other societal structures, it is inherently a phantasm for individuals to pursue, not for societies to orchestrate and institute. It belongs firmly and only in the realm of symbolism, as the following example illustrates.

Hamilton Holt’s seminal *Undistinguished Americans*, from 1906, is a collection of life-lets, stories “as told by themselves” recounting the realities of people from all kinds of social and ethnic stations in order to show the range of diversity (and injustices) in early-twentieth-century America. The first entry is “Life Story of a Lithuanian,” where early on we find a passage in which the contrast between the conception of the dream and that of the imaginary, as well as the transition from the former to the latter, may be concretely observed. The Lithuanian is urged to leave his country for the United States by the traveling “shoemaker,” a man who reads newspapers smuggled in from Germany about, among other things, the free country to the west, and who himself has a son living in Chicago. One night, having stopped by to mend some boots for the anonymous narrator’s family, the shoemaker pulls out a paper on which his son has written something. It is a passage from the Declaration of Independence, which the son has been given in night school and has translated into Lithuanian for his father: “We know these are true things—that all men are born free and equal . . . that God gives them rights which no man can take away—that among these rights are life, liberty and the getting of happiness.”<sup>25</sup> We notice the translation’s slight alterations of the words, but it is the rendering of “pursuit” as “getting” that stands out. The meaning changes, it shifts the degree of attain-

ability and the reality of the promise. “Pursuit” belongs to the realm of imagination and dreams, whereas the “getting” of happiness travels from this realm and over into that of the imaginary. The slippage marks the institution of the imagined into petrified fact, a thing of this world: once there, you will get happiness, which is very different from merely pursuing it.

The way the dream travels into the constitution of the imaginary in this example returns us to the principle from Bakhtin quoted earlier in this chapter: “every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries, and it derives its seriousness and significance from this fact. Separated by abstraction from these boundaries, it loses the ground of its being and becomes vacuous, arrogant, it degenerates and dies.” Essentially, what happens in the mistranslation of “pursuit” into “getting” is an act of transference on the boundary between a cultural outside and the inside of the American master imaginary, and the example consequently brings us back to the idea of going where one’s advancement is, made possible by a hierarchy of moral order that finds a remarkable outlet in the New World. Taylor observes that in the United States

Liberty is no longer simply belonging to the sovereign people, but personal independence. Moreover, this kind of liberty, generalized, is the necessary basis of equality, for it alone negates the older forms of hierarchical independence. What was seen in the old view as the source of self-centeredness, private interest, and corruption is now the driving force of a free and equal society.<sup>26</sup>

He concludes that “Independence is thus a social, and not just a personal, idea.”<sup>27</sup> We see the Lithuanian correctly grasping the promise—the promise to dream. If we look at this more closely, the mistranslation is not a mistake as much as a transculturated affirmation of the contract between participants and the instituted and instituting grids of the master imaginary and its magic. The example from “Life Story of a Lithuanian” thus adds another layer to the dynamics of transference and can be read as a comment on a triangular gestalt of translation, transculturation, and transvaluation. Translation in this example echoes the longstanding tradition of translation as conversion and assimilation, discussed for instance

by Walter Mignolo and Freya Schiwy in relation to missionaries in Latin America laboring for years on end to make available the Scriptures and grammars in Amerindian languages: “Translation was part of a project of transculturation, and transculturation was understood and described as ‘conversion.’ Today we would say assimilation.”<sup>28</sup> In an echo of this description, the Lithuanian’s case of “conversion” is inflected by the dialogue of transculturation, understood here as “an exchange between two cultures, both of them active, both contributing their share, and both co-operating to bring about a new reality.”<sup>29</sup> For while translation may be fuelled by cultural and epistemological agendas that work to convert other agendas and bring them into one fold, in the Lithuanian’s case the reciprocity involved in the “mis”-translation brings about an alternative valuation grounded in the slippage from pursuing to getting: this is the transvaluation that confirms even as it modifies the extended promise, but not to the extent that it questions its fundamental import. Between, on the one hand, the conceptualization of agents scattered across Europe awaiting their American destiny and destination, and, on the other, the dissemination of irresistible promise through differently constructed and founded epistemologies, conversion occurs as a semi-transvaluation. The process illustrates the obligation of the cultural inside of the imaginary to conduct a dialogue with and respond to its outsides, hinting at the potential for assimilation that reaches beyond the borders of actual place. As a spatial manifestation of what Doreen Massey refers to as “relations stretched out,” the triad of translation, transculturation, and transvaluation anchors an agreement even from beyond the cultural sphere of the imaginary’s participants.<sup>30</sup> Finally, what the story of the Lithuanian also illustrates is the distinction we can make between bounded national space—the United States—and the compelling attraction and signification that the American imaginary projects onto the world and finds projected back onto it in turn, thus ensuring the imaginary’s perpetuation and continual renewal.

The chapters that follow have one overarching objective, namely to excavate, explore, and gauge the different refractions of and responses to the American imaginary. When we first turn to Drude Krog Janson’s allowing her protagonist to negotiate the same con-

tract of promise that we saw in the story of the Lithuanian, the similarities between the two narratives become obvious. However, *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter*, more profoundly and with compelling astuteness, also reflects Taylor's earlier point regarding independence as a social idea, one that arises uniquely in the context of the United States. Here is a truly modern story.