

Foreword

The symposium from which the papers gathered here come was dedicated to the memory of Verl Cooper, black bluesman from Texas, whose professional name was Cooper Terry. The choice of name, to honor Sonny Terry, signed Cooper's will to envision and declare a personal future grounded in a cultural tradition of secure worth and clear definition. But there's another little story I'd like to tell, as near as he told it as I can.

It was around the early seventies. Cooper was working up in Germany some place pretty far North – Bremen or, more likely, Hamburg. He was singing in some small, dark, place nights and doing pretty well. So he got himself some things he liked; a look he liked: tall and cool and good humored, but just a bit “dangerous”. A classic look, if you like, with a solid “maudit” or “mean dude” revised tradition behind it. Anyway, a real touch was a tiny genuine diamond set in his right nostril. And one evening this guy walks up to him as he hangs around between performances and he is a real stereotype German. And he says to Cooper, “How interesting that diamond there in your nose: is that tradition?” “Yeah”, says Cooper, “It's a family tradition.” “Really?” replies the German with some eagerness. “It begins with me,” Cooper said. Each time he told the story he would laugh.

But that story is admonitory. Of course it is talking about the pitfalls of pop cultural anthropology and the hopeful search for the exotic other – and about self-irony, too. It is also talking about something having to do with time and the placement of self in time that is deeply rooted in American history. The revolutionary “Fathers” were already looking back at themselves from the future, seeing themselves as the start of a tradition, before they ever declared independence. The anniversary orations celebrating the date of the Boston massacre in the early 1770s speak of what posterity will say as a means of determining what the citizenry should do now and tomorrow. They already see themselves as descendants of founders and as future past founders, in turn. They see themselves as conduits with individual responsibility to make signs so the future can grasp what it came from and recognize itself in its past; The tradition – the family – begins with me, and thus a diamond and no tribal bone or ring; the future begins today and it is transfiguration of a negative stereotype of “me” into distinctive beauty.

I want to put another little episode right next to this one. It also ends with a satisfied laugh and I think it completes the picture of historians, futures and stereotypes. During the 7th symposium, a session included several Italian scholars. One of them was a very well-known older historian – considered, indeed, distinguished in his field – a Marxist who had been part of the old Communist party. As he stood waiting for the session to begin – and he had not come to any other session but his own – he was heard to say to one of his entourage of young hopefuls, “Visions of the future... like a séance, I suppose; do they invoke ghosts or deal in esoteric formulae?” His laugh was echoed by his disciples.

So what of visions of the future, then? Are they indeed out of the proper ken of serious historians? That surely depends on what we mean by serious and who we mean by history.

At 7:30 on many a cold New England morning, my father would cry heartily from the kitchen as he picked up his bag of sandwiches to go to the factory and passed the half-closed door of my room, "Up and at 'em!". A confrontational view of life one might say or, perhaps, instead, the comradely invitation to not lose heart, but rise again to grapple with reality. Did the soft whisper of Bartleby's "I'd rather not" ever hang invitingly, treacherously on that chilly morning air for daddy as he urged me to manly/womanly courage? As he invited me and himself into history. For each time we choose to shift our legs over the edge of the bed and rise to our feet, we stand not only upon the day, but in history.

To stand is not only to rise to one's feet, but, as Milton long ago pointed out, to take up a position and that, whether we know it or not as we do it, is to contribute to making history. That is one of the reasons why the footprint in the sand on Robinson Crusoe's lonely beach is so powerful an image. Someone was *there*, making history even if he thought he was only passing through. Even more haunting the footprints archeologist Glynn Isaac described in a letter to his historian brother, Rhys, at Laetoli in Africa, "A trail which with small breaks goes back 23 metres...two parallel trails, both unmistakably human... one large - walking with parallel tread & a stride of 50-55 cm. and another smaller, walking with splayed tread." "There one stood looking across 3 1/2 million years at a specific moment": "the smaller...trail-maker stopped at a certain point and turned half sideways to look at something...!" These auroral humans were going somewhere: the future they stepped into, as one paused to look around, was many millennia down the road.

Each "footprint" we make, however dimly visible today or mysterious in a tomorrow we cannot imagine, is in aid of a vision of the future. The future is this evening or tomorrow morning; the future is next week, next year, next millennium. What we assume it will be or want it to be is a vision not merely in the limited sense of a projection of probability or reasonable expectation, but in the more ample sense of the imagination. And it is all, inasmuch as it is human experience, the legitimate domain of historic inquiry.

That said, I need to say as well that this *Quaderno* closes a cycle of Milan Group symposia that began in 1988 with *Languages of Revolution*, but it also takes up themes present in *Quaderno I, Making, Unmaking and Remaking America. Popular Ideology before the Civil War*, where proposals for alternative modes of living the republic institutionally and of defining its sense were central. In this sense several essays explore secular and "sacred" alternative models to an institutional situation already firmly consolidated (and this not only in the context of 19th century America, but in France as well). Among these essays David Grimsted's discussion of Shaker song is remarkable for its innovative structure which communicates content both in terms of traditional scholarly exposition and in the literary diction and cadence of its text, speaking itself a language of revolution – as it declares that of the songs and the conceptual world which produced them to be so. Grimsted sees the Shakers as a "shadow republic", a might-have-been, representing and announcing a form of that universality of humankind which Sophie Wahnich examines in French revolutionary debate (where Americans also spoke their minds).

The alternative community as real choice for the few, but also exemplar for a nation is a politically viable – realistic – proposal in physical and historic contexts which appear "open" to making or remaking. Such elements coincided with

revolution in both America and France and in both places and times gave rise to visions of a future different and better than the past and – more important – than the present in which the unmaking of institutions seemed a sure and continuing event. New Jerusalem might be on the frontiers for Americans, beyond the gate of the blue mountains, or it might be amid the purified waters of the French countryside. It might be sung or enacted on stage or street, or painted at the behest of spirits. But still another “opening” seemed to beckon American blacks in the second half of the nineteenth century, inviting visions of future liberties to live; nor were moments for the imagination lacking in other places and in other social milieux.

At the same time, among those who projected the new, many also feared its free unfolding and sought to hedge all bets by “educating” for functional, “layered”, citizenship. The very multiplicity and richness of an “open” historic moment – and the nineteenth century, too, offers its own, however briefly, however illusory – makes for complex possibilities of comparison; and one of the strengths of this *Quaderno* is its dense pattern, which weaves together themes and images that have appeared in preceding *Quaderno* and inter-textual references to the on-going exchange which, from symposium to symposium, has moved participants, as David Brion Davis has said, into viewing a number of questions from previously unnoted angles. Or, perhaps, into a hazard of new visions?