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Once Upon a Time in Central Park: Public Space and the American (Exceptionalist) Ideology of Space

I.

In 2005 and for sixteen days in the month of February, New York City's Central Park was the site of an exhibition called "The Gates: Central Park New York 1979-2005," by the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude (C/J-C). The installation consisted of 7,500 "gates," with luminous orange drapes, hanging from their tops. "The Gates" created what the artists described as "a golden river weaving through the bare trees," "a work of joy and beauty in total freedom" stretched along 23 miles of serpentine footpaths of the park (Henry). The event was ardently supported and promoted by the *New York Times*, the local TV stations, NYC ex-Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and a private, not-for-profit organization that administers Central Park, the Central Park Conservancy (CPC). Moreover, as American art critic and historian Hal Foster stated, "[I]f the actual location of 'The Gates' was the park, its effective site was the global media: that is to say, its site was everywhere" (32). Naturally, 4 million people visited the Park in order to attend the artistic event. "The Gates" turned out to be a tourism gold mine for New York, generating 254 million dollars for the city's economy, according to Bloomberg's official statement.¹

The spectacular success of the event (in terms of its popularity and economic assets) brought to the forefront many questions concerning this iconic urban space that can be summed up as follows: who controls, who uses Central Park and for what purpose? More important, how does the use of this historically singular public space reflect and sustain the American ideology of space? And, to what extent is the ideology of space entwined with and affected by the grand narrative of American exceptionalism?² To be sure, there have been a significant number of studies about America's premier democratic space, most notable among which is Roy Rosenzweig and

¹ Qtd. in Jesse Lemisch's "Art for the People?" The author, who is a Professor Emeritus of History at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, posted his original critique as well as the ensuing debate on the H-Net American Studies list.

² A substantial part of my argument is grounded in Leo Marx's essay "The American Ideology of Space" in *Denatured Visions*. See also, Marx's "Pastoralism in America," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, in which Marx addresses a similar issue. He asks: "To what extent is the attraction exerted by pastoralism on the American left another expression of 'American exceptionalism'?" (36); and "Does Pastoralism Have a Future?"

Elizabeth Blackmar's *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (1992). In it, the authors examine Central Park as both "a social institution and a space, an aspect of the city rather than just a natural or designed landscape" (3), engaging in the historical and contemporary issues related to the meaning of public space. While I fully endorse the authors' conclusion which highlights the Park's cultural, political and property based dimensions (6), in this essay I seek a reading of Central Park within the deep-rooted discourse of American exceptionalism. I take American exceptionalism to refer to an ideology that sees the United States as different and unique but not necessarily exemplary and superior to other national cultures, although this last version of exceptionalism has been embraced by many American historians and cultural theorists. The distinctive character of the nation is putatively based on democratic ideals and individual liberty, but also on material differences resulting from the continent's abundant resources. That these ideas have been repeatedly distorted and misused, but still provide "U.S. citizens with a representative form of self-recognition" (Pease, *New American Exceptionalism* 7), is proof of the ideology's protean nature and remarkable resilience.

In this essay, I investigate the ideological and material permutations of Central Park in relation to the prevailing American ideology of space taking up examples of the park's contemporary use as well as of fictional representations of it. With reference to the historically specific sociospatial processes that produce it, I will show that, as urban site, Central Park has been closely tied to assumptions of space that are reflective of the ideology of American exceptionalism. In the same way that America was regarded as the first nation founded on democratic ideals and personal liberty, the first urban park of the nation, too, carried an implicit democratic promise to foster an urban culture based on equal opportunities in civic participation and environment. The promise may have never fully materialized, as a result of the contradictions and paradoxes that pertain to exceptionalist ideology, but for more than a hundred and fifty years it has remained alive. The abandonment, in more recent decades, of public spaces with the subsequent reliance on private sources to maintain and administer them, constitutes "a betrayal of that promise and a retreat to an openly hierarchical and segmented society" (Blake 233) and, in my opinion, an unfortunate, albeit irreversible universalization of America's exceptionalist attitude toward space. The underlying premise of my argument is that American exceptionalism, whether fantasy or an ideological construct, remains relevant in the minds of Americans, forming one of the core elements of American national identity. Put in Winfried Fluck's terms, "the essential glue, still largely untarnished, is the idea of American exceptionalism" (Interview). "The initial romance with America," for Fluck, lives on, despite revisionist attempts within the field of American Studies to escape it.³

³ Fluck has pursued this compelling argument in "American Studies and the Romance with America" in *Romance with America?*, where he argues that even oppositional discourses end up reinforcing traditional American narratives. Elsewhere, he identifies the revisionist New Americanist program as an instance to overcome the current crisis in the humanities ("The Humanities" 211).

More specifically, contemporary use and stewardship of Central Park replays a deeply rooted American exceptionalist conflict of ideas about space: the opposition between a democratic, egalitarian use of public space and a use that is increasingly oriented toward efficiency, profit and technocratic concerns, which has resulted in a “trenchant reregulation and redaction of public space” (Low and Smith 1). Without explicitly referring to American exceptionalism, Leo Marx identified a distinctly American ideology of space imbued with a utilitarian outlook. In *The Machine in the Garden* and in subsequent publications, he has provided one of the most incisive discussions to date of the “dubious blend” among three main variants of that ideology, “three more or less distinct ways of locating meaning, value, and social purpose in American space” (“American Ideology” 63): the “primitive” (pristine and unmodified state of nature), the “pastoral” (middle landscape) and the “utilitarian” (commodity exchange value of space). Despite the persistence of tension mainly among the last two versions, “the nation’s overall direction in its treatment of space,” according to Marx, “has been set by the dominant utilitarian ideology of progress as: the maximizing of economic growth; trust in the operation of the market; the commodification of land” (74). Although there seems to be no doubt that Marx is correct in positing a prevailing American ideology of space, it is my contention that this dominant, utilitarian approach toward landscape is chiefly attributable to American exceptionalist ideology. Underlying the privatization of public space, I claim, is the specter of American exceptionalism and its concomitant conflation of America’s democratic exemplarity with a market vocabulary. If, according to Seymour Martin Lipset, the nation’s ideology “can be described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire” (31), it seems but a short step from the pursuit of equality of opportunity and individual empowerment to the enhancement of market potencies through privatization and private profit maximization. Thus, American egalitarianism becomes consistent with individualism and laissez-faire. Moreover, given the fact that, as Donald Pease convincingly states, American exceptionalism “has undergone decisive shifts in its self-representation” (*New American Exceptionalism* 9) and that accounts of the discourse’s content are reconfigured “to address the change in geopolitical circumstances” (“Introduction” 21), it follows almost naturally that one element, in this case anti-statism and laissez-faire economics, is elevated “into the position of the metaconcept empowered to represent the entire cluster” (*New American Exceptionalism* 9). Scholarly emphasis on neoliberalism and its policies of privatization and state non-interference should not obscure how “similar clusters of elements” are also present in the narrative of American exceptionalism. To be sure, whether privatization correlates to American exceptionalism or it is merely another variant of exceptionalism in the home front is an issue that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the essay makes the general claim that the privatization process of urban public spaces is pertinent to the exceptionalist conviction for “open, competitive and unregulated markets liberated from all forms of state interference” (Brenner and Theodore 2), and, to the extent

that such process be replicated and generalized, it would further exacerbate social disparities, uneven development and citizen involvement in decision-making processes.

In this regard, while the form of private-public partnership has been highly successful in administering Central Park, it nevertheless has eroded the public space of its relevance and power, turning it into an increasingly orderly, controlled space for tourist attraction, entertainment and recreation, passively experienced by park users, in which public interaction is mediated and to which access-within is tightly regulated. And, while – admittedly – Central Park has progressed from the gloom of the 1970s to the bloom of 2010, there is no doubt that this sort of “collaborative governance” promotes neoliberal market ideology through privatization of the commons, and foreclosure of democratic and collective activity, at the same time as it professes to stand as “exemplary” and “a next step in an evolution of American democracy.”⁴ In its more recent reinvention of itself, the “Janus-faced”⁵ American exceptionalist ideology has favored privatization and profiting from public spaces, rendering manifest some of the most glaring inequities in the United States in the way public spaces are designed, maintained, and regulated.⁶ To the extent that the societal and institutional orientation toward public spaces is consistent with the American value system that relies as thoroughly as possible on markets to organize social relations and thus much less on public engagement and intervention, Central Park can serve as a case study, exemplifying both the material and cultural reinvention of traditional exceptionalist assumptions. As a matter of fact, it is not surprising that the Central Park Conservancy was first formed in 1980 under three-term mayor Ed Koch (1978-1989) who, according to his biographer, Jonathan Soffer, “pioneered the Democratic Party version of neoliberalism, which allowed for government to shape and subsidize private enterprise, but...remained diffident about creating new programs for redistribution or social insurance” (4). In the remaining of this essay, I will show how changes in perception and use of Central Park have transformed “the city’s most famous public space,” affecting its meaning, social purpose as well as its artistic representations. I will begin by discussing the history and growth of the park in three phases, arguing that from its inception up to its contemporary development, Central Park was affected by the double-edged ideology of American exceptionalism. Next, I select two literary texts that belong to different stages in the public-private partnership of the park but which I see as reflecting the conflicts and contestations around the meaning of public spaces and the prevailing version of exceptionalism. I conclude by arguing that privatization policies of public spaces, such as Central Park, undermine local democracy and the treatment

⁴ See “Who’s Afraid of Central Park?” (56) by John D. Donahue, Frank A. Weil, and Richard J. Zeckhauser.

⁵ The term belongs to Donald Pease.

⁶ See Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

of space as a public good in favour of private wealth maximization, while simultaneously they justify a new brand of American exceptionalism designed to support US economic and cultural expansion around the world.

II.

As late as 1857 not a single city in the US had a major, completed park; Central Park became the first urban landscaped park in the US and for this reason it was accorded special significance. However, parks are not just physical places but also socially constructed entities⁷ which reflect dominant nationalistic sentiments and aspirations. From its inception in the early 1850s, Central Park was conceived as a manifestation of 19th century American exceptionalism, i.e., of American democratic aspirations and ideology of expansion. Its construction was based on the award winning design, the “Greensward Plan,” also known as “the founding text of landscape design” in America (Germic, *American Green* 30). The plan was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and his partner, Calvert Vaux. Olmsted, in particular, who was an active antislavery author in his youth and more a student of parks and public landscapes than an architect himself, was concerned with the democratic potential of urban design.⁸ Indeed, Olmsted’s design for Central Park envisioned promoting “civic brotherhood and civil equality” (Roulier 317). On the eve of the Civil War and during a period of severe economic crisis when the city faced the threat of urban rebellion,⁹ Olmsted believed that the aesthetic design and physical topography of public spaces, like Central Park, would nurture the vibrant and resilient democracy of the United States. In designing the Park, he wanted to establish an egalitarian site, to perform an experiment in spatialized democracy – a class leveler as well as a space to escape from the confinement and bustle of the city.¹⁰ According to Olmsted:

⁷ See Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, Harvey’s *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (esp. chapter 11).

⁸ Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, first Central Park Administrator, wrote that “Olmsted felt conflicting emotions toward the city, and out of his ambivalence arose his great contributions to it. He was primarily a Jeffersonian at heart, but at the same time he put a high premium on the value of ‘civilization’ and its accompanying social and material amenities.” As a matter of fact, “he took the Jeffersonian rural ideal and carried it into the heart of the city” (7).

⁹ In his book-length study, *American Green*, Germic includes an episode narrated by Olmsted when the construction of Central Park was ongoing during the panic of 1857. According to Olmsted, hungry, unemployed men confronted him with a banner that read “Bread or Blood,” making the threat of urban rebellion real (18).

¹⁰ Rosenzweig and Blackmar tell a different story about Olmsted’s conception of the park. According to the authors of *The Park and the People*, Olmsted and Vaux differed in their conceptions of the park’s public purpose. It was Vaux who considered the park an instrument by which “a man of small means may be almost on the same footing as the millionaire” (139). By contrast, Olmsted promoted policing in the park, prohibited sports activities and championed the park’s role as a visual respite from urban living (135).

The Park is intended to furnish healthful recreation for the poor and the rich, the young and the old, the vicious and the virtuous, so far as each can partake therein without infringing upon the rights of others, and no further. (212-13)

To be sure, Olmsted perceived Central Park as a democratic institution by virtue of the "human mixture" within its boundaries, a site where differences of class and race would be erased and the physical and moral corruption of the city would be alleviated. He contended that the Park's democratic intentions were reflected in the spaciousness of the land and the sense of freedom such spaciousness evoked. This exceptionalist imaging of the park, with an emphatic pronouncement of freedom and egalitarianism, was enhanced by a design aiming to conceal the artificiality of the project and to manipulate nature so that it gave the illusion of limitlessness. In this respect, Olmsted's "spacious design" is closely related to what Leo Marx terms a "middle landscape," that is, a pastoral approach to space which sought "greater harmony between the man-made and the natural" and where artifice and nature would sublimely cooperate ("American Ideology" 74) for aesthetic and moral individual and national development. It was Olmsted's conviction that a successful park represents a "marriage" of town and country, a rural oasis embedded in the urban environment. Thus, an army of (exclusively white) laborers were mobilized to transform the swampy and rocky property of the park to an uncorrupted countryside landscape. In order to further create "a sense of enlarged freedom"¹¹ transverse roads below the level of the park were constructed to carry crosstown traffic. Olmsted's skillful concealment of human artifice in the design and construction of Central Park, which Leo Marx would later identify as "pastoralism," was a "relatively rare, partial and temporary" reconciliation between reverence of nature and social utility, between primitivism and progressivism, and, according to the American cultural historian, it "has not issued in a genuine alternative to the dominant ideology" of space and "probably never will" (74). More important, the Park's construction marked a historical period when the dominant "metaconcept" (Pease) representing American exceptionalist ideology was freedom of people's involvement in the establishment of their own public park use. In the words of Rosenzweig and Blackmar, "[t]he association of a new park with the 'public' meant that a much broader cross section of New Yorkers would ultimately claim their rights to this new cultural institution than the relatively narrow groups of wealthy (and often self-interested) New Yorkers who actually carried the proposal for a park through the political process" (38-9).

Nevertheless, this exceptionalist conception of Central Park as an agent of cultural democracy was burdened by dualistic tendencies which masked the Park's main function as a tool of social control and cultural enlightenment and did not recognize it entirely as a space of social and political contestation. As Dorceta Taylor explains in her analysis of Central Park as a model of social control, the Park became a site of contestation between the bourgeois elites who conceptualized, designed and managed the park, and the working class

¹¹ The expression belongs to Olmsted in Murphy's "Distant Effects."

who were employed for its construction and who related in a different, often “unacceptable” manner to the park.¹² Stephen Germic, too, demonstrates how Central Park manufactured a “geography of exclusion” by repressing the “abject and unstable character of American identities based on class.”¹³ Furthermore, not only access to the distant park (Central Park was 6 miles away from the city center) was limited to middle class whites, but about 1600 Irish and German immigrants (in “Pigtown”), including the Black community of Seneca Village which was located within the boundaries of the park, were to be evicted for the purposes of construction.¹⁴ Reiterating the rhetoric of “blank canvas” or “unclaimed” space to enable territorial expansion, and that of egalitarianism to mitigate social and economic crisis and obfuscate class antagonism by homogenizing lifestyles, the discourse surrounding Central Park functioned to reinforce perceived American exceptionalism in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Germic succinctly argues, Olmsted’s urban masterpiece, Central Park, “materialized the nineteenth century’s greatest abstraction and ideal: the nation” (*American Green* 17), representing the landscape as America, as available, unowned land, emptied of conflict and promising infinite resources, while at the same time, through a visual and spatial rhetoric, contributing to define “Americanness” at a time when social identity was remarkably unstable.

Circumfused with a mythical and exceptionalist aura, “this synthetic Arcadian carpet” (23), as Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas labeled Central Park a little over a hundred years after its construction in his urban manifesto, *Delirious New York* (1978), would become Manhattan’s moment of relief from the city’s architectural ideology of relentlessly rectangular arrangement. A simulacrum of wild and unpredictable nature, this uninterrupted artificial green carpet was considered a visual articulation of resistance to the homogenization and dullness of the grid. But, like the grid, which transcends topography, Central Park was more than a major recreational facility of Manhattan, it was, to quote Koolhaas, a “colossal leap of faith” (21) invested with social and political significance. Like the grid, the Arcadian carpet was imposed on Manhattan, which the Dutch architect called “a man-made Wild West, a frontier of the sky” (87), in an effort to pacify the socio-geographic tensions

¹² An environmental sociologist, Dorceta Taylor has published widely on the development of urban environments. Taylor uses Central Park as a case study in much of her work in order to address issues of social exclusion and economic inequality. Very interesting is her examination of how the discourse around urban financing has evolved from the 19th century onward and how Central Park is still influencing the way in which parks are financed today. See “Central Park as a Model for Social Control,” chapter I of *Environment and Social Justice*; and *Environment and the People in American Cities*.

¹³ In “Nature, Naturalism, American Exceptionalism.”

¹⁴ Rosenzweig and Blackmar give a detailed account of the eviction of these communities which opened the possibilities to the massive removal of minorities and poor whites. Contrary to the view that saw the occupants of the land before the Park’s construction (called “pre-parkites” by the authors) as having a loose relation to the land, Rosenzweig and Blackmar argue that the establishment of churches and schools deepened the population’s connection to the land (65-78). Taylor (2010) argues that Central Park was an early form of gentrification on a massive scale (39).

and contestations implicated in the gridded space. Embracing a celebratory exceptionalist rhetoric, Koolhaas describes Central Park as “a taxidermic preservation of nature” (21), which emphasizes the fusion between technology and nature, hinging upon Leo Marx’s pastoralist view of landscape as the prevalent ideology of space, as far as the Olmstedian phase of historical development of the park is concerned.

III.

If Olmsted’s design and fashioning of Central Park inaugurated the first era in the history of the Park, the second major era began with the appointment of Robert Moses as City Parks Commissioner in 1934. By then, years of neglect and the Great Depression had rendered the Park in a state of decline. Robert Moses undertook to remedy all this, and a lot more, always opting for master plans based on efficiency and rationality rather than on the urban fabric that evolves organically.¹⁵ His technocratic principle of order stands in stark opposition to what Leo Marx sees as a native, Americanized aesthetic tradition based on the doctrine of organic form.¹⁶ Besides, as Marshall Berman reminds us, it was almost impossible to oppose the man who boasted that “when you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax” (294). In his characteristic authoritative style, Moses enforced his own metropolitan manifest destiny attitude onto New York City, a major part of which involved Central Park. Influenced by the playground movement of the early twentieth century, he redesigned the Park to accommodate recreational facilities, distancing himself from Olmsted’s plan that favored conservation rather than recreation. Intent on imposing his “utilitarian” vision, even while ignoring the concrete patterns of urban life and the real needs and desires of people who lived in proximity to the park, Robert Moses built more than 20 playgrounds, athletic fields, and renovated the Park zoo.¹⁷ However, a notable instance of protest against Moses’s controversial initiatives in the Park came in 1956 by a group of upper west side neighborhood mothers who disapproved of his plan to construct a new parking lot for the adjacent elegant restaurant of Tavern on the Green. The much publicized episode which became known as the “Battle of Central Park,” forced Moses to cancel the parking lot plan and rebuild a new playground. Not only was it

¹⁵ In his Pulitzer award winning biography from 1974 *The Power Broker*, Robert Caro documents Robert Moses’s preeminent role in the massive urban renewal projects of last century.

¹⁶ Marx traces the origin of “organicism” to Coleridge and German romantic philosophy, but sees its “first Americanized” version in “Horatio Greenough and Ralph Waldo Emerson.” Later, the organic principle of form was applied “with stunning originality to literary form by Henry Thoreau (in *Walden*) and by Walt Whitman (in “Song of Myself”); and most effectively translated into the language of architecture by Louis Sullivan, Montgomery Schuyler, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Lewis Mumford (“American Ideology” 73).

¹⁷ Under powerful Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, Central Park became “essentially a playground” (Rosenzweig & Blackmar 449).

a victory of public good over private interests but the negative press this episode received, which coincided with Jane Jacobs's ferocious attacks on what she called "anti-city ideals" of Moses's "progressive" urban planning ethos put an end to his unquestioned imperious regime.¹⁸ It also paved the way for community development as well as for the visibility and importance of gender in the public sphere in the modern city.

In the decade that followed, the 1960s, urbanized public space took on a new meaning as the object of conflict over claims to its control and over rights of occupation. At the same time, public space provided the necessary setting for enactment of those conflicts. Inspired from or, perhaps, reacting against Kennedy's exceptionalist presidential address and the zeitgeist of the period, a generation of young Americans rose up to fulfill America's promise, by challenging conventional lifestyles and institutions, protesting the materialism and consumerism of American society, and demanding withdrawal from the war in Vietnam. The streets, the squares and the parks became sites for such protest, albeit often turning into violent clashes and race riots.¹⁹ Paradoxically, in spite of its location in the heart of the bustling city, and because of its size and masterful Olmstedian construction, whose scenography evokes the Arcadian notion of nature (according to Leo Marx),²⁰ Central Park thrived as a symbol for counter-culture events and urban revival. Many rock concerts, political marches, peace demonstrations, large-scale antiwar rallies and festivals took place there. "Love-ins," "be-ins," and "fat-ins" became regular features, blending pastoral and anti-urban sentiment with utopian imaginings of belonging, and infusing the Park's social, cultural, and increasingly political atmosphere. Granted, the high-impact activities and events of a scale unprecedented in the history of the Park had caused the deterioration of its once-verdant lawns, picturesque paths and lush vegetation. What is remarkable, however, was that Central Park fulfilled its function as public urban space, a true "people's park," an open and uncontrolled site where groups of every description and conviction could achieve "public visibility,

¹⁸ Incidents like this over the use of the park's space inspired Jane Jacobs's seminal book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. In relation to parks, Jacobs claimed: "Parks are volatile places. They tend to run to extremes of popularity and unpopularity. Their behavior is far from simple...They contain a significant diversity of different people, functions and activities. They don't necessarily increase the commercial value of a neighborhood but they can also bring it down" (89).

¹⁹ "Major race riots have occurred in the United States at least since the Harlem Riots of 1948, but the 60's surpassed anything previously experienced. The five day Watts riot in August, 1965 saw 34 people die and a thousand injured; and the 1966 Detroit riot, 43 deaths. Following Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968, rioting broke out in over 120 cities including Chicago and Washington." In "The Sixties." (<http://scholar.library.miami.edu/sixties/urbanRiots.php>).

²⁰ As stated above, in *The Machine in the Garden* Leo Marx used the term "middle landscape" which he defined as "a middle state between primitive nature and an over-refined civilization" (v). As a matter of fact, Marx's book is itself a product of the sixties culture which articulates its anti-urban, and post-romantic representations. Also, in his essay on "Pastoralism," Marx speaks of "a much deeper continuity between the nineteenth-century pastoralism and the radical movement (or counterculture) of the 1960s" (38).

seek recognition and make demands" (Goheen 480). The Park's democratic realization led Rosenzweig and Blackmar to remark that "[t]he greatness of Central Park has more to do with these democratic possibilities than with the artful arrangement of trees, shrubs, bridges, paths, and lawns" (530).

As a matter of fact, aesthetic appreciation of nature in Central Park was never deemed enough to legitimize the centrality attributed to it in public imagination, much more so during the 1960s racial tensions and social unrest confronting a corporate society. That cultural and aesthetic conceptions of the landscape as a garden of Eden of pristine and abundant natural beauty had become anachronistic, was reflected in the land art movement which emerged in America during the 1960s. Land artist Robert Smithson, in particular, whose earthworks sought to break away from the boundaries of "natural" landscape in order to articulate the artificial interventions, became interested in Olmsted's creation because he saw Central Park, like his own work, as "a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region" (160). In other words, as he asserted in his 1973 *Artforum* essay "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," the Park did not exist as "a thing-in-itself" (160) but as a site specific work of art demonstrative of the continually transforming relationships between man and landscape. In order to compose the essay, Smithson had taken a walk through Central Park, looking for visual evidence of Olmsted's attempt to create a "concrete dialectic between humans and nature" (164). He heralded the Park's creator, as an artist of serious worth and magnitude, creating ponds and not simply contemplating them and having the capacity to "translate Democratic ideas to Trees & Dirt."²¹ He recognized the profound interactivity of a public park – socially, ecologically and materially, dismissing the notion of the park "as static entity," and emphasizing instead change and chance, "a range of contrasting viewpoints that are forever fluctuating, yet solidly based in the earth" (165). In Smithson's view, Central Park was always already becoming a "thing-for-us," rather than a "thing-in-itself" in "dialectic" intercourse between physical landscape and its temporal context, between nature and people (160).

IV.

Before there was time to assess critically the 1960s gain of vitality in the public sphere and to determine the changing conception of Central Park as public space, the 1970s urban fiscal crisis hit the Park. This is the time President Gerald Ford denied federal assistance to spare New York from bankruptcy.²² The effect of the city's financial hardships on its park system combined with absence of effective management had contributed to the park's alarming condition, which in turn led to the formation, in 1980, of a joint public-private partnership, the Central Park Conservancy. Thus begins the third major era

²¹ In fact, it is Vaux who used this phrase according to Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 136.

²² On Oct. 30, 1975, on the occasion of this denial, the front page of *The Daily News* read: "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD."

of the Park that marks a turn from municipal financing to privatization or, to put it in terms of my argument, a shift from exceptionalist democratic egalitarianism to exceptionalist market driven economy. In the case of Central Park, private funding, raised through fundraising and investment income, and efficient park stewardship did contribute to the park's renovation and landscape restoration. At the same time, through a series of selective policies of rehabilitation of the park "as the original creators saw it,"²³ the Park was gradually transformed to an elite cultural institution removed from its democratic past. Despite the large degree of skepticism with which the Conservancy's formal recognition was greeted, this was not registered in the official rhetoric. Instead, the Conservancy was hailed as "the long-awaited restorer and protector so avidly desired by the various Park betterment groups," and this model of "collaborative governance" was regarded by some as the "next step in an evolution of American democracy" (Donahue et al. 56). The ideal of American democracy is evoked again only to mask the fact that the ideological conception of space has shifted from pastoralism toward the "utilitarian ideology of progress," to recall Marx, or, to put it differently, from the land of the free to freedom of enterprise. This kind of exceptionalist rhetoric serves to reinforce the "specialness" of American treatment of space through reaffirming the nation's belief in progress, economic freedom and minimal government interference with the market forces. To paraphrase Walter Benn Michaels, "the American Dream turn[ed] into the neoliberal dream" and "the fear of (or the hopes for) American exceptionalism" – like worries about the state of democracy – to a "kind of nostalgia" – like the reference to Olmsted's original vision of the Park (34).

In 1998, New York City's government under Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani agreed to an important move: It delegated stewardship of Central Park to the Conservancy, establishing the ground rules for a permanent collaboration that granted important decision-making authority to the Conservancy.²⁴ While privatization was hardly new to New York City government, this high-profile privatization of the nation's most famous urban space was a very controversial arrangement.²⁵ It established an "exemplary" model of privatization at the same time as it raised numerous questions regarding the attenuation of democratic process. In reality, the transformation of the Park into a capitalist commodity on which the Central Park Conservancy has exclusive control, inevitably gave it the power to take what should be public decisions out of public hands. Urban economist Oliver Cooke persuasively argues that the Park's locational, aesthetic and cultural uniqueness allows it to capture and capitalize significant resources which the Central Park Conservancy has exclusive

²³ According to Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, the 1980s administrator of Central Park Conservancy (Taylor, "Equity" 43).

²⁴ For more information on the contract between the Giuliani administration and the Central Park Conservancy, see Oliver Cooke's "Class Approach to Municipal Privatization" and *Rethinking Municipal Privatization*.

²⁵ The election of Rudolph Giuliani (1994-2001) as New York City's mayor marked a turning point for New York City government. Giuliani made privatization a key platform of his 1993 campaign. See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

responsibility to manage. As a result, the Conservancy decides on the type of activities that take place in the park, depending on whether it is profitable, protects the organization's investments or might offend potential donors.²⁶

This issue came to light in the summer of 2004 when the Conservancy in collaboration with the city denied permit to hold a large Protest rally on the Great Lawn of Central Park during the 2004 Republican National Convention, explaining that an event of this magnitude would severely damage the Great Lawn and the cost of re-seeding it would be too high. Clearly, the Great Lawn's aesthetics was judged more important than its symbolic significance, as "the heart and soul of New York," as the place where many rallies had been held in the past (such as the 1982 anti-nuclear rally, an anti-apartheid rally in 1986, a Gay Pride rally in 1989, and Earth Day in 1990).²⁷ "What does this closure of the most symbolic of public spaces portend?" Setha Low rhetorically asks ("Erosion"43).

While the Conservancy denied protesters the democratic right to demonstrate against the Iraqi war, it ardently promoted Christo's installation, as we have seen, hailing the exhibit rather than the rally as "a Great Communal Event."²⁸ Obviously, this decision is evidence of the loss of democratic discourse and confirms Rosenzweig and Blackmar's concerns (quoting architectural critic Paul Goldberger) that "these new and privately owned public spaces have become an artificial substitute for a true public realm" (509). Undoubtedly, privatization of Central Park has brought what Mike Davis has called "the death of ... the Olmstedian vision of public space" (226). Further, argues Davis, Olmsted "conceived public landscapes and parks as safety valves, *mixing* classes and ethnicities in common (bourgeois) recreations and pleasures" (227). But, if privatization has marked "the death" of Olmsted's reformist vision of public space, it also marked the abandonment of the

²⁶ "The Central Park Conservancy holds the right to demonstrate to donors that their investments are well used and protected. Any risky decision from the part of the Conservancy might imperil the organization's fundraising efforts and there is danger it might offend potential donors" (Cooke, "Class Approach" 127).

²⁷ Passavant 108. The author discusses how the privatization of public spaces circumscribes the exercise of freedom of speech. He examines several lower level court decisions regarding the right to protest, putting them in the context of neoliberal, post-Fordist urban economy. Among the cases discussed is Central Park which is seen as a place of attraction of mega-events as long as these produce "a brandable image" of the city (103). See also, Jennifer Steinhauer and Diane Cardwell: "'The Central Park Conservancy runs Central Park and they've been very possessive about it,' said City Councilman Bill Perkins, who is in favor of letting United for Peace and Justice rally there. 'In some years they've considered whether there is too much activity in the park because to them activity is a maintenance issue.'"

²⁸ Jesse Lemisch argues persuasively that there seemed multiple clear conflicts of interest behind the event. More precisely "the CPC bought many of the drawings, as did Mayor Bloomberg, who was already a Christo collector and would now see his Christos skyrocket in value. So, trumpeting The Gates enhanced the value of Bloomberg's and CPC's investments." In the same article, the author explains that in "'this public-private partnership' CPC's 'Corporate Partners' include Bloomberg, J.P. Morgan Chase, Citigroup, Consolidated Edison, ABC, Prudential, Goldman Sachs, Martha Stewart Living, NY Stock Exchange Foundation, Pfizer, and others."

egalitarian ideal and the elevation of the laissez-faire ideology into the position of American exceptionalism's "metaconcept." As I have said at the beginning, I apply Donald Pease's argument, who observes that "the semantic indeterminacy of American exceptionalism" allows it to adjust to the changes in socioeconomic circumstances when one version of it no longer suits "extant socioeconomic demands" ("Re-mapping the Transnational Turn" 21).

More recently, in 2008, and as America's economy cratered toward recession, the Chanel Fashion Company rent a part of Central Park to celebrate its designer handbags in a gleaming white pavilion designed by Zaha Hadid.²⁹ Just before the realization of this "ambitious project," Parks & Recreation Commissioner proudly announced: "Our partnership with CHANEL continues the great tradition of bringing world class cultural offerings to New York City's parks."³⁰ Ironically, as one critic noted, while Olmsted had planned the park as a great democratic experiment, the "Chanel project reminds us how far we have traveled from those ideals by dismantling the boundary between the civic realm and corporate interests." Instead of enjoying the therapeutic benefits of time spent in the park, visitors of the pavilion "spiral ever deeper into a black hole of bad art and superficial temptations, into an elaborate mousetrap for consumers" (Ouroussoff). Clearly, as Cooke poignantly argues in his book-length study on municipal privatization, Central Park had become "a good that no longer constituted a mere-use value, but one that also comprised exchange value." "Put otherwise," Cooke goes on to say, "the privatization process commodified Central Park" (57). The extent to which Central Park is perceived as commodity was also made apparent when former president Clinton settled for a Harlem office, determined as he was to have an office with an unobstructed view of Central Park. Thus, the Park's exchange value extends to include the Park's view and not just its use.

V.

Obviously, the Park's privatization seems to have influenced both the material use and its imaginary representation, effectuating a reduction of the site's diversity, or complexity, and gradually divesting it of its social signification. A fictional example of this can be seen in Jonathan Safran Foer's mythical tale of New York City's Sixth Borough that evokes Central Park in

²⁹ The exhibition, called "Mobile Art," was conceived by Chanel's designer Karl Lagerfeld. It ran from Oct. 20 to Nov. 9, 2008 in the park's Rumsey Playfield. Chanel paid the city \$400,000 to rent the space and made an undisclosed donation to the Central Park Conservancy.

³⁰ Parks & Recreation Commissioner Adrian Benepe. Along the same line, the president of the Central Park Conservancy Douglas Blonsky declared that "[a]s one of America's most important works of art and a treasured New York landmark, Central Park is the perfect setting for CHANEL's innovative and free public art exhibition. As caretakers, the Central Park Conservancy works in partnership with the City to create a safe, beautiful and inviting space where cultural opportunities such as this can flourish." In "Central Park to Host Mobile Art."

magical terms. First published as a short story in the *New York Times* (2004), it was later incorporated in the author's highly acclaimed novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. According to the story, The Sixth Borough was an island separated from Manhattan by a body of water that could be jumped across by the world's greatest long jumper. It was eventually discovered that the island was drifting further away from New York until it became totally detached. The key image of the tale is Central Park which used to reside in the center of the Sixth Borough but – using giant hooks – it was relocated to Manhattan as the island began to move (Mullins). As part of a novel that addresses the traumatic experience of 9/11, “The Sixth Borough” has been read as a parable of the inextricable connection between victimized communities that transcends national, racial and religious demarcations. Central Park was interpreted to depict the unity between the New York world, before and after 9/11. But as separate piece, “The Sixth Borough” encourages a reading that underscores a dematerialization of Central Park, a place detached from the reality of the surrounding environment, as a result of the phantasmagorical modes of representations through which this heterotopic space acquires its meaning. In Foer's bitter-sweet fantasy, Central Park is salvaged by being pulled “like a rug across a floor, from the Sixth Borough into Manhattan” (221), but its relocation involves a complete loss of its social significance. In his imaginary exploration of Central Park, Foer writes: “Children were allowed to lie down on the park as it was being moved. By the time the park found its current resting place, every single one of the children had fallen asleep, and the park was a mosaic of their dreams” (221). Foer's Central Park has turned into a utopian landscape, totally liberated from the historic constraints of the traumatic present, but also totally divested of the needs of real-life city-dwellers who might use it as a negotiable location of everyday practice. To the extent that urban space represents the spatial manifestation of social practices, then Foer's imaging of Central Park surreptitiously undermines it as a potential site of sociability and politics.

Juxtaposed to Foer's post-9/11 utopic representation of Central Park is Paul Auster's 1960s Central Park which reflects the era's conceptualization of public space as a concrete, real, urban site of democracy. Written in the late 1980s when the Park's privatization was under way, but chronologically set twenty years earlier, *Moon Palace* depicts the novel's young protagonist, MS Fogg, undergoing a series of identity crises. In an early one of those, Fogg is evicted from his apartment and finds refuge in the friendly, all inclusive confines of Central Park. Although it is situated at the center of New York, the Park is “devoid of associations” (56), as Fogg admits. Its vastness and unlimited sky give him a sense of freedom from the ugly and stressful city. Emptied out of its urban associations, the Park evolves into a frontier setting, to which the protagonist has to adapt with determination and resourcefulness. In Auster's Central Park, Fogg can enjoy his privacy, living as a homeless, and can benefit from his proximity to nature, “blending into the environment,” as he says, without being isolated. In fact, it makes him feel happy to experience urban civility, to realize that, in the Park “[p]eople smiled at each

other and held hands, bent their bodies into unusual shapes, kissed" (57). Moreover, he depends on the generosity of other park users who offer him food, exchange news or invite him for a game of softball. Cooperation among people in the Park, therefore, becomes crucial for his survival both physical and psychological. In addition, his sojourn in the Park frees him from the corrupted materialism and capitalism of the streets as well as the burden of performing his social identity according to normative standards of behavior. "There were eight hundred acres to roam in, and unlike the massive gridwork of buildings and towers that loomed outside the perimeter, the park offered me the possibility of solitude, of separating myself from the rest of the world. In the streets, everything is bodies and commotion, and like it or not, you cannot enter them without adhering to a rigid protocol of behavior" (56).

Although Central Park is represented as an urban "sanctuary" (56), it is not idealized, romanticized or invested in pseudo-innocence. Fogg comes across criminals as well as the official authorities who threaten to put an end to his precarious settlement in the park. In addition, he is perfectly aware that there "is no romance in stooping for crumbs" (60), as he says. Nevertheless, no danger, hardship or humiliation can diminish his enjoyment in being directly involved in this "man-made natural world" (62), a "miniature world" (63) that contains an infinite number of sensory, aesthetic and social variables traditionally associated with the frontier. In this respect, Auster's invocation of the enduring myth of the frontier, and its themes of radical individualism, self-reliance and equality of opportunity in relation to Central Park, brings to the forefront the link between American exceptionalist discourse and the pastoral spatial ideal. As stated above, Central Park in the 1960s was still experienced as the common ground where people would carry out the "functional and ritual activities that bind a community" (Carr et al. xi) and create a civic bond.

VI.

As "the foundational ideology" of American Studies (Fluck, "Concept of Recognition" 168) and a "cultural supplement to the political nationalism promoted by the state" (Pease, *Keywords* 110), American exceptionalism has exercised a powerful influence in the nation's self-understanding and self-representation. Its resurgence after the dismantling of the Soviet Union confirmed its remarkable resilience to the extent that, far from losing its effectiveness and accountability or being left to lament its "end" (Bell), American exceptionalism "has returned, and with a vengeance" (Hodgson 27). As is well known and sufficiently documented, recent academic and political discourse has witnessed a renewal of interest in this most enduring tenet of American self-fashioning. In recent scholarly discourse, even when American culture is supposedly examined through the transnational perspective, such critical analysis gains its legitimacy only to the extent that it may "cast aside notions of American exceptionalism" (Fluck, "Theories" 60). As Fluck remarks, however, intellectually what is "considered the cutting edge of the field," i.e.

transnationalism, "is merely the latest installment in an attempt to escape from the field's initial romance with America" and still operates within the intellectual framework of "theories of American culture" (*Romance* 87). Moreover, in his "Theories of American Culture," Fluck identifies a number of critics who view transnationality, not in its own right, but as a critical perspective that would potentially undo "the tenacious grasp of American exceptionalism" and would challenge the cohesive borders of a mythical America (Kaplan 154). Finally, without wishing to underestimate the revitalizing power of these innovative trends to American Studies, whichever prefix they announce themselves with (trans-, post-, meta-, inter-) I wish to draw attention to Donatella Izzo's line of argument which insists on the paradox of the present moment in American Studies: the all-encompassing, "virtually boundless," "'progressive' narrative of unfolding radical potentialities" of the field suspiciously conflates the creation and circulation of the nation's own cultural self-representations with the material (economic, political, military) underpinnings of the ascendancy of the United States (593). Izzo illustrates her critical position by referring to transnationalism, and the term's appropriation by American Studies from its former field of economic application, in particular from multinational corporations. She succinctly argues that "[t]ransnational American Studies thus figures as what might be termed a *technology of transnationalization*, effecting the translation of the newworld wide horizon of the economy into culture and transferring the old nationalistic version of American identity onto a globalized stage" (595).

In my analysis I have avoided a (macro scale) deterritorialized perspective of transnationalism, focusing instead on a (micro scale) local analysis, and tracing the changes in current uses of Central Park as public space that resulted from the shift in dominance of elements that comprise the American exceptionalist "metaconcept" (Pease). As I have said at the beginning, since its creation, the nation adopted a distinctive American ideology of space which has become inextricably linked to America's view of itself as exceptional. While the changes in the character and meaning of public space were in accordance to the realities of historical developments and the political context, they have also been safely and deeply rooted in American exceptionalism. Alternating between what Leo Marx termed the pastoralist or the economic utilitarian perspective, nationalist ideology toward space drew (and still draws), on the same clusters of distinctively American characteristics that were liberty, equality, populism, individualism and free-market economy (as summarized by Lipset). I chose Central Park as a case study in order to illustrate this ideological shift toward space from the democratic egalitarianism of the Park's Olmstedian beginnings (pastoralism) to free market economy's advocacy of its privatization (utilitarianism). Both ideological approaches exist within the (broad) confines of American exceptionalism and both make claims for their unique American character.³¹ But, to recall Lipset, American

³¹ According to Seymour Martin Lipset, "[t]he United States, almost from its start, has had an expanding economic system. The nineteenth-century American economy, as compared to the European ones, was characterized by more market freedom, more

exceptionalism is a “double-edged sword.” Privatization of Central Park has revitalized the Park, drawing a large number of people on a daily basis to its restaurants, coffee shops and other facilities and generating funds through individual contributions and corporate charitable donations. At the same time, making Central Park a privatized success has brought about its commodification, as well as a foreclosure of democratic and community activity.

For over two hundred years, Americans enjoyed the “exceptional” belief in their nation’s greatness. Whether based on America’s democratic values, its military preeminence or/and economic growth, exceptionalist ideology was always already a source of pride for Americans, linked as it had become to core qualities of “Americanness.” Today’s deep uncertainty about American national identity and a growing concern for the nation’s place in the larger world have led to a renewal of interest in the term. What the future form and shape of this protean ideology will be is hard to know. It is my understanding, though, that taking pride in the achievements of privatization is the new, albeit distorted, dominant “metaconcept” of American exceptionalism. Given the country’s economic crisis, privatization, which marks the process of reallocating assets and functions from the public sector to the private sector, seems to bring a special national promise of renewed economic development. The promise of market-based economic growth, however, ought not to hide privatization’s political and cultural dimensions. It remains to be seen whether this brand of American exceptionalism will carry its course at the expense of democratic gains of the past.

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individual landownership, and a higher wage income structure—all sustained by a national classical liberal ideology. From the Revolution on, it was the *laissez-faire* country par excellence” (54).

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