

David W Fletcher, February 2005

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Miller, James S. "Inventing the 'Found' Object: Artifactuality, Folk History, and the Rise of Capitalist Ethnography in 1930s America." *Journal of American Folklore* 117 (2004): 373-393.

Based on his assumption that the Depression decade of the 1930s marked "the pivotal turning point at which the commercial system . . . achieved its status as a truly national or 'mass' culture" in the United States (389), Miller, an Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater, proceeds to reverse the period's "retrospective interest" in "junk" from nostalgic resurrection of the pre-industrial past to a central and forward-looking role "in consolidating and legitimating . . . a narrative of corporate-commercial progress" (374). To counter the "folk" history thesis that judges "commercial-capitalist" / "urban-industrial" modernity void of common-people values, i.e., "roots in the land, a sense of community, connection to tradition" (375), Miller re-analyzes three Depression-era classics: Dorothea Lange's *An American Exodus* (1937), John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1936).

No doubt, Miller works at a highly theoretical level to see in these literary gems aspects of acceptance rather than censure of America's burgeoning commercial, mass-market culture. So much so, he often confuses the reader with language that is quite difficult to understand. For example, in his assessment of Lange, he writes:

What Lange's repeated depictions of industrial demolition and technological displacement provide is less a map for excavating the remains of a prior "folk" heritage than a blueprint for reenvisioning heritage itself as an adjunct or by-product of commercial development. To see its work solely as an act of cultural conservation or historical recovery, as Lange's depictions imply, is to overlook the ways that understandings and definitions of locality and historicity were themselves imbricated in the emergence of corporate-commercial modernity—failing to account for the ways

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capitalist culture itself participated in the creation of what one ethnographic theorist has termed the “production of authentic localities” (377-378).

Obviously, Lange’s intent, i.e., what her depictions imply, does not suit Miller who wants to glean more than she intended out of her work. If Miller means no more than the overlapping semantic meanings with reference to her representations of those impoverished by the progressive sweep of modernity, perhaps he has a point.

Modern culture and its peculiarities certainly cannot be understood fully without reference to what came before, i.e., the lack of modernity. This holds true for any chronological movement from culture to counterculture and their corresponding beliefs, ideologies, materials, and traditions. History remains a continuum upon which semantic shifts rest. But, on the other hand, if Miller means to deny Lange, Steinbeck, and Agee the force of the original intent of their respective works (cf. 379, 385), then he re-fashions the historical record after his own needs.

That the latter seems to be the case may be construed from his closing remarks:

Although it is tempting to look back at these efforts as responses to capitalist crisis—one more strained, utopian attempt to imagine a refuge or antidote to America’s industrial-commercial society—it is far more accurate to view them as a kind of object lesson in the ways public memory came to be characteristically shaped, managed, and repressed under corporate capitalism, a blueprint of the mechanisms through which history making and the question of historical truth gets bracketed in an age of capital accumulation. . . . What this examination itself most forcefully excavates is buried desire to forge a conception of history uniquely attuned to the ideological and psychic needs of America’s new corporate age—to recover (which is to say, invent) the artifactuality of commercial-capitalism itself (390).

Lange, Steinbeck, and Agee possibly might be surprised to discover that they have done all that Miller credits them.