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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Milette Shamir. *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 282 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3906-5.

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Published on H-Amstdy (July, 2006)

Suburban Pioneers

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation." For some of my students, David Thoreau's words from *Walden* are a ringing confirmation of their rejection of parents' values and peers' incessant striving. Thoreau's prophecy reveals that all that glitters is not necessarily gold. With Ralph Waldo Emerson too dense and Walt Whitman too giddy, Thoreau serves them as a sage of disaffection, a seer of the new good life. He is the anti-suburbanite before the suburbs ruined everything.

Milette Shamir, however, reminds us in her engaging book *Inexpressible Privacy* that this is a relatively recent understanding of Thoreau. Until the twentieth century, the author of *Walden* (1854), *Civil Disobedience* (1849), and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) was considered a "second tier" writer in the canon of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. and read widely by the middle-class denizens that Thoreau supposedly critiqued. According to Shamir, the "radicalization" of Thoreau did not begin until the aftermath of the First World War when modernist critics like Waldo Frank and Van Wyck Brooks transformed popular literary works into an "antinomian romance featuring the alienated … American genius" (p. 181). Shamir seeks to overcome this anachronistic understanding of antebellum authors by proving them to be products of the values they supposedly rejected. For Shamir, Thoreau was the first suburbanite.

Inexpressible Privacy begins with an analysis of the Victorian home. However, Shamir rejects the one-sided argument that the privatization of space in this period coincided with the construction of the Cult of Domesticity and the isolation of women therein. Instead, she proposes that the middle-class home exhibited two types of privacy: an "affirmative" where the individual claimed a right to "actively construct their private identity," and a "negative" where a person had the right to be "left alone" without the pressure to construct a self for public view (pp. 229-230). This negative privacy, a place of passivity and silence, is exemplified by the husband's study in the new domestic architecture of the 1840s and 1850s. For Shamir, then, the works of antebellum authors like Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Hawthorne, and Thoreau are middle class in their style and sensibilities because they explored the tension between a privacy that requires an audience and a privacy that shuns it. These antebellum authors explored the battle between the parlor and the study.

Within this argument, well-known works come into new and engaging focus. Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) which takes place in a bustling law office, becomes a tale about private space where the protagonist, the opaque and passive Bartelby, is a statement of a "masculine mode of intimacy based on concealment of the self" (p. 12). Likewise, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) practices a "strategy of exposure" and lends selfhood to African-American slaves who exist entirely in the passive and silent world of negative privacy (p. 113). This kind of analysis allows Shamir fruitful consideration of antebellum political rhetoric as well. The "house divided" of Lincoln's famous speech is not only a Biblical reference familiar to his listeners, but also a justification for the containment of the slave system where the South, like an "overstepping wife," threatens the proper domestic divisions within the middle-class household (p. 106). In this light, Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond becomes the ultimate refuge for negative privacy. There, the planting of beans and corn is less a necessity and more a symbol of "abstract manly virtues" that elicit "revery" and "virtue" in the planter (p. 201). The work that Thoreau does on Walden Pond, much like the work around the suburban home, is ultimately private and meditative. "As in the life of the suburban commuter, who returns home after a long day of work," says Shamir, "a clear separation be-

tween work and leisure is essential to Thoreau's ideal conduct of life" (p. 202).

I have some small quibbles with this very good book. The first is Shamir's occasional slide into jargon-laden prose. When the author begins to discuss the "sociopetence" of the home versus its "sociofugality," I am afraid I lose the thread of the argument (p. 106). In similar fashion, when Shamir uses an explanation of Freud's Oedipal complex to illuminate an argument, but in the next paragraph undermines Freud's theory itself by noting that it is a product of the two-fold privacies of the nineteenth century, I cannot help but feel a little man-handled (p. 185). Finally, there are a few minor errors to correct in the next edition. For example, in chapter 2, one must resist two things: "(a) the fact that she or he is in actuality visible, and (2) the fact that no one is looking for her or him in any way" (p. 68).

Overall, Shamir's book will make excellent reading for American studies scholars, gender studies critics, literary historians, and historians of antebellum American culture. Its broad appeal encourages interdisciplinary dialogue and cross-fertilization. I hope to use it next spring in a course on American masculinity and, I imagine, many of my students will be challenged by Thoreau-as-suburban-pioneer. I also imagine that this will be good for them.

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Citation: Jason Stacy. Review of Shamir, Milette, *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11984

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