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"THE SPECTACLE OF A LOST FUTURE": RICK MOODY'S SUBURBAN APOCALYPSE

ABSTRACT: The paper analyses Rick Moody's fiction, both in relation to the American apocalyptic tradition and the tradition of suburban fiction, arguing that *The Ice Storm* (1994) and *Purple America* (1997), in conjoining the two, add new dimensions to both. However, with the two cities of Revelation as points of reference, the paper also traces some crucial differences between the novels regarding their apocalyptic outlook. *The Ice Storm* depicts a suburban Babylon that must be destroyed in order for a new era to begin. Investing its symbolic universe with the redemptive and ultimately also revelatory powers of catastrophe, the novel is apocalyptic in the traditional, even original, sense of the word. The suburb of *Purple America*, by contrast, comes across as a bleak version of the New Jerusalem, a place where the conflicts have ceased and where history seems to have come to an end. *Purple America*, the paper concludes, is essentially post-apocalyptic, not only in the sense that it is set after the catastrophe, but also in that it seems to drain the apocalyptic myth itself of meaning. In the later novel, the suburb also functions as a metonym for the nation as a whole, a nation that is post-productive as well as post-historical.

The American suburb dates back to the early decades of the nineteenth century (Jackson 13), when semi-rural residential areas were established to cater for new demands regarding housing, demands that would increase dramatically over the course of the century with intensified industrialisation and urbanisation. The immediate purpose of the suburbs was to offer the upper-middle classes a refuge from the hectic and allegedly also perilous energies of the rapidly growing cities, effectuating dissociation between the domestic and the commercial realms. However, the obvious emphasis on division notwithstanding, it can also persuasively be argued that the idea of suburbia largely rests on a *both/and* ideology: suburbia was to provide its residents with easy access to the city they had willfully removed themselves from; it was built up as a site of traditional, even timeless values while simultaneously providing its inhabitants with all the novelties modernity had to offer (indeed, the prerequisite for this semi-rural refuge was the technology that enabled its residents to commute); it catered for the independence of the family unit at the same time as it facilitated interaction between these units through proximity as well as homogeneity; and it created an entirely new topography in combining natural and urban traits in unforeseen ways.

A century later, however, the American suburb had become highly contested territory, not least in fiction. As Catherine Jurca has shown, novelists such as John Updike, Sinclair Lewis and Frederick Barthelme principally represent suburbia as a disenchanting utopia where white, middle-class and predominantly male protagonists cannot but feel victimised by the very lifestyle that singles them out as privileged (6). Subsequently, as the mass-production of houses and household goods made the American suburb accessible to a wider spectrum of the middle class and later also to the working class, new criticism was launched. The fictions of writers such as John Cheever, Jack Kerouac and J.D. Salinger, Benjamin Christopher Stroud demonstrates, abound in pejorative descriptions of the mass-produced suburbs threatening to turn their residents into "a soulless, malleable conformity for conformity's sake bred from the starkness of the landscape" (17).

Depicting the bleak, middle-class life of affluent American garden suburbs, Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994) and *Purple America* (1997) can certainly be said to extend the tradition of the novelists mentioned above. As Stroud aptly argues, however, suburban fiction must, perhaps more so than most other genres, reinvent itself in relation to its own inheritance, precisely "because of its burden of perceived mundanity—of the sense ... that there's nothing new to say about the suburbs" (13). As I will suggest, then, Moody's novels achieve such a renewal of the genre by relating it to the cosmic dimensions of apocalypse while at the same time breathing new life into the substantial and culturally essential body of American apocalyptic writing by bringing it to bear on middle-class American life.

The Ice Storm and *Purple America* certainly have a good deal in common. Both subject prosperous New England suburbs to irrevocable disintegration and both relate this demise to a greater cosmic scheme by placing the suburb within an elaborate apocalyptic framework. "Apocalyptic," I hasten to add, should not solely be associated with scenes of death and destruction, as the original meaning of the word is not catastrophe but revelation, the actual cataclysmic event being only one, albeit central, motif in a plot that balances chaos against order, darkness against light, and destruction against creation. Importantly, however, it is in their apocalyptic outlook that the two novels differ the most: they hinge on different stages of the apocalyptic narrative—before and after the catastrophe—and consequently also invest the suburb with divergent social and existential prospects. Pre-cataclysmic in its narrative focus, *The Ice Storm* primarily describes the period leading up to the disaster, whose onset is accompanied by escalating conflicts and portentous signs. In *Purple America*, by contrast, the catastrophe has already occurred, the conflicts ceased, and a stifling sense of stasis dominates the suburban territory at large. But the suburban settings of the two novels can also be understood through the well-known *geographies* of the apocalyptic tradition. In other words, if the reader enters different *timescapes* of the apocalyptic plot in the two novels, she also enters different *landscapes* of the same plot, in this case, the places before and after the cataclysmic event. The suburban setting in *The Ice Storm* can therefore be said to recall the depraved city of Babylon, which must be destroyed in order for a new horizon to

open up. Purple America, by contrast, sets up a suburban territory located beyond the end of history, which resembles, but also significantly revises, the eternal architecture of the New Jerusalem. From this it follows that Babylon, placed within history, is subject to change, whereas the New Jerusalem, located after the end of time, offers no way forwards. Analogously, Babylon is doomed, yet from the ruins hope about a new earth and a new heaven emerges, whereas the New Jerusalem has reached its ideal state and thus traveled beyond such expectations. One can escape from Babylon but the New Jerusalem is the final destination.

The plot of *The Ice Storm* centres around two families, the Hoods and the Williamses, who lead seemingly comfortable suburban lives in New Canaan, Connecticut, in the early 1970s. In the opening pages, the reader is introduced to what is described as “the most congenial and superficially calm of suburbs. In the wealthiest state in the Northeast. In the most affluent country on earth” (IS 3). From the beginning, however, it is clear that something is amiss. Thanksgiving has just passed but is already forgotten (IS 3), and an undefined but irrepressible anguish controls the speech, actions and thoughts of the characters. “Trust,” it is said of Benjamin Hood, “never overpowered him. [He] was full of dread. And anxiety” (IS 7). This general fretfulness takes increasingly destructive expressions: parents neglect their children and the word “adult” comes to equal “adultery” as virtually all of the spouses betray each other. But as Benjamin tries to explain his affair with Janey, wife and mother of the Williams family, to his wife Elena, he does so by referring to a more general process of moral decay, of which he is only a part: “Look around you, anyway. It’s the law of the land. People are unfaithful. The government is unfaithful. The world is” (IS 71). Wealthy, powerful, yet riven with deception and transgressions, New Canaan is indeed a middle-class, latter-day Babylon, and like Babylon, the Connecticut suburb reflects a larger, even global, moral deterioration.

And so the apocalyptic plot has its way with the sinners. When Benjamin Hood has ended up in the bed of the guest room of the neighbouring house awaiting a not-so romantic encounter with Janey, “[t]he wind gusted fiercely, wailing its dissonances, turning the corner around Janey’s house, around the guest room, passing into the valley below ... The weather report was bad. Rain, rain, and then turning sharply colder. It was coming down in sheets now and mixed with harder stuff” (IS 19). Begirding the centre of the transgressions, the howling wind seems to voice its rage at the sinners, and as the depravity worsens with a swinger party as its climax, so does the weather. “Surfaces contracted” (IS 32); “The sleet and snow turned the last light a sullen yellow. The sky looked awful, nauseating” (IS 50); “The mercury would retreat into its little bulb. The heavens would open” (IS 52). The weather report is constantly on in the background as a kind of stand-in apocalyptic narrator, with monotonous persistence predicting and commenting on the developments and making it clear beyond any doubt that the disaster is approaching and that there is nothing anyone can do to prevent it: one can only focus on saving oneself. The problem with the residents of suburban Babylon, however, is that they do not pay heed to the warnings and keep to their original plans,

worrying over every mundane thing but oblivious to the threat of real catastrophe. As Paul Hood laments, "no one believes in the weather anymore" (IS 135).

But *the ice storm* also seems to pave the way for a regeneration of some kind, rendering "the stuff of ... everyday life beautiful again—magic, dangerous, and new" (IS 210). Indeed, the name New Canaan is not entirely ironic, but is, as the plot unfolds, increasingly associated not only with economic but also divine privilege. As Wendy, the teenage daughter of Elena and Benjamin, heads towards the Williamses, she experiences a sense of chosenness that transcends the thin familial relations, imagining "that she was the last girl on earth, that God had selected her and New Canaan as the center of His attention" (IS 137). Wendy senses that the approaching disaster is somehow part of a cosmic drama in which she plays the role of daughter as if for the first time: protected, precious and irreplaceable.

The storm changes all dimensions of the landscape. Outside, "[t]he ice [builds] up on every surface" (IS 175), and inside, houses are flooded as the plumbing freezes and breaks. The catastrophic plot reaches its climax when the entire area is darkened by a tree falling on a power line, which also causes Mike Williams to be electrocuted. It is Benjamin who, by chance, finds his neighbours' boy's body and his first impulse is to run, but then "fate smiled" on him, "grace flickered in him" (IS 218) and instead of fleeing he embraces Mike, "caring for him in death as meticulously as he had disliked him in life" (IS 219), growing, in that moment, into himself as a father. In the act of carrying Mike, Benjamin realises "that this body, this abbreviated life, this disaster, was his" and that "he would exercise a parental control over this tragedy" (IS 220). The death of Mike even amounts to a revelation, unveiling perspectives of eternity as well as finality: "The revelation of death was that Mike Williams would be dead as long as Benjamin knelt by him. ... This was the miracle. Death was terribly durable. It was the sturdiest idea around" (IS 219).

As they gather outside the Williamses' house before the ambulance takes Mike's body to the morgue, it is "the last time when the Hoods and the Williamses would be this close, when their stories would be so easily told together" (IS 259), marking the end of the common suburban life of the two families and by necessity also of the narrative itself. Elena senses in this demise the faint possibility, if not of a new heaven and a new earth, at least of a different kind of existence. The moment therefore harbours all the weight and import of judgment day. She seeks forgiveness and realises that everything depends on this, but does not know how to utter the crucial words: "Elena knew that apology was the impossible paragraph, its words were like the secret names of God. ... Elena wanted to say all this, to say impossible, ancient words of confession and absolution. And she knew that if she didn't, she was condemned to watch the blunders of the past come around again for a revival, an encore presentation" (IS 259). To free oneself from the burden of history, the novel suggests, one must confess one's sins, mistakes and lapses, yet doing so is a terrifying thing, a letting go of the known territories of the past without the certitude of a life to come, leaving one

“transfixed ... by the spectacle of a lost future” (IS 260). This impasse, however, is broken by a revelation that puts the doubts to rest, at least momentarily:

And right then there was a sign in the sky. An actual sign in the sky. The conversation stopped and there was a sign in the sky and it knotted together everything in that twenty-four hours. Above the parking lot. A flaming figure four. And it wasn't only above the parking lot. They saw it all over the country, over the Unitarian Church of Stamford, over New Canaan High School, over the Port Chester train station and up and down the New Haven line, over emergency vehicles in Greenwich and Norwalk, over the little office where Wesley Myers was trying to write the next day's sermon, for the first Sunday in Advent. In halls devoted to public service, in private mansions and dilapidated apartments. The heavens declared: the flaming figure four.

They saw it from the Firebird. They did, and it stayed with them all that fall, that apotheosis. (IS 278-79)

The apocalyptic text, as we have seen, balances sinfulness with salvation, suppression and veiling with revelation and, most importantly, cataclysm with reconstruction; apocalyptic catastrophe is in this regard primarily a means of establishing entirely new existential premises. *The Ice Storm* finalises the destruction of a moral ground that has somehow anyway already eroded, and yet the celestial message dovetails with the four Sundays in Advent, suggesting that a second coming of Christ may in fact be in store. In this manner the novel places the catastrophic event within a complete eschatological scheme and can consequently be said to be apocalyptic in the traditional and even original sense of the word.

Purple America, by contrast, is pronouncedly post-apocalyptic and effectively drained of such transformative powers. Hex is a childless alcoholic in his mid-thirties with a speech impediment and a stillborn career in freelance publishing to his name. The novel spans 24 hours of Hex's life, during which he returns to the New England suburb where he spent most of his childhood together with his now-deceased father Allen, whose death was caused by a failed nuclear bomb test in the late 40s, and his mother Billie. It is not a happy return. The house, having largely been left unattended after Allen's death, is sadly dilapidated, and Billie is immobilised by a neurological disease. Deserted by her second husband Lou, who is simultaneously laid off from the local power plant, Billie persuades Hex to sign a contract that obliges him to take her life when the disease has progressed beyond a certain point.

When the story begins, the catastrophe is already in the narrative past, and yet, to the dweller of Moody's purple America, the end seems a perpetual state rather than a decisive, revelatory moment. Disconnected from the past as well as the future—indeed, from history itself—the suburban territory may therefore best be described as a gothic version of the New Jerusalem. More specifically, Moody's representation of the suburb in *Purple America* echoes

the New Jerusalem of Revelation in some basic aspects: its post-historic location, its exclusivity (of which homogeneity is a result), and the merging of opposites and absence of conflicts. At the end of time those judged worthy will be granted access to the timeless city of God while the sinners are effectively kept out by the surrounding high walls, not unlike a gated community: "there shall in no wise enter into it anything unclean, or he that maketh an abomination and a lie: but only they that are written in the Lamb's book of life" (21:27). The New Jerusalem also essentially lacks distinctions and demarcations. Death has been done away with (21:4) and no sun is needed as there is no night: the eternal day is lit by God's glory (21:23), which also explains the absence of temples. There is no need to stake out sacred ground as the entire area is controlled by divinity and as the "Lord God the Almighty, and the Lamb, are the temple thereof" (21:22). In this post-historic place, the spatial divisions that contributed to driving history forwards have collapsed into one: urban and rural environments, nature and culture, and heaven and earth all melt together to make up the perfect, timeless place of the New Jerusalem. In Steven Goldsmith's words, the city is the "appearance of ideal form" (5): "content without time" (44). Perfection, as it were, can only be reached through a pure aesthetic place situated outside of time's grasp, which also means that such a site is both static and utterly uniform. Further, the symbols from both nature and culture in the New Jerusalem, Lois Zamora suggests, "[pertain] to various important sets of beliefs about ideal times and spaces, promise and fulfilment, immanence and transcendence" (12), thus corresponding to a more general idea of utopian space manifested also in suburban aesthetics.

Several critics have seen parallels between apocalyptic patterns and those of liberal democracies, arguing that such teleological narratives described by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) are in fact modern versions of the apocalyptic plot. Fukuyama argues that liberal democracy, free from the radical inner tensions and contradictions that have characterised all earlier forms of government, constitutes the final point of humanity's ideological evolution. The system of liberal democracy is perfect; it cannot be improved, and thus history, in the Hegelian sense of the term, has reached its end. In Krishan Kumar's analysis, the modern apocalyptic imagination exemplified by Fukuyama is "a kind of millennial belief almost entirely emptied of the conflict and dynamism that generally belong to it. It is a millennial belief without a sense of the future. We have, it seems, at the end of the second millennium achieved the millennium, the hoped-for state of peace and plenty. But it brings no pleasure, and promises no happiness" (205).

Hex's suburban dystopia is characterised by a similar absence of contrasts and discord. Indeed, his greatest loss when arriving in New England seems to be that of difference itself: "he was seven when they moved here from the city, away from the predations of what used to be called simply Town—the ghettos, the crime, the immigrants, the other classes—when they moved here according to that *theory of paradise*, that *theory of the fifties*" (PA 18).¹ In the novel, however, the merging of opposites and the ensuing want of energy are most saliently

epitomised by the colour purple, which permeates the novel at various symbolic levels. The voice of the decorator responsible for the aesthetic strategies of the Raitliffe residence still seems to echo in the house, making the links between the colour purple and the dissolution of dividing lines explicit when it says, “[T]hey were working toward a union of opposites, the design team, in the matter of color harmonies” (PA 19), and “Mrs. Raitliffe expressed a very adventurous desire, a modern desire, to work with radiant colors. Especially colors in the purple family” (PA 25).

The symbolism of purple is linked to the sphere of the body as the colour of blood spilling into the texture of the skin: Hex is given a “shiner,” which is “swollen and purple” (PA 270) and which corresponds to the “plum-colored bruise of his personality” (PA 190).

But as the title suggests, the suburban condition is also associated with a more general American predicament, both through the obvious reference to how most states in a presidential election are purple politically—a melting together of Republican red and Democrat blue—and through the associations to the colour of a bleeding American flag. In a letter to Billie, Allen also conjoins national and bodily injury through the colour purple in his description of the sky after the atomic bomb test. He writes, “the whole sky the color of purple” and “the bruise in the sky which enveloped us” (PA 297).

The motif of nuclear disaster is more explicitly connected to apocalyptic discourse through references to Eisenhower’s famous address “Atoms for Peace” (1953). In *Purple America*, as the CEO of the nuclear power company fails to cover up a radioactive leak, he tries to make Lou take the blame. To achieve this, he spins a web of lies that he seeks to corroborate by quoting the line “[m]oving out of the dark chamber and into the light” (PA 47) from Eisenhower’s speech, in which Eisenhower argues that the task of the nation is to translate the dark language of atomic warfare into one of light and promise, focusing on the benefits of nuclear technology for mankind in general and Americans in particular:

Occasional pages of history do record the faces of the ‘Great Destroyers’, but the whole book of history reveals mankind’s never-ending quest for peace and mankind’s God-given capacity to build. ... It is with the book of history, and not with isolated pages, that the United States will ever wish to be identified. ... So my country’s purpose is to help us move out of the dark chamber of horrors into the light, to find a way by which the minds of men, the hopes of men, the souls of men everywhere, can move forward toward peace and happiness and well being. (4)

Eisenhower seeks to mask the threats of nuclear weapons by dressing them up in traditional apocalyptic garments, embedding the cataclysmic element in a national and cosmic narrative of hope, progress and regeneration. Ultimately, then, this is how a “theory of the fifties” gets turned into a “theory of paradise” (PA 18), where opposites have been

overcome, history has come to an end, and language has become delusive. That apocalyptic discourse is made part of this pattern of deception reflects the status of apocalypse in the novel as a whole: *Purple America* is post-apocalyptic, not only in the sense that it depicts the time after the catastrophe, but also in Teresa Heffernan's definition of the term, namely the time "after the faith in a radically new world" (6): after the faith in revelation, unveiling, and indeed, after the belief in the apocalyptic myth itself.

In Moody's purple America, destiny is deplorably manifest: all is conquered, the future is in the past, and yet the end as revelatory moment somehow fails to arrive. Lou describes himself as being "between situations" (PA 45), "working at peak capacity *just to stay where he is*" (PA 154), just as Hex's speech impediment leaves him "stalled between consonants" (PA 134). Symptomatically, several characters in the novel harbour the secret fear of unnoticeably passing the threshold to death. Billie's anxieties about stopping breathing before her thinking goes are matched by Lou's obsession with checking his own pulse, to make sure that he has not already lived past his own death. The great irony of these fears is, of course, that it is precisely such a death-in-life existence that has laid siege to the house in Flagler Drive.

The future seeming to be already spent, Moody's characters try to re-enter time by retracing their steps back to their origins. Lou imagines the landscape "as it was before, before weekenders corrupted the landscape hereabouts, back when there was nothing in the neighbourhood but thorns and Congregationalists" (PA 162). Also, Hex turns to primal scenes in his mind, to a time when the world seemed new and full of potential, but he invariably finds that the beginning is overwritten by the end. In the opening scene of the novel, the dynamics of beginnings and endings take shockingly intimate proportions. Here Billie's disabled body is both a homeland and the primal scene that Hex seeks to recover as he gently but awkwardly bathes her: "Whosoever knows the folds and complexities of his own mother's body, *he shall never die*. Whosoever knows the latitudes of his mother's body, whosoever has taken her into his arms and immersed her baptismally in the first-floor tub ... *he shall never die*" (PA 3-7). Exploring the primal "geography" of life itself, Hex soaps "underneath her breast where he was once fed" (3); "looks at his pacific mom's face in the water and knows ... the face he had before he was born" (4); and "checks the dainty hairless passage into her vulva one more time, because he can't resist the opportunity here for *knowledge*" (PA 5), hoping that a return to the pre-catastrophic, original site will save him from the death of the present. However, mother and son are trapped in a cycle of belatedness. The beginning can only be known through the grimness of the ending, insofar as Billie's disability warrants Hex's caretaking, and the apocalyptic narrative becomes a framing device that is ultimately imprisoning in the same way that Billie's disease is imprisoning: "The relentless predictability of disabling traumas was beyond words, stretched out around her, fore and aft, hemmed her in" (PA 13-14). The course of Billie's all-consuming, progressive disease can neither be reversed nor undone, and no time or place is exempt from it. The destiny of Billie's body is manifest, conclusive, like the apocalyptic plot itself.

By the same token, Lou's leaving the suburban sphere is an attempt to re-connect with a sense of the original America via a road that he imagines leads right into the very cradle of American civilisation:

The Boston Post Road, the oldest road in the country, relic of the colonies, stretching from New York up to Boston, and then beyond, winding through the state of Maine, along that rocky coast and through the North Woods, through the logging country, before vanishing into the Canadian hinterlands. The Boston Post Road, where the warring private postal systems—which antedated the federal monopoly—hotfooted through the Indian turf, delivering to the Pilgrims. (PA 39)

The Edenic scene evoked here tells the story of a germinating American infrastructure and corporate system, but also, implicitly, the beginning of Native American annihilation. The beginning is consequently the beginning of the end, and the path into primal landscapes a movement backwards and forwards at the same time. For the act of moving towards the past simultaneously actualises a movement in the opposite direction, annihilating the distinction between retrospect and prospect. The intermingling of origins and ends that the road enacts is further emphasised by Billie's dismissal of it as a "road of merciless superficiality, where consumers come to get fleeced, and transients hurtle past" (PA 70). If we regard the road as a spatial manifestation of history, it is a history that does not offer a different horizon, but simply a prelude to the bleakness of the end.

When Hex returns to the suburb and learns the disconcerting news about Lou's departure, he realises that he is dangerously close to being drawn into suburban life again, aware that his mother now only has him to depend on. He clings to "an ordered linearity of events" (PA 16) to somehow make sense of the present and the occurrences leading up to it, "an orderly sequence of events in which betrayal is followed by recognition, in which Hex Raitliffe's mother tells him that *her husband has left ...* in which past is ineluctably followed by present, *this sequence necessarily unravels at this spot*" (PA 16-17). "Think of it in sequence" (PA 17), he tells himself as he walks through the house turning on lights, feeling "the past gathering around him" (PA 18). Hex's understanding of history, however, is confined to his suburban existence, and even more narrowly limited to a tour of the house that has remained fixed since the "original day" (PA 21). Almost compulsorily repeated over the years, the tour is formalised by the family into what may best be described as a historical trail, a spatial history, with few or no possibilities for digressions or transgressions.

At this very point in time and space, then, "a long story begins" (PA 17), but as the story stretches into the past, the point that constitutes the beginning is also the end of the story. Significantly, the grown-up Hex imagines himself accompanied by the people who took the "original tour": himself as a child, his mother Billie as a young woman, and the interior decorator Mavis Ellsworth, the latter two taking on the roles of museum guides. And like a

museum, the house organises objects and events into a strict chronological order. If the foyer is the starting point of the tour, the portraits of Pilgrims on its walls signify the origins of the nation: "Yes, the portraits were the point of origin on that tour, and his mother as she led, as she held his hand, was beautiful and blond and her lips were painted brightly, this was *before the cane*, the long period of the cane" (PA 18-19). The young Billie cannot be separated from the woman she later becomes, and in a sense, the handicapped Billie also struggles along on the tour. And as the portraits have no connection whatsoever to the inhabitants of the house (who do not stem from New England at all), but merely correspond to a received notion of "American beginnings," they bring the onlooker even further from what would qualify as roots: "Lou Sloane seemed to feel confused, as Hex did himself, by the fact that these people were not actual relatives" (PA 19). Significantly, the Puritan portraits in the foyer are later replaced by a mirror, which further suggests that history merely offers a foil to the present calamities, relentlessly casting back the image that the viewer had sought relief from. This is the national-historical parallel to Billie's all-consuming, all-pervasive disease: its apocalyptic course can neither be reversed nor undone, and there is no time or place exempt from it. History is unable to make Americans feel at home in the present, the novel ultimately suggests, because it does not hold up a clarifying picture, which would require difference, but is little more than a retrospective reproduction of the present.

Relating middle-class American life to the apocalyptic myth, Moody's novels undoubtedly add a new dimension to suburban fiction as well as to the American apocalyptic tradition. But, as should be clear by now, the two novels also exemplify two widely different attitudes to the apocalyptic myth. In *The Ice Storm*, apocalypse is above all a means of breaking out of the suburban template, of reinventing family relations and finding ways of rethinking oneself as father, mother, son or daughter. Investing its symbolic universe with the redemptive and ultimately also revelatory powers of catastrophe, *The Ice Storm* can therefore be said to be apocalyptic in the original sense of the word. In *Purple America*, the crisis played out within apocalyptic suburbia has broader social and geographical implications, because the territory primarily functions as a metonym for the nation as a whole, a nation that is not only post-productive but also essentially post-historical. Above all, *Purple America* questions and even subverts the apocalyptic myth itself, showing not only how American notions of progress and purpose are intertwined with apocalyptic teleology, but also how the apocalyptic plot, with its shrill overtones of predestination, ultimately turns on itself. When Christopher Columbus first set eyes on the Americas he allegedly quoted Revelation's description of the New Jerusalem as "a new heaven and a new earth," an idea he later elaborated on when writing to his patrons: "For I believe that the earthly paradise lies here, which no one can enter except God's leave" (224). The greatest problem with the American New Jerusalem that Moody outlines, however, is not the terms and conditions of entry but rather the lack of visible passages out.

NOTES:

¹All italics in quotations from *Purple America* are in the original.

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