

Reconfiguring Academic Disciplines: The Emergence of American Studies

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Few recent books have generated as much discussion as Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Reviewers have debated its evocation of "German exceptionalism," and historians have discussed the persuasiveness of the evidence it offers as well as the cogency of its explanatory framework. But one may also wish to ask about the role the book is playing in the United States today: what cultural work is it performing at a moment in which the Holocaust seems itself an ever-larger presence on the American scene? This seems to me an absorbing, indeed major, question. But I do not want to address it here. Rather, I wish to ask "where should such a question be studied within the academy?"

By "cultural work" I refer to the ways in which a book or other kind of "text"—a movie, a Supreme Court decision, an ad, an anthology, an international treaty, a material object—helps construct the frameworks, fashion the metaphors, create the very language by which people comprehend their experiences and think about their world. The question of the cultural work *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is performing today is not, then, an historical issue, strictly speaking; individual historians might venture answers, but most would maintain that it is rather more a matter for imaginative speculation than for the assessment of facts, logic, and alternative explanations—the historian's stock in trade. While the book is by any definition a "text," it remains unlikely grist even for the varied mills of English studies. A cultural anthropologist might take the issues on, but those who study the United States are rare, and courses rarer.

Are we then to conclude that this is a matter not for the academy but for that fabled hero, the Public Intellectual, or for more mundane Sunday morning TV

pundits? That conclusion sells the academy short. More important, perhaps, it ignores the fact that the question of a text's cultural work is not one restricted to a few exceptional volumes like Goldhagen's. On the contrary, the issue arises with any human production—the movie *Jurassic Park*, for example, or the “Contract With America”—that mobilizes creative imagery and artful details that resonate with force in the society. Nor do such issues emerge only with respect to contemporary works. The question of where and how one studies the cultural work of texts comes up as well with Herman Melville's “Benito Cereno,” the Dred Scott decision, *A Sociology for the South*, or a Virginia sampler. So the question remains: where—and how—do we study not so much the texts themselves as what I have been calling the “cultural work” they perform? Where, moreover, do we ask how and why certain texts or objects come into existence in the particular historical landscapes of the United States?

The brief answer, I think, is in American studies.

My longer answer to these questions, to the problem of the academic divisions of knowledge, derives from what may be a distinctive experience of student capacities in graduate and advanced undergraduate courses, especially in American studies and in English, as well as in reviewing American studies programs. What is very striking to me are the differences among even—or perhaps particularly—stronger students in English, history, and American studies. Whether or not they do it well, English students seem drawn inexorably to close reading formats, even when these are inappropriate to an assignment. Most have seemed to me deaf to entreaties, demands, or even lessons in how to “contextualize” through anything but the vaguest references to “historical background.” On the other hand, most history students seem to think it strange, at best, to focus on the textualization of concepts, on the specific linguistic constructions that give form to ideas, much less on the ways in which language and form can come implicitly to contradict, or at least call into question, the very arguments being made. They seem used to more generalized discussions of a writer's ideas, or to questions of how well or badly a scholar has marshaled evidence and worked out the logic of an argument. I am, to be sure, making large generalizations, and I would not try to insist upon them too unequivocally. But they do suggest that after all is said and done, literary and historical study continue, adequately or not, to maintain what were their earlier methodological emphases.

Such methods are, of course, quite relevant to the varied forms of study that have come to dominate American studies as it is practiced in the United States. But such traditional approaches, and the subject matters they effectively underwrite, simply do not begin to cover what is now being done in American studies. It was once the case that American studies amounted to a loose amalgam of history, literature and art (HLA, to use the Harvard formulation). No more. In fact, I think, the return to more traditional methods and subjects now often urged upon English and history departments¹ needs to be understood as a response to newer forms of academic work pushing up between and within these older disciplines.

I believe we are in the midst of a fundamental alteration in the academic division of what are sometimes termed the “human sciences.”

How we divide academic knowledge is not altogether arbitrary, though it is deeply inflected by historical accidents. There is no necessary logic to the structure of English departments, for example, most of which are internally divided between literature and writing (and often further divided between “creative” and “remedial” writing), and many of which contain, or once did, areas like speech, film, and theater. Nor are these departmental divisions fixed, though the institutional structures in which they are embedded do persist, indeed tend to resist change. Still, as new ways of thinking about the world emerge, new disciplines like sociology and anthropology arise. Often such new areas of study develop within existing departments, from which, if they grow and flourish, they then separate as independent entities. But the place of such new programs in the academic system, their very right to exist, can long remain at contest. At my own institution, for example, anthropology emerged as a small independent department just three or four years ago. This is not surprising since much of the academy is conservative by design and exclusive in practice. Still, one cannot usefully pursue an inquisitional approach to new knowledge: one cannot exclude by fiat what intellectuals persist in asking about and what students find compelling.

Both intellectuals and students persistently ask about movies, *Jurassic Park* for instance. In a broadly-constituted English department, one might approach it as yet one more “text,” whose plot, characters, themes, and aesthetic tactics can fruitfully be analyzed in more or less traditional ways. But what if one wishes then to historicize this “text,” addressing the conflict between its condemnation of commodifying dinosaurs and its real-life existence as one of the most successful commodifications of dinosaurs or, indeed, anything else in human history? Again, in light of the movie’s thematic critique of technology applied to profit, how does one best study the origins, development, and use of the advanced technologies upon which the movie is so dependent? How does one explain the film’s great audience appeal in the particular, post-Gulf War moment of its distribution and consumption; its role in salvaging the economic fortunes of the Matsushita Electric Industrial Corporation; or its function in the spreading internationalization of cultural production? Doesn’t the pursuit of these historical, economic, marketing, even technological issues draw one away from any traditional discipline—even one as flexibly constituted as English—and into other, distinctly interdisciplinary fields, like film studies or, more often, American studies?

I point toward American studies in part because the annual convention of the American Studies Association and its journal, *American Quarterly*, have become venues of choice in the United States for many of those active in cultural studies and related areas concerned with mass culture, the media and its institutions, the politics of communications, academic conventions and discourses, and the like. At the same time, though the process has been less apparent, distinctive theoretic-

cal paradigms as well as objects of study have emerged within American studies. To compare the reading lists of introductory graduate courses in English, history, and American studies is to observe three very distinct domains, within which practitioners are asking rather different, if related, questions. Such a course in American studies will include work by people located in English and history, as well as in sociology, anthropology, political science, art, and music departments. But what is more striking are the number of works that are very *unlikely* to be central to either introductory graduate history or English courses, books like—to cite just two from 1996—Richard Ohmann’s *Selling Culture* and Rob Kroes’ *If You’ve Seen One, You’ve Seen the Mall*.² Cixous, Culler, de Man, Derrida, Fish, Gilbert, Gubar, Hartman, Spillers, Spivak continue to constitute meat and potatoes in literary criticism; Williams, Trachtenberg, Radway, Lowe, Lipsitz, Hall, Denning, Carby, Anzaldúa in American studies.

Such core texts in American studies generally embody a number of distinctive methodological principles. One is embodied in Fredric Jameson’s injunction “always historicize,” by which is generally meant focus less on the formal qualities and structures of a text or a material object and more on why it emerges as it does in its particular moment, how the forms of its production, distribution, and consumption materialize—what forces, social, economic, aesthetic, technological, have come together to produce this thing in this place at this time? The emphasis on historicizing texts extends to books in the field, including its “classics,” works like Perry Miller’s *Errand Into the Wilderness* or Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, for example. These can be explored not only for their arguments but to understand why they emerged at a particular historical juncture and what were the roles they played in constructing an older, essentially cold war paradigm of American studies.³ Just as scholars wish to understand the origins and the work of such texts, they likewise seek to grasp the functions of their own intellectual labor within the changing shape of American institutions, like the culture industries and the university. In this respect, the central concerns of American studies promote a kind of intense self-scrutiny among its practitioners, an effort to situate one’s own practice and assumptions within American institutional life.

A second principle has to do with the fundamental importance of textuality, not just of the written sort but, as I have suggested, in the variety of forms people construct for the many purposes to which we devote ourselves. Textual form as such is of less concern here than the ways in which such forms express various relations of power, and also how texts themselves, like all cultural phenomena, shape and are shaped by the material conditions of everyday life. Moreover, like their colleagues in literary study, Americanists are interested in how language and form often reveal what an argument tends, indeed wishes, to veil, or how imagery and details reinforce or contradict a writer’s ideas. An Americanist teaching certain founding documents, like Tom Paine’s “Common Sense” or Alexander Hamilton’s “Federalist No. 6” might call attention to the differing ways both employ gendered imagery to suggest what constitutes “manly” forms of behavior

in the distinctive moments of these texts' creation.⁴ One might point to how the language of the final sentence of Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* opens a critique of the book's main argument about the centrality of American "high" culture to the sustenance of humane values.⁵ Or to Priscilla Wald's intense scrutiny of the revisions of the Declaration of Independence or the terms used in the majority opinion of the *Dred Scott* case.⁶ Similarly, Amy Kaplan roots a brilliant critique of how earlier forms of American studies had ignored American imperialism in her observation of how Perry Miller's brief African experience returns obsessively to Miller's account of the origins of his project to study America's "Errand into the Wilderness."⁷

In thus separating textuality from what is sometimes called "context,"⁸ I run the risk of reinscribing the old literature/ history dichotomy within the picture of American studies I am constructing. That division, as Donald Pease has pointed out, underwrote a more fundamental political separation of culture from politics in the forms of American studies that emerged after World War II.⁹ It is important, therefore, to underline the ways in which current versions of American studies insist upon the political functions of textual forms, or, in Pease's words, "on literature as an agency within the political world."¹⁰ Moreover, texts need to be seen as constituting but one element of what Lisa Lowe has described as "discourse":

I do not intend to limit *discourse* to only these particular textual forms; by *discourse*, I intend a rather extended meaning—a network that includes not only texts and cultural documents, but social practices, formal and informal laws, policies of inclusion and exclusion, and institutional forms of organization, for example, all of which constitute and regulate knowledge about the object of that discourse, Asian America.¹¹

I am not persuaded that "discourse" is an altogether useful term here, since it would seem to encompass the results of deploying not only the close reading skills of literary critics, but also the practices of accumulating, classifying, evaluating, and interpreting empirical data central to the disciplines of the "human sciences," economics, and ethnography. It is no surprise, moreover, that some Americanists tend to emphasize the *reading* of cultural texts over the processes of tracking the economic or political work texts perform or the concentration of material factors that shape particular cultural moments and material objects. Indeed, current American studies practice can sometimes be criticized for restricting itself to the close and often clever readings of unusual "texts"—contracts, ads, legislation, organizational forms—detached from the worlds in which they perform their work.¹²

Third, American studies has increasingly become comparative and global in outlook,¹³ often focusing on cultural, social, and geographic "borderlands,"¹⁴

within which new multicultural personal and group identities are being constituted. Focusing, too, on the multiple connections between ethnicity and race as domestic social constructions and overseas communities from which Americans derive, and to which they display, degrees of affiliation. It is almost unnecessary to say that certain key categories of experience and analysis, particularly race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability, have become central to American studies discourse, as they have to most of the humanities and humane social sciences in the American academy, though practitioners have been considerably less successful in focusing on “class” in the context of the United States than on other of these conceptions. Scholars have also come to speak of a “post-national” American studies,¹⁵ which may sound like a contradiction in terms, but which actually reflects one way in which the very globalization of American culture seems to require an increased localization of its study. Moving away from earlier methods—like the analysis of myths and symbols—which emphasized what was “exceptional” in American culture, today’s scholars increasingly apply comparative tactics that illuminate what is continuous in the experience of Americans and of other people, what is hybrid, as well as what is uniquely American. In particular, American studies practitioners are interested in how aspects of American culture and politics, like ads, slogans, political ideas, organizational strategies are appropriated in different times and places by different people for differing ends—how, for example, Indonesian students adapt discussions of American elections to examine their own national politics, or, as Rob Kroes has shown, how Europeans deploy elements of American advertising toward somewhat different cultural goals.

A fourth principle, perhaps a bit less widely shared, has to do with the usefulness of Antonio Gramsci’s ideas about “hegemony.”¹⁶ These provide what many find a useful framework for understanding how particular groups gain authority over political and cultural life in a state, how they respond to challenges from subordinated groups, how such subordinated groups themselves generate cultural and social authority, indeed how power is always contested, shifting, Protean.¹⁷ Such ideas have been particularly influential in charting the dynamic interplay of race, gender, class, and other categories of identity in so multicultural a nation as the United States. Earlier metaphors of class or group combat—“’Tis the final conflict,/Let each stand in his place”—were perhaps drawn from then prevailing ideas of warfare: armies confronting one another across relatively stable lines of battle, critic-soldiers entrenched in intellectual strongholds, exchanging learned shells across a front, and the like. The concept of *hegemony* reflects something of the character of guerilla warfare, wherein the lines of combat, the distribution of power, even what precisely constitutes power continually shift, and to freeze into an altogether defined location is to court irrelevance, if not disaster.

Finally, a fifth point, American studies is part of the wave of interdisciplinary programs that, particularly beginning in the late 1960s, gained a certain purchase

in the American academy. It shares with history, as I have said, that focus upon “context,” with English the devotion to the text, whatever it might be, with cultural anthropology a functional way of reading texts and objects. American studies, however, consciously seeks the areas of intersection between the objects of study of the various disciplines upon which it draws—between a literary text, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, say, or “Benito Cereno,” contemporary ideas about color and miscogeneration, historical and legal debates informing policy and legislation like the *Fugitive Slave Act*, questions of citizenship and race embedded in American constitutional jurisprudence and manifest in a Supreme Court decision like that in *Dred Scott*, the doctrines of evangelical Christianity, including the tensions between the perfectionist ideology of abolitionist leaders like William Lloyd Garrison and the more meliorative views of men like Lyman Beecher, changing technologies of publishing and distribution (and travel) in the 1840s and 1850s, the iconography of fugitive slave posters, and the economics of the slave trade and industrial capitalism, to name some of the most obvious.

Interdisciplinarity is a source of the strength of American studies. But looked at uncritically, as a kind of mantra, the concept of “interdisciplinarity” presents something of a problem. For it can be seen as sustaining in normative roles the disciplinary arrangements of knowledge that prevail in most universities today. But disciplinary knowledges are not grounded in nature. Rather, they are in significant measure ways of mapping authority and power over resources within the greater education industry. They are not only that, to be sure, but to assume their permanence or their epistemological innocence seems to me a mistake both at the level of institutional politics and, as I have been trying to suggest, in theoretical and methodological ways as well. It may well be that the newer interdisciplinary programs as well as some older ones—American studies, ethnic studies, women’s studies, lesbian and gay studies, the variety of area studies, cognitive science, political economy—will thrive only by contesting for resources and legitimacy with existing, monodisciplinary academic programs.¹⁸ One might, in fact, argue that interdisciplinary paradigms are to the traditional disciplines as queer paradigms are to the hegemony of heterosexual norms.

However that may be, these five characteristics suggest how distinct American studies has become from history, English, art history, or anthropology—or, for that matter, from the other disciplines that constitute the older departmental structure of American colleges and universities. My methodological emphases are not the whole story, to be sure, especially because the current dynamics of American studies have brought sharply into view the relationships between certain interdisciplinary academic programs and communities variously marginalized in American society. Turning away from the fundamentally nationalist project that preoccupied Americanists in the post-World War II period, and learning from its peers in women’s studies and in ethnic minority studies programs, American studies has increasingly sought to find—or, more properly, to construct—grounds upon which to connect its academic work with the needs

to sustain humane values in an era distinguished by rising greed, chauvinism, and indifference. In the title of the 1997 American Studies Association convention, the issue has become “Going Public: Defining Public Culture(s) in the Americas.”

That forms of cultural study have in the United States taken root within American studies is not simply an historical accident, though one could argue that it is coincidental. When cultural studies began to develop, it needed either, like women’s studies, to create an academic home, or to find one within which it might flourish. Not having any ready-made constituency, and given the cutbacks that began to wrack higher education in the 1970s, the separatist route seemed chimerical. Popular culture venues were too narrow and fragmented. History departments were, on the whole, unreceptive, and while English as a national field was more open, fundamental stresses remained at the level of many departments, within which the very concept of historicizing led, for the most part, a shadowy existence and within which post-structuralist theory, with its philosophical implications and cachet, came to define the major departure from the close-reading aesthetics of the New Criticism. American studies, however, seemed a reasonable abode: it had from its origins focused on cultural issues, it had outgrown the paradigms prevailing through the 1960s and was searching for new ones, it shared an interdisciplinary character, and there were significant connections between some of its most energetic practitioners and the British cultural studies school of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and others.

There was, of course, a rudimentary contradiction: as Michael Denning has pointed out, the fundamental identity question traditionally asked by American studies—“what is American?”—is far narrower and perhaps less interesting than the questions asked by cultural studies; the identity question seems to lead inevitably toward what is unique, exceptional, whereas “the central questions [of cultural studies]—‘what is culture?’, ‘what are its forms and how is it related to material production?’—formed a more productive theoretical agenda.”¹⁹ Yet, ironically perhaps, as the power of American-based capitalism has spread worldwide, as processes of globalization have brought elements of American culture to almost every corner of the world, and as components from many other cultures have come into and altered America—as, in short, the United States itself becomes more hybrid and international,²⁰ the appropriateness of American studies as a home for the new intellectual work rooted in cultural studies becomes more logical.

As the advent of cultural studies has altered American studies, the reverse has been true as well. It would be a mistake to think about what I am describing as a popular culture glorification of *General Hospital*, Ice-T and *I, Robot*. The new American studies encompasses a far wider set of “texts” and asks questions about them that students and colleagues in disciplines outside the older HLA framework find compelling. But it also asks similar questions of “high” cultural texts as well.

This is an area of contemporary American studies work often misunderstood. Robert Berkhofer, for example, names a “recent trend” in theory “dehierarchization”:

Such a trend is most evident in the erosion, even dissolution, of the scholarly and aesthetic boundaries dividing elite from popular cultures. Although it may be difficult to pinpoint when the Beatles became as legitimate to study as Beethoven, or *The Virginian* as *Moby-Dick*, or everyday objects as high art ones, American Studies was in its classic period already a leader in the trend.²¹

Berkhofer’s formulation can easily lead to the charge that American studies as an intellectual practice reduces, indeed degrades, traditional forms of high culture, valuing equally not just the Beatles and Beethoven but “What’s Love Got To Do With It?” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” But the question of what is a legitimate *object of study* in no necessary or predictable way impinges upon how, in terms of aesthetics or continuing interest, one might *evaluate* creative productions. To be sure, listening closely to “Easy Livin’” or “A Little Help From My Friends” might increase one’s valuation of such works—then again, it might not. What *is* at issue is Lionel Trilling’s proposition that one best—or perhaps exclusively—comes to comprehend a culture by reading its “monuments of unaging intellect.”²² No doubt, one can come to understand some aspects of a culture in that way . . . and others not at all, as is so forcefully illustrated by what Trilling and his contemporaries chose *not* to write about (e.g., the meanings of slavery and racism for American culture and letters), or by the very titles *Virgin Land* and *Errand Into the Wilderness*, and *The Vital Center*.

What I am proposing here is finally not a rhetorical case for the charms of American studies, though I’d be willing to pursue that task. I am suggesting, rather, the inevitability of a significant realignment in how colleges and universities structure the humanities and humane social sciences. But, to apply my first principle, “Always Historicize,” why now and why in these forms? American studies has been around in its academic model for half a century, much longer in other versions. Why has a definitively separate identity begun to emerge only in the 1990s? A number of factors are, I think, in play, not all of which will comfort those of us active in American studies. First, the Right is probably right in pointing to something of a breakdown in the traditional disciplines: as new constituencies gained access to the university in the 1960s they raised questions about curricula parallel to those being asked in political arenas, like “where are the blacks?” and “where are the women?” Such canon questions through the 1970s and 1980s became particularly contentious, especially because demands for “new” areas of study conflicted in some degree with existing disciplinary structures in departments like English (consider the name, just for starters) and to a lesser extent,

perhaps in history. If one moved to fund a specialist in American Indian literatures (and necessarily cultures, perhaps religions) or in women's history, did that mean *not* replacing the resident Miltonist or the retiring Medievalist? Work in American areas was easier to change: "American" was the new boy/girl on the block, had only recently achieved a degree of legitimacy (American literature was regarded with some scorn even when I was in graduate school in the 1950s), and hadn't so hardened into academic categories. Even so, newer constituencies have often felt the response of traditional disciplines to their concerns to be inadequate, and thus have moved to establish a variety of forms of ethnic and women's studies or have seen American studies as a potential umbrella under which particular areas of work might flourish. Moreover, as post-structuralist theory undermined older forms of literary and art history formalisms, American studies, with its strongly historicizing tendencies and openness to socially-inflected categories of analysis, like race and gender, took on a certain utility.

The end of the cold war has also, paradoxically, liberated American studies from at least some of the constraints under which it had operated. As an *academic* discipline, American studies came into being in the post-World War II era²³ as, in part, an expression of American nationalist objectives. For some, American studies offered an academic framework to carry out the kind of left-liberal program associated with the wartime Office of Strategic Services and significant tendencies in the early CIA—anti-communist, to be sure, but also anti-fascist and promotional of democratic, liberal values associated with the kind of coalition FDR had assembled.²⁴ For others, American studies offered a form of work, based in social and cultural analyses, distinct from the conservatively-rooted, formalist approaches to texts characteristic of the New Criticism.²⁵ In the context of the cold war, American studies could thus be seen as constituting—and in my view was—something of an oppositional discipline, non-marxist, of course, yet providing a critical (some have said "anti-American") approach to the study of American social and cultural institutions. The end of the cold war has presented some paradoxes: support for American studies by the federal government and by major foundations has all but evaporated, but the discipline has spread. It no longer needs to be burdened with the fairly explicit nationalist agenda of the cold war years (though that is only a half truth). At the same time, it has been invigorated by significant elements of marxist thought (and marxist thinkers), now detached from the previously threatening specter of Soviet—that is, "foreign"—power and ideology. It may be the case that, once again, American studies is playing the role described by Michael Denning as "a substitute for a developed marxist culture."²⁶ Or it may be that it is one of the few games in town able to look consistently at and think freshly about the ugly contradictions in and the power and attractiveness of American social and cultural life. One thinks of Claude McKay's poem "America":

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,

Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!

Beyond that, the traditional functions of the academic enterprise have, as Bill Readings argued,²⁷ fundamentally eroded. Instead of transmitting a national culture, an enterprise to which departments like history and English were central, universities have come to enshrine “excellence,” an empty signifier, as Readings points out, now usually filled with the ideology of the marketplace. As the traditional humanistic disciplines themselves are thus marginalized within the academy, loyalty to them erodes and therefore their ability to maintain discipline, as it were, even among practitioners. In fact, as universities have promoted forms of consumer culture among students, students have turned to areas of study that offer them that *sine quo non* of capitalist consumption habits, variety . . . as well as flexibility—qualities they tell us they see in majors like American studies. More sinister, perhaps, for some administrators looking to reduce expenditures in now—“nonessential” fields, American studies and other interdisciplinary areas offer opportunities for consolidation of resources: you can bring together forms of ethnic studies, literature, history, and the like under a single, presumably cheaper, roof. Moreover, as role differentiation among higher education institutions hardens, most universities feel little pressure to imitate those bastions of the traditional liberal arts, like the Ivy League universities, and sustain the older disciplines like English or history. In short, a gradual decrease in the centrality of conventional disciplines has been accompanied by an increase in the academic fungibility of American studies.

And not just “academic”: I would not underestimate how cultural capital accumulated in American studies has from its beginnings been translatable into other goods and services, particularly overseas travel. To be sure, American studies has no corner on this particular market, but since overseas programs use the rubric “American Studies” to cover a variety of academic practices, it has been possible for domestic Americanists to fit into overseas assignments sometimes quite tangential to their particular specializations. Thus the advent of literary Americanists in overseas politics classrooms. In any event, the benefits of associating oneself with American studies as a discipline have increased measurably in the scales of what counts in the academy.

In many colleges and universities, and in some secondary schools, I think a result of these changes will be newly independent American studies programs. The specific constitution of these will differ from one institution to another. In some, too, their names may be “cultural studies,” “communications and society,” “media theory,” or even “America in the World.” Whatever the precise rubric, such programs or departments will not only focus on social, political, and cultural issues involving the United States as such, but will approach that content in the often eclectic but also distinctive methodologies that, I am arguing, distinguish American studies.

So far, I have written primarily about American studies as I see it being practiced *within* the United States. But American studies—or at least the name—has also been spreading overseas, even as American-based financial support for such work has declined, as U.S. government libraries and centers have closed, and as private foundations have shifted funding priorities. An overseas presence has long been important to the domestic prestige of American studies; the two, while separable, seem to echo back images of value. In this regard, domestic and overseas American studies programs represent not just intellectual but institutional components of each other.

Outside the United States, American studies often functionally constitutes one among a number of area studies programs. Though area studies conferences originating within the United States have seldom included American studies, overseas, Americanists usually participate in such meetings. To add to the distinction, disciplines in most universities outside the United States exercise greater academic hegemony than those within the United States. At least in the United States students do not enroll in rigidly delimited “faculties” from which one needs everything but a visa to exit. But in many places, American studies “belongs” to one or another largely self-contained discipline, like history or English, and these are heavily the fields within which American studies students actually labor. Thus work in American Studies is less likely to take interdisciplinary form or by itself to challenge existing structures of knowledge. In many areas one remains not an Americanist but a historian or an economist who happens to study the United States. How stable such academic structures will be remains unclear. On the one hand, the title “American Studies” seems to be a significant asset, though what is done under its head may appear rather like traditional American history, American-style empirical social science, or English (American mode) as a second language.

At the same time, however, students *learn* a great deal of what they believe—or think they know—about the United States from the media, from popular culture, and from related sources. My own experience suggests that a certain tension can thereby arise between what is studied and what is experienced of things American. Such conflicts may lead in time to more academic efforts to adopt the emphasis upon analyzing culture—its production, distribution, and reception—so fruitfully pursued today in many American studies programs in the United States. For such work offers opportunities to develop students’ analytic abilities in relation to cultural productions—fiction, movies, ads, magazines—which are already of interest to them, and which are, moreover, one of the primary ways in which they actually encounter American power in their own space.

In this connection, Melani Budianta’s “Interroads” comments in early 1997 on the University of Indonesia’s American studies program may project one future for American studies overseas. The program in Jakarta begins with two courses designed to establish a “common ground for discussion” and to “develop skill in interdisciplinary analysis.” The first course, on “Contemporary American Society,” looks closely at the ways in which American institutions and social

issues actually operate, focusing on topics like race, ethnicity, family, poverty, the welfare state, and the press, and helping students begin to “understand the internal mechanisms of the US as a nation state.” The second introductory course provides students with ways to look at the field of American studies itself, both historically and currently. Such courses, Budianta contends, are, on the one hand, shaped by the particular “cultural and political” conditions of Indonesian life, and, on the other, by the need for Indonesian students to understand concretely how American culture and politics affect Indonesian realities. The program carries forms of cultural study into its more advanced work: one of three second-level courses is called “American Texts,” about which Budianta writes:

This . . . course studies how to use various kind of texts as material for cultural analysis. The class also discusses why certain texts become significant . . . [at] a certain historical and cultural juncture.²⁸

The other second-level courses are, traditionally, a survey of American history, and, atypically, an anthropological approach to American values. It seems to me that such a program is, on the one hand, responsive to the distinctive conditions of Indonesian society and politics, and, on the other, to the new directions in American studies in the United States that I have been trying to sketch. This is one meaning of the rubric I earlier proposed—that the globalization of American culture requires the localization of its study.

Another example is provided by the University of Houston. It illustrates how some programs and perspectives within the United States are responding—increasingly, I believe—to the implications of changing, perhaps often dissolving, borders, including those of nation-states. The program at Houston was described by Steven Mintz in the same set of “Interroads” exchanges that Melani Budianta addressed. “The first question we asked,” Mintz wrote,

was whether we should follow an existing model or instead try to create a program that would reflect the distinctive features of our border location and our student body. After a great deal of heated discussion, we decided that we should think about American studies in hemispheric terms and establish a program that would offer both interdisciplinary and multicultural perspectives on the United States and comparative perspectives on the peoples and cultures of the Americas.²⁹

Such a program illustrates that the kind of American studies I am describing is, like most other aspects of American culture, no longer a one-way proposition, from the United States outward. Rather, the impact of globalization here—including of the student body—is to reshape a program within the United States in a distinctively local fashion.

Both these programs, moreover, emphasize not American exceptionalism but difference in a comparative context. Houston's introductory course, for example, "The Americas: Identity, Culture, and Power," begins by examining "how very different experiences with colonialism gave rise to distinct countries, with different social structures and places in the global economy." The second part focuses on the diverse modernisms of the Americas, and the third on "issues of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender" as these have been constructed in our time.

Such courses are, to say the least of them, challenges to any—or all—of us. Mintz sees that team-taught introductory course as a means "to re-educate our faculty." I took, by teaching, an introductory graduate course in American studies in the fall of 1996 in which I am sure I spent many more hours than my students reading and rethinking a number of the texts to which I have alluded in this article. One of my colleagues put it this way: "You are asking me to learn a new discipline. I'm not sure it is worth my while at this stage of my career." I agree with the first sentence, at least in part, but not with the implications of the second. For it seems to me that what is most exciting in American studies today is precisely what is troubling, reasonably so, to my colleague: that it is a new discipline, new in engaging America wherever it is found across the globe, and new in approaching the subject of America with a set of tools and methods fashioned to win its own space in the unruly world of the American academy.³⁰

Notes

1. See, for example, William E. Cain's opinion piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 13, 1996, p. B5, which argues that English departments are, or should be, the domains for close reading of literary texts; and Stanley Fish, who argues that English has lost its identity, its sense of coherent mission, and thus a good deal of its public support in "Them We Burn: Violence and Conviction in the English Department," *English as a Discipline: Or, Is There a Plot in This Play?*, James C. Raymond, ed. (Tuscaloosa, 1996), 160-173.

2. Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1996); Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana, 1996).

3. As is done, for example, in Alan Trachtenberg, "Myth, History, and Literature in *Virgin Land*," *Prospects* 3 (1997): 125-133.

4. At the conclusion of "Common Sense," Paine speaks of "Freedom" in these terms: "Freedom hath been hunted round the Globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind." He thus constructs manliness in terms of a competition between a new, legitimate suitor and the illegitimate authorities who have maltreated Freedom in the past. By contrast, Hamilton concludes two early historical paragraphs about the failures of Pericles, Cardinal Wolsey and King Louis XV with this sentence: "The influence which the bigotry of one female, the petulancies of another, and the cabals a third, had in the co[n]temporary policy, ferments and pacifications of a considerable part of Europe are topics that have been too often descanted upon not to be generally known." The passage helps set up the gendered imagery employed toward his conclusion: "From this summary of what has taken place in other countries, whose situations have borne the nearest resemblance to our own, what reason can we have to confide in those reveries, which would seduce us into an expectation of peace and cordiality between the members of the present confederacy, in a state of separation? Have we not already seen enough of the fallacy and extravagance of those idle theories which have amused us with promises of an exemption from the imperfections, weaknesses and evils incident to society in every shape?" Thus for Hamilton, manly conduct is constructed against feminized utopianism. *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Second edition, Vol. I (Lexington, MA, 1994), 861, 1197, 1200.

5. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1964.
 6. Priscilla Wald, "Terms of Assimilation: Legislating Subjectivity in the Emerging Nation," *The Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham, 1993), 59-61.
 7. Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone With America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," *The Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham, 1993), 3-21.
 8. For example, Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "A New Context for a New American Studies?" *American Quarterly* 41 (1989): 588-613.
 9. "Preface," *Revisionary Interventions into the American Canon* Donald Pease, ed. (Durham, 1994), 4-7.
 10. "Preface," 16.
 11. Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 33.
 12. Michael Denning's approach to the 1930s and 1940s "Cultural Front" offers an excellent contrary example. Denning argues against the usual accounts of the popular front and its cultural manifestations, which emphasize affiliation ("are you now, or have you ever been . . .") and ideology. Rather, Denning emphasizes the importance of the 1930s social movements that helped construct the CIO, and combat fascism and racism, and also the material factors having to do with the changing constitution of the working class, especially in the newly-emergent industries that produced and distributed mass culture. See *The Cultural Front* (London, 1997).
 13. Some overseas associations for "American" studies have pioneered such comparative strategies, notably the Brazilian Association for American Studies, within which the term "American" almost never refers solely to North America.
 14. A veritable explosion of work developing such paradigms has followed the pioneering approaches of Gloria Anzaldúa and José David Saldívar, among others.
 15. Particularly the group in the University of California system organized by John Carlos Rowe at UC/ Irvine, and others.
 16. T. J. Jackson Lears's, "The Concept of Hegemony," *American Historical Review* 90 (June, 1985): 567-593 and Michael Denning's critique of Lears in "'The Special American Conditions': Marxism and American Studies," *American Quarterly* 38 (1986): 356-380 illustrate some of the tensions about the usefulness of such terms and the problems of the contexts from which they derive.
 17. For three (among many) striking instances of how ideas of hegemony are deployed see Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity 29-30, 41-42; Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture*; and Denning *The Cultural Front*.
 18. I have made some of this argument in "A Call for (At Least a Little) American Studies Chauvinism," *American Studies Association Newsletter*, 18:2 (June, 1995): 1-3.
 19. Michael Denning, "'The Special American Conditions': Marxism and American Studies," *American Quarterly* 38 (1986): 360.
 20. See, for example, Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Homogeneity, Hybridity," 22-44.
 21. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "A New Context for a New American Studies?" *American Quarterly* 41 (1989): 593.
 22. Trilling's classic formulation of the capacity of the rare artists to "contain within themselves . . . the very essence of the culture" appears in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Viking, 1950), 9.
 23. It is important to emphasize that the discipline has been around in non-academic form for a considerably longer period of time. One might argue, in fact, that "American Studies" is coterminous with the construction of "America."
 24. See, for example, Robin W. Winks, *Cloak & Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939-1961*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, 1996).
 25. See, for example, Leo Marx, "Text Vs. Context," talk given at the annual meeting of the American Literature Section of the Modern Language Association, Toronto, Canada, December 28, 1993 ms.
 26. Michael Denning, "'The Special American Conditions,'" 357.
 27. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA, 1996).
 28. Budianta Response to Pedersen Essay, Interroads, 1/14/97; located on the Crossroads web site: <<http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads>>.
 29. Mintz Response to Pedersen Essay, Interroads, 1/15-97.
 30. Some have asked as a practical matter how I would deal with the fact that many local American studies programs list virtually any course that deals with the United States as part of the major or minor. Am I not here proposing a kind of ideological test for what "counts" as American studies? I do not actually think that is the case, for I am trying to report on what I observe.
- As to the issue of what should count in terms of course credit, my approach to that is to raise the question with colleagues of how their course in history or English or another traditional discipline would be different were it cross-listed in American studies and thus counted toward an American

studies major or minor. I do not think that colleagues are obligated to answer such questions; on the other hand, I do not think that American studies programs are obligated to accept any and all courses dealing with the United States as parts of an American studies program. It does not seem to me that there is any single answer to the question of how a course listed in American studies would be different from one not so listed. My only contention, at this point, is that such a question needs to be raised . . . and answered.