

No Shining City on a Hill: American Studies and the Problem of Place*

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Let me begin by saying what a pleasure it is to hear Leo Marx speak, to see him display the integrity, the commitment to inquiry, and the respect for evidence that has characterized his whole career. I very much appreciate and applaud his sense of what we need to do as scholars and his understanding of the high responsibilities that our work imposes on us. I think that he will find my remarks more compatible with his perspective than he might expect, and that shouldn't be a surprise. Like everyone else in this room, my education in American studies has been shaped by the things that Leo Marx has demonstrated through his writings. I agree completely with his observation that we should not see this session today as a kind of oedipal battle between the image-myth-symbol school and the cultural studies school. Ways of saying true and useful things about American culture from the past never become obsolete; no new paradigm comes into being without a powerful debt to the scholarship with which it is in dialogue.

It did surprise me, however, to hear Leo Marx say that those of us doing cultural studies work give the impression that we've reached some kind of nirvana. I think that if there is a nirvana connected to cultural studies, it is not the concept from Buddhist and Hindu traditions, but rather Nirvana, the rock band from Seattle. The late Kurt Cobain and his fellow musicians in that band helped shape a generation of young people through their uncompromising honesty, their willingness to deal with the disappointments and to face the hard facts about life and culture in this country. That is a project not so far removed from what Leo Marx presented to us today, and not so far removed from what he has been trying to do throughout his career.

What unites us in this room today is a shared experience with a place and an appreciation of what that place made possible. We are here because we have been shaped by our history as students and teachers at an egalitarian university created by a state with extraordinarily strong social democratic traditions. We all owe a great debt to the people of Minnesota, to the faith in the future that they have demonstrated over the years through their support for public education and academic freedom. We know that good people and good projects exist everywhere, but we have learned as well that some things are only possible in some places, that things happen in Minnesota that happen nowhere else. I discovered this on my first day here. My friends tell me that I must be mistaken, but I remember distinctly driving through the intersection of Raymond and Como in St. Paul and hearing a commercial for a local restaurant on my car radio. To the tune of “Tavern in the Town” the verse went

You should try our *lutefisk*.
 Many think it’s worth the risk.
 We’ve served it here since 1985,
 And most who’ve tried it have survived.

I think that is a message that could be broadcast only in Minnesota. It took me a while to understand this culture completely, but I liked it from the start. It was a refreshing change for me to come to this part of the country from Texas—where football is serious business and team mascots have names like Longhorns and Cougars—and discover that in the upper Midwest football is simply something to do to keep busy between fishing seasons, and that the teams have more humble mascots like Gophers and Badgers. Yet, it was only after I left the state and moved to California that I fully understand the uniqueness of Minnesota. In California, I was startled to learn that eighty percent of college students were *not* named Anderson, that in other states Twins outfielder Mickey Hatcher is not considered a candidate for the baseball Hall of Fame, and that in some states whole decades pass without anyone named Rudy being elected to high public office.

Yet, there is more to Minnesota than its eccentricities. The university harbors extraordinary intellectual energy and intense moral passion, in part because of what people have brought to it from other places. To borrow a phrase Howard Lamar uses to describe Texas, this is not so much a place as a commotion.¹ Like Texas, this state and this university have been places that people have come to for refuge and regeneration, they have been places that people have passed through on their way to someplace else. How could be it otherwise in a country as characterized by migration, mobility, immigration, and exile as the United States has been?

David W. Noble reminded us in his keynote address last night that the history of “place” in Minnesota and the rest of the United States is also the history of

displacement.² It is the history of people who have had to make spaces for themselves in part because of the places they left behind somewhere else. It is also the history of the people they displaced in order to do that. Leslie Marmon Silko tells us in *Ceremony* about Native Americans whose land was taken from them, who wake up every day “to look at the land, from horizon to horizon, and everyday the loss was with them; it was the dead unburied, and the mourning of the lost going on forever.”³ In *My Antonia*, Willa Cather draws a connection between *conquistadores* like Coronado and immigrants like Antonia’s father who both traveled far from home in search of things they never found.⁴ Families like David Noble’s who learned the pain of losing land, of leaving farms and homesteads, have much to teach us in the current moment of world history when the rapid movement of diasporic populations around the world makes displacement a matter of immediate urgency for millions of people.

The power of transnational corporations, the disintegration of the social wage in post-industrial western countries, and the increasingly desperate conditions facing unemployed and low-wage laborers around the globe add an element of immediacy to reflections about American studies, about its approaches to place and to displacement. The indecent social order of our own day delivers a stinging rebuke to the hopes for democracy and justice that have long been nurtured in institutions like the University of Minnesota and the American Studies Association. So while the oedipal argument between two schools of American studies scholarship that some of you anticipated today is not going to take place, we do need to draw on all the critical and reflective tools of our discipline, past and present, to address, interpret, and intervene in the dire circumstances that we confront currently in our own country and around the world. We need to talk honestly and realistically about the things that unite us and the things that divide us. We have to take advantage of this occasion to take inventory of what we have done in the past and what we need to do in the future. I think a debate between Leo Marx and George Lipsitz would be no contest; it would make me feel like the second half of that concert back in the 1960s when Jimi Hendrix was the opening act for the Monkees. Yet, while I have no interest in upstaging Leo Marx today or engaging in a “battle of the bands” between generations of American studies scholars with him (or with anyone else), I hope we can use our joint presence on this podium to provoke our field to develop new ways of thinking, teaching, writing that will be capable of addressing the very serious challenges we are certain to confront in the years ahead.

We would not really honor the occasion that brings us together, the Fiftieth Anniversary of American Studies at Minnesota, if we engaged in either simple celebration or categorical condemnation of American studies. What we are obligated to do is to engage in critical dialogue, to ask ourselves what time it is. The shared project that we have participated in deserves praise or blame only to the extent that it prepares us to face up to the realities that are emerging all around us.

In his very interesting address, Leo Marx noted the special relationship between the initiation of American studies and the New Deal. I think this can open the door for us to think more systematically about the connections between scholarship and social movements in general. The democratic social movements of the 1930s and the imagination of America that they both asked for and authorized, played an important role in making academic American studies possible. American studies was the product of a particular place and time; it shared its conditions of possibility with the emergence of the class conscious inter-ethnic coalitions during the 1930s that coalesced around the political campaigns of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota, of the Anton Cermak coalition in Chicago, and the Fiorello LaGuardia alliance in New York. Coupled with the efforts of radical immigrant journalists like Louis Adamic who celebrated the multi-ethnic history of this country and with mass mobilizations like the Minneapolis General Strike of 1934 that were central to the establishment and growth of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the New Deal coalition helped restructure the contours of politics and culture in this country.

Mass mobilizations and electoral initiatives during the 1930s drew upon disparate sources of resistance and opposition. They forged an uneasy alliance linking anti-monopoly capitalists with popular front marxists, connecting desires for ethnic inclusion into mainstream society with proletarian self-activity. They met with mixed success in their efforts to redistribute wealth and power, but they won enduring victories on the terrain of culture. The New Deal coalition laid claim to the national legacy, turning outsiders into insiders, while “rewriting” the past as well as the present. The “cult of the common person” circulated inside New Deal film, photography, fiction, and theater projects, established a cultural consensus so powerful that its ideology even permeated the cultural expressions of monopoly capitalist film makers in Hollywood as well as popular front writers and artists.

Academic American studies was not an intentional creation of this social upheaval and cultural transformation, but the field emerged from the social and cultural struggles of the 1930s as one of many unintended aftershocks. That is the way history happens. Social movements shake up society. They throw a pebble into a pond and produce ripples everywhere. Even when social movements fail to achieve their own stated goals, they send a message to people in other places about the potential for struggle and resistance. They provide tools for people to ask questions, to settle scores, to speak about parts of their lives that have been repressed and suppressed. The creation of American studies had everything to do with the cultural and intellectual spaces opened up by the mass movements of the 1930s.

When mobilization for World War II co-opted the radicalism of the 1930s social movements—and quickly enabled the establishment of an undemocratic alliance among big business, big government, and big labor in the form of the postwar corporate liberal state—the cultural radicalism of the 1930s could not be

suppressed completely. Bureaucrats acted on behalf of the national security state and used the excuse of anti-communism to direct the full force of legal and extra-legal repression against activists, artists, and intellectuals in an effort to purge labor unions, universities, the media, and community groups of their “subversive” tendencies. Yet, even in the darkest days of McCarthyism, social movements, cultural practitioners, and traditional intellectuals continued to draw on the legacy of the past to preserve oppositional thought. At a time when history departments encouraged “consensus” school interpretations cheerleading for the status quo and erased all traces of the oppositional interpretations advanced by New Deal era scholars, and when English departments turned to new criticism largely as a means of isolating cultural texts from their social and historical contexts, American studies prospered as an institutional site where literature could be studied in relation to history and where historical inquiry concerned itself with the culture of ordinary people as well as the actions of elites. Whatever the limits of these endeavors, they nonetheless kept alive a critical tradition that proved itself extremely useful for interpreting and understanding the many challenges to political and cultural hierarchies that emerged inside and outside the academy in the 1960s and 1970s.

The new paradigms that emerged within American studies in these years also drew their determinate shapes from social movements outside the academy. As scholars, we have become accustomed to discussing “the new social history” and “the anthropological turn” of the 1970s in American studies as purely academic refinements of the myth-symbol-image school, as alterations in the field emerging entirely from within. But I would argue that the emancipatory and egalitarian social movements of the 1960s among women, youth, aggrieved racial minorities, workers, gays, lesbians, and opponents of the war in Viet Nam instigated this paradigm shift by demonstrating to us through their actions the difference between the stories that society tells about itself from the top down and the realities of social relations as they might be understood from the bottom up. The emphasis on the everyday life experiences of ordinary people within the new social history and the concern for the uses and effects of culture in enabling people to make meaning for themselves evident in the anthropological turn in American studies, responded to the new view of culture in America made possible by social movements in the streets, just as the New Deal coalition stimulated the emergence of the myth-symbol-image school in the 1930s.

In addition, just as the enduring traditions within American studies allowed scholars and citizens in the 1940s and 1950s to understand and interpret the defeats of 1930s social movements, the new social history and the anthropological turn of the 1970s emphasized links between micro-social experience and macro-social institutions that proved extremely important in explaining how conservative mobilizations of the 1970s and 1980s succeeded in reversing the democratic victories won by the oppositional movement of the 1960s.

Seen in this light, the cultural studies approach of the 1980s and 1990s was neither a rebuke of the anthropology and social history of the 1970s nor a rejection of the myth-symbol-image school of the 1940s and 1950s. Rather, it emerged out of a recognition of new conditions and new connections between culture and social structure. Many of the victories of the New Deal social democratic era ignored or even exacerbated injustices based on race, gender, or sexual preference. Even more important, the defeats suffered by the social movements of the 1960s and the victories secured by the successful counter-mobilization orchestrated by big business neo-conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s placed new emphasis on the role of culture as a political force. Cultural studies scholars in American studies turned to the work of European theorists, including Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Stuart Hall, because their work offered insights into the political popularity of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, because they helped us understand how cultural appeals could induce people to support policies that were diametrically opposed to their own interests, and because they provided productive ways of understanding the ideological implications of seemingly apolitical practices and activities. We came to see the price that previous movements for social change had paid by marginalizing issues of race, gender, and sexual identification, how cultural conservatism rooted in racialized, gendered, and sexualized hierarchies worked against egalitarian social change. At the same time, we also came to see the importance of oppositional, resistant, and negotiated cultural practices among subcultures, counter-cultures, and even groups within dominant culture itself.

I have never been enthusiastic about interpretations of life and culture in the United States that attempt to compress the infinitely plural and diverse experiences of an entire nation into one story told from one point of view. But I do think that one basic principle can help us understand the connection between academic inquiry and social life. This principle is that the democratic self-activity of ordinary people is an extraordinarily powerful force, that it influences every emancipatory hope and practice around it. When aggrieved populations fight to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, they not only act to free themselves, but they also set in motion dynamics that help free others. But the current crisis that we face compels us to rethink the role of democratic self-activity in relation to place. The connections between place and culture that have undergirded the cultural and political practices of the industrial era are becoming obsolete, and the current crisis demands a different imagination about culture, place, and power.

For more than a hundred years, our imagination about emancipation has rested on notions of "place." Within American studies, the nation-state has served as a satisfactory and seemingly inevitable object of inquiry. Our explorations of culture have most often concentrated on physical places within the nation-state—the frontier, the farm, the factory floor, the forms and functions of the built environment, and the physical and cultural contours of the city. This scholarship

followed logically from social struggles that had also been centered on places, on efforts to gain control over the point of production, the municipal government, or the nation-state. The trade union insurgencies of the 1930s grew out of the solidarities engendered by assembly line production, from the power workers could gain by stopping the machines they worked and holding them for ransom until management capitulated, and from the class and ethnic solidarity produced in urban neighborhoods outside the factory gates. The farmer-labor coalitions that have meant so much in Minnesota and other states grew some of their distinctive force from the fact that land ownership gave farmers a sense that they had the right to determine the nature, pace, purpose, and rewards derived from their own labor. During the 1960s, the ghettos and barrios that generated so much inequality and conflict also produced cultures of solidarity and mutuality because people shared physical spaces together and learned to adjust to each other's needs and desires, using their control over physical spaces and their numbers to pursue self-determination. The counter-cultural movements of that same era sought to establish free spaces and liberated zones, imagining that small scale experiments in democracy could move incrementally toward larger issues encompassing more people and the spaces in which they lived and worked. The social movements that grew out of these shared spaces challenged entrenched structures of power by using space as a source of solidarity and as an impetus to action. By seeking to create new spaces, by demanding concessions from the state, by writing themselves into the spaces of the national narrative from which they were excluded, activists, artists, and intellectuals of all sorts created space for scholars to envision and enact a different kind of academic work through the rubric of cultural studies.

Today, many of the cultural and community crises we face emanate from the ways in which the sense of place that guided social movements and scholarship in the 1930s and 1960s has become obsolete. New technologies have been the instruments of these changes. Containerization, satellite and/or fiber optic communications, and computer-generated automation, outsourcing, and de-skilling have allowed a new separation of management from production. They have increased the mobility of capital and confounded traditional strategies for social justice based on controlling places like extracting concessions from employers with fixed capital investments in one place or using demographic and electoral power to regulate capital. But, as Leo Marx himself reminds us in his superb chapter in a recent anthology about technology, monopolistic management control and profit-oriented decisions are responsible for these changes, not the new technologies themselves.⁵

In order to combat the ways in which the new realities of social space have given management and investors the upper hand, we now need to think about places not only as specific geographic and physical sites, but also as circuits and networks of communication, physical movement, and commodity circulation. American studies scholarship can be a great help in rethinking the perils and prospects of the present because its history helps us understand the ways in which

place has always been a strategic construct, a narrative creation as well as a physical reality. All places are produced by cognitive mappings that give physical realities their social functions and meanings.

When I think about the new meanings of place that we need to develop now, one lesson from the past comes immediately to mind. During the 1960s, civil rights activist Percy Green used to exploit the spaces open to him on city streets in St. Louis by turning thoroughfares designed for traffic into theatricalized sites for airing social grievances. He organized sit-down demonstrations and traffic tie-ups in the streets because those spaces provided him with a great equalizer. Business interests needed the streets. They needed them clear and open so that customers could get to stores, so that employees could get to work, so that products could reach factories, warehouses, and markets, Percy Green realized that the streets could be transformed into sites of struggle. For people who could not get into city hall to meet with the mayor, who could not express their grievances directly to corporate executives, who could not even get their ideas or actions reported in newspapers controlled by their enemies, direct action in the streets offered a great way to begin a dialogue on even terms with their enemies. "If David attempted to fight Goliath with a sword, it wouldn't have been a contest," Green observed. "So therefore he had to use his head to develop an equalizer."⁶

In an age where business is global rather than local, where whole cities, states, and nations can be abandoned and written off in pursuit of greater profits elsewhere, direct action in the streets may have far less impact than it did thirty years ago. But the principles that drove people to the streets—that led them to identify the strategic utility of disrupting business-as-usual—retain enormous significance. We need to identify the cultural practices, political actions, and social movements that might lead us to discover the great equalizers of our own time. The sense of "landscape" that David Noble discussed last night is now being given some new meanings and some new definitions. In a provocative article a few years ago, Arjun Appadurai argued that we should stop thinking solely in terms of physical spaces, stop thinking in terms of landscape, and realize that our world is now cognitively mapped into ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples.⁷ These "scaples" enable us to think about the ways in which ethnic identities extend beyond national borders, how mass media creates common images with radically different local inflections, how technology gives workers in the heavy machinery plants of East Peoria the same labor conditions facing assembly line laborers in Japan and Brazil, how the policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank impose a similar urban austerity on cities around the world, and how ideologies, religions, and market practices are both global and local at the same time. In my view, Appadurai underestimates the enduring importance of local spaces, memories, and practices, and his framework does not account adequately for the degree of oppressive centralized power basic to the creation of these new spaces sufficiently, but he

does us a great service in fashioning new forms of thinking about circuits and networks, about their consequences for the meanings attached to physical places. In this respect, the study of global popular culture becomes an essential task of an American studies attuned to the realities of the present moment, because global popular culture is one of those “sites” that might be interrupted, inverted, or subverted for egalitarian purposes.

Whenever I start talking about commercial culture, I know that a certain part of the audience always gets uneasy. For understandable reasons, people worry that attention to popular culture and its practices may trivialize important matters of political and economic power, that it may elevate consumer choices and the symbolic identifications they encourage to the status of social movements struggling for control over places, resources, and power. Certainly, commercial popular culture and its global reach should give us cause for concern. But no struggle for power can ignore the mechanisms that make us the people that we are. No struggle for power can ignore the ways people make meaning for themselves. The images and ideas circulated so broadly in global popular culture usually originate from particular people in specific places expressing themselves in the only arenas that are open to them. Popular culture is no more important, but also no less important, than any other social sphere.

As someone who works extensively in this area, I have to admit that I am often perplexed and sometimes repulsed by the contents of commercial culture. I wonder, for example, about the statement made a few years ago by the right-wing publisher Rupert Murdoch when he purchased *TV Guide*. Murdoch announced that he was going to make the magazine “more popular” and “less cerebral.” Was this a problem in the old *TV Guide*? Did it contain too much Baudrillard and not enough *Baywatch*? In one of the first issues of the magazine that came out under Murdoch’s supervision, he printed a story indicting the American educational system because a poll revealed that only nine percent of the population knew that William Rehnquist was the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, but nearly sixty percent recognized Judge John Wapner as the presiding judge in the television program *The People’s Court*. Perhaps this statistic does serve as proof of the inadequacies of the American educational system as Murdoch’s writers argued. But as media scholar Gary Burns observed, it might also offer an accurate measure of the quality of performance demonstrated by these two jurists justices in their respective positions. I, for one, would argue that Wapner dispensed a brand of justice in his fictional role far superior to that administered by Rehnquist in real life.⁸

The same properties of commercial popular culture that lead to its perversity and pandering also enable people to express ideas and opinions that can not find their way into expressly political debate. The connection between Thomas Mapfumo’s *chimurenga* music and the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, the prominence of Freddie Aguilar’s song *Bayan Ko* in the 1985 “people power” insurgency in the Philippines, and the success by Boukman Eksespyans in

creating carnival songs that played a crucial role in the *lavalas* movement for democracy and justice in Haiti provide just a few examples of the strategic utility of popular culture. In these cases, popular music served as an arena for people who had more leverage as consumers and entertainers than they possessed as citizens. In a world where the power of transnational corporations constrains people so thoroughly in their political lives, while allowing seemingly unlimited free movement for commodities and images, it is reasonable to expect that aggrieved individuals and communities will turn to culture as a site for imagining and enacting new ways of living. Commercial culture is neither innately emancipatory nor metaphysically manipulative. As Stuart Hall argues, it is the ground on which transformations of our identities are played out, and as such, it should carry as much importance for people interested in social change as it does for people interested in selling commodities.⁹

Important aspects of our current moment can be illumined by comparing performers in popular music today with those from the 1930s. During the Great Depression, Peetie Wheatstraw sang for nickels and dimes on street corners and in juke joints around Biddle Street on St. Louis's north side. Wheatstraw addressed the indignities and alienations of low-wage labor, racism, and police repression through blues songs that boasted about his ability to survive, to overcome any obstacle placed in his path. He drew upon the "bad man" tradition described by Lawrence Levine in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, the tradition of Stagger Lee—the brother off the block who was so ferocious and tough that the hangman's noose could not kill him and the devil's fire could not burn him. Singing to audiences who had to steel themselves for the grim realities of the Great Depression, Peetie Wheatstraw gave his listeners an image that they could use in their own struggles. He mentioned the streets they traveled and the companies for which they worked by name. He billed himself as "the High Sheriff from Hell" and "the devil's son-in-law" to reflect back to Black low-wage workers the grit and determination they needed to survive and endure the hand they had been dealt by history.

The Peetie Wheatstraw of the 1930s is a very different kind of public figure than a popular music star of our own day like Michael Jackson. His identity depends upon constant changes in his physical appearance and singing style. His sense of self comes from flaunting the malleability of his image as a person and as an artist. Jackson has changed his physical features through plastic surgery to create an appearance that is racially ambiguous. His voice could belong to a child, a woman, or a man: indeed it bears a close resemblance to the tone, pitch, inflections, and phrasing of a series of male and female singers who preceded him, including Frankie Lymon, Ronnie Spector, and Diana Ross. He wears facial make-up and clothes generally associated with women, yet his dance moves and performance styles contain gestures and promote responses among young girls and women reminiscent of those provoked by male sex symbols—Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and George Michael, among others.

Jackson has been a celebrity for as long as most of his listeners have been alive, taking on different images at different times. His fans can periodize the different stages of their lives by reference to the Michael Jackson they encountered at different ages. His public image has been mediated by a series of styles, consumer goods, and technologies—his childhood Afro and adult plastic surgery, the white glove and pegged pants that defined him as a young adult and the glitter outfits that have defined him as an adult; the studio sounds of the late Motown era that marked his earliest recordings, the “moonwalking” that he unveiled in his performances of the 1980s, and the sophisticated “morphing” techniques employed in his 1990s video “Black or White.” The more ambiguous Jackson remains as a public image, the easier he becomes to sell to an international audience that speaks different languages and draws upon diverse sets of indigenously cultural symbols.

Peetie Wheatstraw was connected to the streets of industrial-era St. Louis in a way that Michael Jackson could never be connected to the late-industrial Gary, Indiana, where he was born or to the late-industrial Detroit where he secured his first fame as a child star. Rather than living in Gary or Detroit, Michael Jackson lives on a California ranch called “Neverland,” named for the place in the Peter Pan story where no one grows up, and, as independent film maker Rita Gonzales points out, bears a taxonomic resemblance to those other mediated “lands,” —Walt Disney’s Disneyland and Elvis Presley’s Graceland. Culture and place seem to have become disconnected in the age of Michael Jackson; he appears to us as an artist peculiarly ungrounded in space and time. Yet, the reach and scope of Michael Jackson’s image unites audiences in ways that Peetie Wheatstraw never could; the emphasis on image, dance, and spectacle in his act make his appeal less bound to the parochial appeals of place that determined Peetie Wheatstraw’s relationship with his audience. If Peetie Wheatstraw was the high sheriff from hell and the devil’s son-in-law, Michael Jackson is the king of pop and Elvis’s son-in-law.

The same circuits and networks of popular culture that seem to collapse categories of time and space also seem to make them more important. The rapid movement of images across the globe reveals local inflections of global practices and highlights the things that divide us as well as the things that unite us. The celebrity status of basketball player Michael Jordan enables him to collect more in endorsements every year from Nike athletic shoes than the company pays to all of the low-wage women workers who make “Air Jordans” in six separate workplaces in Indonesia. In this case, Jordan’s glamorous image hides the hardships facing the women workers who make the shoes that carry his image around the world. Yet, at the same time, when labor activists revealed that clothes endorsed by television personality Kathie Lee Gifford were actually made by children in Central American sweatshops, the resulting publicity and pledges of remedial action by Gifford called attention to labor exploitation in a way that no amount of political mobilizing by workers’ advocates had been able to accomplish previously.

The global nature of commercial popular culture can also help us understand the parochialism of American studies, especially in respect to the ways in which events in the United States have always functioned in dialogue with global realities. By searching out the unique and exceptional properties of U.S. history and culture, American studies scholars have too often obscured the always-international nature of U.S. culture and the perpetual presence of aspects of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe within North American life.

Los Angeles filmmaker John Esaki captured an important dimension of these dynamics in a recent film about a young man from Los Angeles who became a leading *taiko* drummer in Japan.¹⁰ Given the large number of Japanese Americans in Southern California, it is perhaps not surprising that an American would become successful playing a traditional Japanese instrument, but this particular drummer is not Japanese American. His name is Maceo Hernandez-Delgado and he is a Chicano from East Los Angeles. Hernandez-Delgado grew up in a part of Los Angeles where Asian Americans and Mexican Americans have long shared the same spaces, and he learned about *taiko* drumming at a local community center. He heard in *taiko* music resonances of the Afro-Cuban rhythms he had learned from Mexican music and the rock'n'roll sounds of Carlos Santana. He took up the instrument and was discovered by a touring Japanese *taiko* group who took him back to Japan with them, in part, because they wanted to combat ethnocentrism and racism in their own country. They wanted to show that someone from a culture that most Japanese did not respect could play their traditional music well.

About a year after seeing Esaki's film, I heard a piece of music on the radio—a traditional Mexican bolero played in the salsa style that I associate with Tito Puente and other Puerto Rican and Nuyorican ensembles. Recorded by a group calling itself *Orquesta de la Luz* (orchestra of the light), the title of the song was "*Somos Diferentes*" ("We are Different")—a lament about the end of a love affair. I thought the singers were Puerto Rican, but when I got the compact disc I discovered from the picture on the front that the members of the group were all Japanese. I later learned that they spoke no Spanish, that they learned the lyrics of their songs through transliteration. Yet their music seemed to me impeccably Puerto Rican, their singing resonating with Puerto Rican accents and idioms in both Spanish and English.

John Esaki's film about Maceo Hernandez-Delgado and *Orquesta de la Luz*'s ability to mimic Puerto Rican music should make us nervous. They reflect the ways that traditions connected to place—that have organic roots through practices passed on from generation to generation—can become absorbed by outsiders unfamiliar with the full social world from which these cultural practices originate. The power of mass media to displace culture from its place of origin and its sense of social connection is part of the unsettling instability we encounter in our own lives everyday. Yet, on the other hand, mass media and the inter-cultural communication it engenders also calls attention to families of resemblance, to the ways in which people and groups who think of themselves as completely different

learn that they have affinities, connections, and similarities as well as differences. In the world that is emerging because of the power of transnational capitalism, the ability to look beyond national and cultural boundaries might be an important democratic resource for ordinary people, not just a marketing strategy for transnational corporations. This does not mean that the nation-state will disappear. The question is not whether there will be nations, but rather, what kinds of nations for what purposes? The question is not whether there will be politics, but rather what kinds of politics for what purposes? The question is not whether there will be intercultural or transnational culture, but what kinds of culture for what purposes?

Intercultural and transnational cultural creations emblemize the dramatic transformations of our time. Something more than postmodern mixing and the juxtaposition of seemingly inappropriate entities is at work here. We are witnessing an inversion of prestige, a moment when diasporic, nomadic, and fugitive cultures from the “margins” seem to speak more powerfully to present conditions than do metropolitan cultures committed to the congruence of culture and place. Populations that suffer the anguish of exile and displacement—Filipinos, Jamaicans, Punjabis—offer powerful expressions of code switching and cultural fusion that attract followers from outside their own groups.

What does this have to do with American studies? It seems to me that there are two American studies traditions in existence. One is the institutional American studies canonized within easily recognized paradigms like myth-symbol-image, uses-and-effects anthropology, the new social history, and cultural studies. All of these offer vital, important, and even essential ways of understanding culture in the United States. But they are tied to connections between culture and place that no longer may be operative. The present moment and the present crisis threatening the connections between culture and place require us to draw upon what we might call the “other American studies,” the organic grass roots theorizing about culture and power that has informed cultural practice, social movements, and academic work for many years. Much of this work has been created by exiles, migrants, and members of other groups that have been displaced and consequently are less likely to take for granted the automatic congruence between culture and place. This is the American studies of C.L.R. James, whose brilliant book *American Civilization* written in the 1950s has recently been re-issued.¹¹ It is the American studies of Duke Ellington who used to respond to questions about “Negro” identity by playing a dissonant chord on the piano and saying “That’s us. That’s our life in America. We’re a thing apart, yet an integral part.” This is the tradition of Americo Paredes, whose extraordinary 1958 book about the ballad of Gregorio Cortez, *With His Pistol in His Hand* has a lot to teach us about what culture means to people for whom displacement, bi-lingualism, code-switching, and struggle have been constant realities.¹²

I think “the other American studies” takes on new meaning in this age of de-industrialization, economic restructuring, capital flight, and economic austerity.

We face a crisis within all the institutions whose existence was established by the social movements of the 1930s and the 1960s—public schools and libraries, subsidized housing and health care, youth centers and arts organizations, among others. We face the planned shrinkage of the university as fee increases and attacks on affirmative action change the racial and class composition of our students, sending increasing numbers of poor people to prison rather than to school. Expensive patent sharing agreements and research and development subsidies for large corporations undermine liberal education and give a vocational and mercenary cast to the future of higher education in this country. At the same time, millions of workers around the world face a future of low-wage labor, diminished public services, and the continuing disintegration of social networks and communities. This kind of crossroads can be confronted, understood, and mastered, but only by blending both versions of American studies into a new synthesis.

Efforts by American studies scholars at the University of Minnesota to explore the unique and singular properties of culture, history, and society in the United States have not been misplaced, but they have been incomplete. Our emphasis on the nation-state as the natural unit of study has obscured the always-international character of our country and its culture. Today, the connections that link Minnesota to the rest of the world are more evident than ever. The baseballs put in play by the Minnesota Twins at the Metrodome in Minneapolis are made by low-wage women workers in Haiti. The fishing lures that Minnesotans drop into the state's ten thousand lakes are assembled and painted by poverty-stricken women workers in Guatemala. The world our students will inhabit will be shaped in determinate ways by the rapid movement around the globe of people, products, images, and ideas.

At the same time, all around the world today, new social movements are emerging in response to current conditions. Locally based and territorially defined groups rooted in shared cultural concerns are making non-ideological and pragmatic demands to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. They are forging unexpected and improbable coalitions to protect the rights of immigrants and workers, to secure health care and reproductive services, to educate and agitate for social change. Activists with the San Diego Support Committee for Maquiladora Workers along the U.S.- Mexico border stand up for the rights of workers being exploited by transnational corporations, but they also call attention to the ninety-year history of efforts by U.S. employers to use Mexico as a source of low-wage labor, to deny citizenship rights and human rights to Mexican workers, and to promulgate views of U.S. history and culture that deny the deep and long-standing links between the United States and Mexico. Asian Immigrant Women Advocates started as a group established primarily for the protection and advancement of Asian immigrant women workers in the United States. But they soon discovered that they could not separate the fate of low-wage Asian immigrant women workers from the conditions facing Latina and Black women,

so they became a force for the interests of low-wage women workers of all colors, while at the same time understanding that in some cases they had to be prepared to take on Asian immigrant capitalists, husbands, and male workers. Similarly, the Haiti National Network has succeeded in uniting Haitian exiles and U.S. human rights supporters in a coalition providing material aid and political support for social activists in that Caribbean country as well as for aggrieved groups in the United States. In San Francisco, a benefit organized by former Black Panther Kiiyu Nayasha raised money for the Haitian peasant farm union *Tet Kole* through a cultural event that combined poetry, film, and music by artists from diverse backgrounds.

This new kind of transnational social activism has already started to produce new sensibilities among scholars in American studies attuned to the ways in which the new global economy and culture confound traditional understandings of the connections between cultural spaces and physical places. Jose David Saldívar's forthcoming *Border Matters* explores the ways in which the existence of the U.S.-Mexico border has shaped the contours of a broad range of Mexican American cultural expressions.¹³ Lisa Lowe's brilliant and indispensable forthcoming work, *Immigrant Acts*, concerns the Acts of Congress restricting and regulating immigration from Asia and the ways in which they provide an ineradicable context for Asian American life and culture. Lowe uses the current crisis as an opportunity to rethink the historical connections linking the state, racial identity, low wage labor, and gendered subjectivity within Asian American communities to a variety of writings and cultural expressions by contemporary Asian American writers and artists.¹⁴ Similarly, the same concerns that lead human rights advocates and Haitian exiles to unite in opposition to policies by the U.S. government encouraging the exploitation of Haitian workers and resources by transnational companies, also enables the kind of scholarship displayed by Brenda Gayle Plummer in her forthcoming book, *Rising Wind*, a monumental exploration of African Americans and foreign policy that reminds us of the always global realities that have confronted African people in America for more than four hundred years.¹⁵ This bold and brilliant work, as well as recent writings by Rosa Linda Fregoso, Herman Gray, Carl Gutierrez-Jones, Robin Kelley, Gary Okiihiro, and Tricia Rose (among others) indicates that the latest stage of social movement formation has already started to produce a concomitant intellectual realignment within American studies.

On the fiftieth anniversary of American studies at the University of Minnesota, it would be understandable if we engaged in a celebration honoring the past. Many worthy and worthwhile things have been done in Minnesota under the name of American studies. But we would be displaying a poor understanding of our own expertise if we attempt to turn one school, one method, or one historical moment in scholarship into yet another American "shining city on a hill." Perhaps we should think of ourselves more like a weed in a vacant lot, something that springs up in unexpected places, that survives where nobody thinks it can, that remains

resilient and hardy even with the heavy weight of concrete pressing down on it. Like Langston Hughes' affirmation of the African American experience, perhaps our greatest accomplishment is simply that we're "still here."¹⁶

As we stand at yet another crossroads in the history of American studies we need to appreciate the ways in which new social relations and communication technologies rupture traditional connections between culture and place, making the local both less and more important at the same time. We need to learn from people and from cultures that have shown themselves to be as mobile, as flexible, and as fluid as transnational capital, yet still remain rooted in enduring principles and values. As the hip hop artists Eric B. and Rakim used to say in a phrase that is as applicable to scholarship as it is to culture, "it's not where you're from, it's where you're at." We are at a place where displacement matters, where artists, activists, and intellectuals all around the world are establishing new paradigms to confront current realities. We can remain rooted in nostalgia and melancholy for the past, if we want. We can fight the old battles forever. But it might be better to use the past to break the chains of the present. Image-myth-symbol, new social history, interpretive ethnography, and cultural studies approaches to American studies all emerged from historically specific contexts and offered important responses to the crises that brought them into being. They are now all insufficient tools for confronting the realities of transnational times. Reflecting on the traditions of American studies developed here at Minnesota and at other institutions, however, can still serve important purposes if it helps to remind us that our best work has always emerged from direct engagement with society and with social movements. At our best, American studies scholars have always been able to understand that people who do not know their place can be precisely the people we need to let us know exactly what time it is.

Notes

*Text of a presentation at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of American Studies at the University of Minnesota, October 21, 1994

1. Howard R. Lamar, *Texas Crossings: The Lone Star State and the American Far West, 1836-1986* (Austin, 1991), xiii.
2. David W. Noble, "Keynote Address," 50th Anniversary Celebration of American Studies at the University of Minnesota, October 1994. Minneapolis, Minnesota.
3. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York, 1977), 169.
4. Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston, 1977), 244.
5. Yaron Ezrahi, Everett Mendelsohn, and Howard Segal, ed., *Technology, Pessimism, and Postmodernism* (Boston, 1994).
6. Interview with Percy Green, September 18, 1984. St. Louis, Missouri.
7. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* v.2 n.2 (1990), 1-24.
8. Gary Burns, "Television and the Crisis in the Humanities," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* v.9 n.3 (1991), 98-106.
9. Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the popular,'" in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981), 228.
10. John Esaki, "Maceo: Demon Drummer From East LA," 1993. Naomi Hirahara, "Drummer Boy," *Rafu Shimpo*, November 17, 1993, 1.
11. C.L.R. James, *American Civilization* (Blackwell, 1994).
12. Americo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand* (Austin, 1958).

13. No longer forthcoming, published in 1997. Jose David Saldivar, *Border Matters* (Berkeley, 1997).

14. No longer forthcoming, published in 1996. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham, 1996).

15. No longer forthcoming, published 1996. Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

16. Langston Hughes, "Still Here," *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York, 1959), 123.