

*Review Essay*

## **What Are American Studies For? Some Practical Perspectives**

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What good are American studies? What in the world are they good for? What good are they for the world? *Who* are American studies good for? Are there any practical consequences to the practice of American studies? These are some of the questions addressed, implicitly if not explicitly, by a new book tracing the development of the field.

*Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline* is a collection of 17 essays that originally appeared in *American Quarterly*, a journal established in 1949, and affiliated with the American Studies Association since 1951. It's an attempt to map the interdiscipline that has grown in the academy since the 1930s. It collects such treasures as Henry Nash Smith's "Can American Studies Develop a Method?" and Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood" and Linda Kerber's "The Republican Mother." It contains pathbreaking essays like R. Gordon Kelly's "Literature and the Historian" and Nina Baym's "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" and Janice Radway's "The Utopian Impulse in Popular Literature." It includes capsule histories of American studies like Bruce Kuklick's "Myth and Symbol in American Studies" and Gene Wise's "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies" and Robert Berkhofer's "A New Context for American Studies?" And it includes newer challenges like Ramon Gutierrez's "Community, Patriarchy and Individualism: The Politics of Chicano History and the Dream of Equality," Kevin Mumford's "Homosex Changes: Race, Cultural

Geography, and the Emergence of the Gay,” and Scott Wong’s “The Transformation of Culture: Three Chinese Views of America.”

The collection itself is immensely impressive, but equally impressive are the brief commentaries on each essay by a contemporary practitioner of American studies. Sometimes these commentaries simply summarize the essay in question. More often, the commentaries contextualize the essay, and show how it has contributed to the conversation that is American studies. At their very best, as in Jay Mechling’s remarks on Gene Wise’s “Paradigm Dramas,” the commentary plays variations on a theme, and presents challenges of its own. These commentaries work very well, and might commend themselves to the editors of *American Quarterly*, not just for retrospective issues, but as a regular format that would heighten the sense of conversation and contestation in the field of American studies.

*Locating American Studies* is not the first collection of pieces from *American Quarterly*. During the late sixties, on the occasion of the quarterly’s twentieth anniversary, Hennig Cohen edited two sets of essays from the journal, *The American Culture* and *The American Experience*. In the late seventies, two special issues of the journal were published as separate books, along with a collection of essays on *Recycling the Past: Popular Uses of American History*. But *Locating American Studies* is the first of these collections to attempt an ambitious self-study of American studies, and it is remarkably successful. Almost all of us engaged in American studies can profit from its provocations. And I suspect that it will quickly become a required text in most graduate programs in American Studies.<sup>1</sup>

A collection like this one asks readers to consider the purposes of American studies. It also invites us to consider how American studies can be a practical example of the practices we hope to see in the wider world. Therefore, I’d like to think a little about the principles of selection in this collection, and the principles implicitly taught by the particular selections. I’d like to think less about the content of these fine essays, and more about their implications for the contemporary community of scholars who identify themselves with American studies. This collection provoked dozens of questions in me, but due to limits of space and intelligence, I’ll focus only on five:

- 1) *What’s the Myth of Myth and Symbol?*
- 2) *Can Method Develop An American Studies?*
- 3) *What Do You Mean “We,” Masked Man?*
- 4) *Are American Studies Just an Academic Question?*
- 5) *Are American Studies Practical?*

### **The Myth of Myth and Symbol?**

As early as the table of contents, it’s clear that *Locating American Studies* is predominantly presentist. Only one essay appears from the 1950s, and only two

from the sixties. By contrast, the seventies and nineties each have five essays, and the eighties four. This seems problematic to me. Is the implicit argument that there wasn't much good writing in the early years of *American Quarterly*, or that essays from that era are irrelevant now? Is it possible that scholars just got better at writing American studies after 1966? Or is there a Whiggish assumption here, suggesting as Emil Coue did in the 1920s, that every day, in every way, we are getting better and better?

Warren Susman's "History and the American Intellectual: The Use of a Usable Past," reprinted in this collection, suggests that history serves Americans as both myth and ideology, and it seems that it serves American studies in pretty much the same way. Most essays in *American Quarterly* (and in this collection) begin with the history of an inquiry or the history of the field. A convention of academic writing, this literature review both establishes the history of the conversation, and the credentials of the author to participate in this particular conversation. But many of these brief histories are oversimplified, more a foil for the thesis to follow than a systematic analysis of past practice. And this makes sense: the point of an academic essay is not to say what everybody else already knows; it's to offer something new. But some of these pieces repeat a history of the field that has become accepted as common sense over time. It's worth thinking about the social construction of this common sense. In some cases, I would suggest, these histories of American studies have been less historical than rhetorical.

The implicit histories of American studies in these explicitly revisionist essays tend to reduce the rich variety of early American studies scholarship to a few buzzwords, most notably "myth-and-symbol." Bruce Kuklick's 1972 essay, for example, provides an incisive philosophical criticism of American studies mythic symbolists, but it leaves the unfortunate impression that myth and symbol was the pervasive paradigm of early Americanist researchers. To some extent, in fact, Kuklick's essay suffers from some of the same problems of simplification that he criticizes in the myth-and-symbol stylists. A common complaint of their work is that they focused on a few literary figures (mostly white men), and made inferences about the American character from that work. Kuklick himself focuses on the work of a few prominent scholars in American studies (all white males), and makes inferences about the character of American studies from their work. Of course, this is partly justifiable. During the fifties and sixties, scholars in American studies did celebrate the distinctive books of scholars like Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx and R.W.B. Lewis and Alan Trachtenberg.

But these people were not the only scholars in American studies, and myth and symbol isn't all they did. Reading the pages of *American Quarterly* in those years, one finds a much greater variety of work than we currently remember. The first issue of *American Quarterly*, for example, was explicitly comparative, with essays on American world influences, including essays on "The Projection of American Abroad" and "The Reputation of America Overseas," on "American

Influences on Contemporary Italian Literature” and “On What It Means to Be French.” The 1953 volume includes Marvin Meyers “The Jacksonian Persuasion” and David Noble’s “The Paradox of Progressive Thought,” which are broad characterizations of Americans (mostly white guys) in particular time periods. But most of the articles are not about national character, or myths and symbols; instead there are detailed investigations of language and religion in the work of Horace Bushnell and Rowland Hazard, of sports journalism in the nineteenth century, of “Psychometry from Poe to Proust,” of two Yankee painters (Thomas Cole and Samuel Morse) in Italy, and of Hemingway in Russia. The volume’s essays deal mostly with white Anglo men. But it also includes essays on Mary Moody Emerson and “The ‘Yinglish’ Music of Mickey Katz.” And in a period of so-called “consensus,” the journal even includes contestation over the myth-and-symbol approach to American studies. Barry Marks criticizes “The Concept of Myth in *Virgin Land*,” while David Riesman offers a nuanced discussion of “Psychological Types and the National Character.” Looking at the whole of *American Quarterly*, and not just the simplified histories of American studies designed to promote “new-and-improved” methods, suggests that American studies practice has always been remarkably diverse, even when it wasn’t about all of the diverse peoples of the United States. As we debate about the future of American studies today, we would do well to remember the methodological multiplicity of this usable past. Despite the awkwardness of the sound, American studies are singularly *plural*.

At the same time, even myth-and-symbol practice itself was more complex and more diverse than our current conceptions of it. As Christopher Hoskins suggests in this issue of *American Studies*, monographs like Alan Trachtenberg’s *Brooklyn Bridge* share significant analytical similarities with current practice in cultural studies. Hoskins suggests that Trachtenberg’s study was not epistemologically idealist, but dialectical; and Trachtenberg looked at Brooklyn Bridge not as a singular symbol of America, but as a site of multiple meanings. The book was not a mere celebration of the American nation, but also a critique of capitalist ideology and hegemony. “In this way,” Hoskins suggests, “*Brooklyn Bridge* functions as a work of cultural studies in the best critical tradition of that field.”

When we relegate methods like myth-and-symbol analysis to the category of “old-fashioned,” we implicitly embrace a system of fashion that may not serve us well. When we focus on “the tradition of the new,” we begin to deal, like car dealers, in planned obsolescence. Unfortunately, unlike car dealers, we don’t have much of a market for used theories or methods. Also, in the process of being academically up-to-date, we sometimes lose contact with the great majority of Americans (including many of my undergraduate students), who have a hard time following the linguistic constructions of deconstruction, for example. Sometimes, too, the things we thought were obsolescent have a life of their own. Myth-and-symbol analysis, for example, hasn’t been confined to the fifties and early sixties. Although it isn’t trendy to write it anymore, it’s notable that *Virgin Land*

and *The Machine in the Garden* and *Brooklyn Bridge* and *The American Adam* and *The Jacksonian Persuasion* are still in print, and not only, I suspect, as examples of methodologically flawed scholarship. Maybe audience-response theory could tell us something about that.

Perhaps American studies could begin to model a relationship with its past that would be more continuous and comprehensive. Instead of seeing the discipline embracing one damn thing after another (historicization of literature, myth and symbol, the anthropological turn, new social history, cultural studies, comparative studies, border studies), we could train ourselves to see the relevance of these different pasts to our present concerns, and vice versa. As Faulkner said, "The past is never dead. It is not even past." A few years ago, *Harper's* ran a regular feature in which a contemporary author re-examined and celebrated a classic work from the past. Perhaps *American Quarterly* or *American Studies* could begin to do the same, keeping us in conversation with the promise and plurality of our past.

### Can Method Develop an American Studies?

Almost all of the essays in *Locating American Studies* are self-consciously reflexive, inviting American studies readers to reconsider the conventions of the field. The collection features those essays that have most affected our conceptions of American studies, not necessarily those that have most affected our conceptions of American culture. It almost seems that there are more essays on *applying* theory and method than there are applications. This focus has both costs and benefits.

When Henry Nash Smith asked in 1957 if American studies could develop a method, he was really wondering if method could develop an American studies. Method was the god of the academy in the 1950s (and not much has changed). Smith saw American studies at the mercy of established disciplines like history and English, and he hoped to clothe this illegitimate interdisciplinary child in a cloak of respectability. Essays like R. Gordon Kelly's "Literature and the Historian" and the Davis group's "American Culture Studies: The Discipline and the Curriculum" have proved enormously fruitful in inspiring a wide variety of American investigations.<sup>2</sup>

But the history of American studies suggests to me that method isn't (and never has been) central to the successes of this interdisciplinary. Smith's American studies "Methodism" has a long history, and while these recurrent methodological awakenings or revivals seem to cause occasional conversions, practitioners of American studies have always been more methodologically diverse (and perverse) than most methodolaters desire. As early as 1979, Joel Jones wondered "if one could make a career out of discussing the problems of methodology and subject matter in American Studies." Clearly, these days, one could. But Jones concluded that the American studies community should stop looking for methodological uniformity and prescriptions, preferring instead the "principled oppor-

tunism” and “pluralistic eclecticism” of American studies practitioners. For himself, Jones decided to concern himself with “establishing a mode of research and teaching that would revolve around personal voice and political vision, a style (‘method,’ if you will) for teaching and research that would be characterized, in the William Jamesian sense, by pragmatic authenticity.” He even hoped that some people would risk “the leap beyond methodology.”<sup>3</sup>

Jones suggested that the primary achievement of American studies since its founding had been its ability to create “free spaces” in academia “for those scholar-teachers who would develop a style of teaching and research responsive, as Emerson suggested, to one’s experiential and existential context.” Implicitly, Jones suggested that we rethink what makes a discipline a discipline, or what makes a community of scholars communal. Although Jones didn’t pursue it in his brief but brilliant article (one that might have been in this collection, if only as an oppositional voice), it seems to me that he asks us to understand a discipline not as a *method* of inquiry and conversation but as a *culture* of inquiry and conversation.

The culture of American studies has been committed to the interstices of the disciplines. This is why it was invented, and one reason why it persists. As Paul Lauter observes in this issue of *American Studies*, students in American studies (and this includes faculty) seem to have synthetic capabilities that more “disciplined” students lack. This is what Gene Wise called “the connecting mind.” Because there are lots of disciplines, and lots of interstices, American studies has traditionally been committed to “sing the body eclectic,” celebrating both disciplinary work and the interdisciplinary work that builds on (and between) it. Instead of trying to find “a method,” American studies should glory in this methodological multiplicity, and in the conversations and contradictions that such multiplicity often engenders. As Walt Whitman (an early professor of American studies) said, “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself. I am large—I contain multitudes.” American studies can also be an example for the disparate disciplines of the academy. Its playfulness, its reflexivity, its curiosity, its synergies and syntheses—all offer object lessons for other disciplines that are less fluid.<sup>4</sup>

Academic cultures also have different kinds of conversations, and the conversation itself can be a principle of coherence. A disciplinary or interdisciplinary community hangs together in its conversations—in its journals and conventions, in bars and coffee shops, in classrooms and living rooms. It’s important to remember that one coherence of an ongoing conversation is not in its conclusions, but in the fact that it’s not conclusive. A good conversation, open to new tangents, new ideas, and even new participants, coheres by the commitment of participants to the conversation itself. It’s a commitment to the practice of learning by careful listening and thoughtful speaking, to the practice of discerning important questions and trying to answer them. When we know what we’re doing, that’s what American studies are; and that’s certainly what *Locating American Studies* expresses and elicits.

## What Do You Mean “We,” Masked Man?

*Locating American Studies* features essays that have challenged the scope of American studies inquiry. Some of them have asked us to reconsider Crevecoeur’s question “What then is the American?” Other essays have asked us to reconsider the question, “What then are these studies?” Our answers to these two questions tell us who “we” are. The results, it seems to me, have been mixed. While American studies has become increasingly inclusive in its definitions of “American,” it seems to have become more restrictive about the question of “studies.”

The essays by Nina Baym and Houston Baker and Ramon Gutierrez and Kevin Mumford and Scott Wong argue for the inclusion of groups intentionally omitted in earlier paradigms and practices of American studies. Essays like these have been invaluable to American studies, challenging our understanding of what counts as “American” and why, and these essays are both the strongest feature of *Locating American Studies* and of contemporary American studies. This collection documents and highlights the interventions that have led (very slowly but pretty surely) to the inclusion of so-called “others” (and a questioning of the category of “other”) in the investigations of American studies. It suggests that American studies has become more open to consideration of issues of gender and race and ethnicity. And it suggests that American studies can continue to be a primary site for the study of difference, and for the embodiment of difference in the academy.

But *Locating American Studies* has its silences and ellipses as well; these calls for inclusion inevitably have their own omissions. Seventeen essays obviously can’t do everything, but the omissions of this collection do suggest some things American studies scholars don’t generally think about very much or very well. The collection omits important topics like business and economics. If this collection is representative of American studies, we seem shy, as the many Americans do, about discussing politics and religion. We also seem reticent in examining our own lives, including many aspects of middle-class culture. There’s little here on American television and its tele-visions, on cars and automobility, on single-family homes and suburban lawns, and not much at all on the lives that many of *us* lead when we’re not at the office or in the classroom.

Too, while there’s no doubt about the importance of difference and division that has been so critical in recent American studies, I think that we can also productively think about what, if anything, Americans have in common besides TV and interstate highways. I don’t think, as Arthur Schlesinger and others do, that we’ve made too much of difference. We’re just beginning to discover what difference difference makes. But we generally speak of “identity politics” as that politics that derives from our differences from each other. In this formulation, our identity is defined by our uniqueness, our particularity, our peculiarity. But if you look it up in the dictionary, the word “identity” also means sameness—identical, as in mathematics. Perhaps we need to think about an identity politics that stresses

the sameness as much as the differences, that names the things we share and bear together, as well as the things that keep us apart. The fact that we can argue so easily about identity politics suggests to me that we share lots of values and assumptions, even if we don't understand or practice them the same way.

We are right to worry about "premature closure" in conceptualizing this commonality, but I think Janice Radway's idea of "intricate interdependencies" offers a way to think about differences in commonality, and the commonality of differences. In her 1998 presidential address to the American Studies Association, Radway suggests that recent scholarship in American studies has featured the intricate interdependencies that constitute cultural identities, ranging from the self to subcultures to the nation-state and the global economy. At any level, identity depends both on self-identification and on the identification of others. And the identification of others works in two ways: 1) "we" (whoever we are) are identified by others, and their view of us affects our view of ourselves, and 2) our "we-ness" depends on our identification of "others," people or groups who are "not us." And these interdependencies are not just conceptual: there are material interdependencies that also affect identities. In this complex sense, Radway's phrase "intricate dependencies" seems like a description of an ecosystem, and it would then be the task of American studies to consider the social ecology that is somehow the sum of these intricate interdependencies.<sup>5</sup>

A second way of thinking about who "we" are is to consider what we do—what disciplinary and methodological directions do we travel. Many of the essays in *Locating American Studies* ask for more methodological diversity, often because established methodologies have structurally privileged certain groups. R. Gordon Kelly's "Literature and the Historian," for example, challenges us to "read" in a different way, while George Lipsitz's "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen" asks us to listen more intently to the theories already embodied in popular culture. But even here, it seems to me that there's an implicit message that some disciplines and intellectual approaches are more equal than others.

*Locating American Studies* implicitly locates the interdiscipline mainly in the humanities, omitting a tremendous array of social science research methods. As Kathryn Kuhn and Wynne Moskop note in this issue of *American Studies*, one of the most notable things about reading *American Quarterly* in the fifties is the number of social scientists who were involved, and how central they were to the original mission of the journal. This is no longer the case, and it's worth asking why, especially since one of the main turns in American studies in the 1970s was supposed to be a shift from humanism to social science methods. Maybe the social scientists quantified themselves out of American studies. Maybe practitioners of "soft" disciplines like English and history are tougher than we think.

Even in the humanities, the essays in *Locating American Studies* favor texts—and not the generally the broadly-defined "texts" of contemporary cultural



studies. George Lipsitz invites investigation of a wide range of popular arts and performance, but most of the other essays are essentially literary or historical. We don't see much here of the visual arts, and we don't get much of a feel for material culture.

The interdisciplinarity of American studies has also caused practitioners in the field to slight the disciplines themselves. Sometimes it seems that American studies are as anti-disciplinary as interdisciplinary. Many of us (including me, in my worst moments) denigrate disciplinary work as we celebrate our own interdisciplinary inquiries. This superiority complex keeps us from including many people who could contribute to and learn from American studies. A good history, for example, is a good thing for American studies.

As we think about who "we" are, and who "we" would like to be, it seems to me that we might want to consider being more genuinely associational. In her presidential address "What's in a Name?" Janice Radway asked us to reconsider the name of the American Studies Association. She considered both the "American" and the "studies," but she didn't say much about the "Association." According to the American Heritage Dictionary—which should perhaps consider changing the "American" of its name too—an association is "an organized body of people who have some interest, activity, or purpose in common." American studies and its organizations are, of course, not very organized, but they are relatively inclusive. As Radway rightly notes, American studies has a tradition of openness. But the members of the Association are much more diverse than even Radway's address or this collection suggest, both in interdisciplinary terms and in intra-disciplinary terms. And this diversity is a good thing. We need people to write border histories, to explore the intricate interdependencies of complex identities. But we also need to associate with more conventional urban historians and environmental historians. We need historians schooled in theory, but our association would be enhanced by the stories of narrative historians as well. We should probably even associate with old-fashioned biographers. In English, we need deconstructionists and reconstructionists and postcolonial theorists. But we can still consort with people who prefer texts to contexts, and even, I think, with a few New Critics, because they read so well, if so narrowly. It would still be good to associate with social scientists. And in American studies, I'm still hoping to associate with somebody who does myth-and-symbol work as well as it can be done. These people, I fear, will not see themselves where we often locate American studies.

### **Are American Studies Just an Academic Question?**

All of the essays in *Locating American Studies* are academic. This observation is what Elizabeth Minnich would call a "blinding flash of the obvious." But it was by no means inevitable that *American Quarterly* would evolve into an entirely academic journal, or that American studies would be located almost exclusively within the academy. The first issue of *American Quarterly*, for

example, pledged that the journal “will attempt to find the common area of interest in which specialists of various kinds and the aware reader may meet. It will publish articles, of a speculative, critical, and informative nature, which will assist in giving a sense of direction to studies in the culture of America, past and present. Contributors, academic or nonacademic, will write for the lay reader who wishes to avoid the thinness of much popularization and the excesses of ingrown specialization.”<sup>6</sup>

*Locating American Studies* includes essays by professors for professors (or prospective professors). Almost none of them would be found in the *Reader’s Digest*, another essential journal of American studies. Indeed, I wonder whether any of them was ever reprinted in a publication not intended for classroom or professional use. And I worry that American studies are increasingly becoming “merely academic.” Are the questions we ask increasingly “academic questions”—questions that only an ivory-tower intellectual would ask?

These essays are not just academic; they are a particular sort of academic. The exclusive focus on scholarship implies an advanced research model of American higher education, where the “real work” of the faculty is publication. As Gene Wise suggests in “Some Elementary Axioms for an American Culture Studies,” many of us operate with a building-block model of information acquisition. The “contribution-to-knowledge” paradigm emphasizes the “producing mind” of the scholar, a mind that produces facts or data or interpretations that will be synthesized sometime in the future. Wise considers this strategy appropriate for a situation of information underload. But in a situation of information overload, which is where we are now, Wise argues instead for an ecological approach. “In knowledge as in the economy,” he claims, “our root problem now is not production, but *ecology*—which means more conscious concern for making fresh connections among existing things; more looking outward to the wider consequences of our information; more serious attention to questioning why we’re doing what we’re doing, and through what forms; more effort given to structuring all this productive activity into humanly manageable forms.”<sup>7</sup>

Such an ecological approach would expand our definitions of scholarship. In *Exiles from Eden*, Mark Schwehn notes that one of the most common complaints of American professors is “I don’t have enough time to *do my own work*.” What this often means is that “I’m spending too much time with teaching and students to do the research and writing that really counts in my profession.” But for most of us, one of the reasons why we’re doing what we’re doing is students; we’re trying to structure productive activity into humanly manageable forms. For a collection of academic essays, there’s precious little in *Locating American Studies* about teaching or students or pedagogy, topics which might well be considered a part of “the evolution of a discipline.”

Since most students will not profess American studies in the academy, it might also be worth thinking about practical consequences of American studies on their postgraduate lives. There’s virtually nothing in this collection from an

alternate academic tradition that promoted character formation, vocation, and service over advanced research. There's little discussion of what Wayne Booth calls the vocation of the intellectual, or of the service that intellectuals render to people outside of higher education. There's an implicit ethic to these essays, but nothing as explicit as the ethic expressed by Mark Hulsether in a 1993 assessment of American studies. Hulsether expressed his dissatisfaction with merely writing about "the endless play of diversity in cultural texts." Instead, he said, "I want to identify central power structures that have concrete consequences for everyday life, explore the roles of culture in relation to them, and—as far as possible—contribute to changing them in the interests of those who are excluded from power." Such an American studies practice and pedagogy would likely have serious consequences for students, both before and after graduation.<sup>8</sup>

Formally speaking, *Locating American Studies* is a collection of analytical expository essays. There's no poetry or narrative, no exploratory essays, no autobiography or memoir. The main person here is the third person. There's almost no humor. There's nothing like Dr. Seuss's fine poem on American academic life, "My Uncle Terwilliger on the Art of Eating Popovers," delivered appropriately at a college commencement ceremony:

My uncle ordered popovers  
from the restaurant's bill of fare.  
And when they were served,  
he regarded them with a penetrating stare . . .

Then he spoke great Words of Wisdom  
as he sat there on that chair:  
"To eat these things," said my uncle,  
"you must exercise great care.  
You may swallow down what's solid . . .

BUT . . .  
you must spit out the air!"

And as you partake of the world's bill of fare,  
That's darned good advice to follow.  
Do a lot of spitting out the hot air  
And be careful what you swallow.

Of course, the editors of this collection should not be faulted for the conventions of American academic life. But a volume like this does provide a good opportunity for readers to reconsider those conventions.

The implicit audience of this collection is not very large. Besides reviewers, I imagine the primary audience for this collection will be graduate students in

American studies. And for people hoping to become practitioners of American studies, this will be a marvelous resource. But it's sad to see that American studies seems to have so little relevance for so many Americans. The aims of this collection, and of a great deal of academic work in American studies (and the rest of the academy), are awfully modest.

Alice Kessler-Harris's "Cultural Locations: Positioning American Studies in the Great Debate" is an admirable exception, and it points to possible directions for American studies. So, too, do the essays by Paul Lauter and George Lipsitz in this issue of *American Studies*. Lauter asks us to think explicitly about the "cultural work" our academic work does. Lipsitz asks us to think about the politics of American studies—not just the politics of professors within the ASA, but the broader politics of education in a context of globalization.

I suspect that practitioners of American studies perform much more "cultural work" than is recorded in the pages of *American Quarterly* and other academic journals. I suspect that many of us are "going public," and that more than a few of us are "public intellectuals." But it would be good to have it reported, perhaps in a regular section of the journal called "Interventions." It would be good for us to share with each other how we try, in ways both large and small, to keep American studies from being "merely academic." And it would be good to see such reports anthologized in a second edition of *Locating American Studies*.

### **The Practicality of Impracticality?**

After we've helped students to understand American culture, then what? After the final exam, then what? At any given time, so *what?* What's the practical value American studies? The essays in this collection are generally silent about such questions.

"I like American studies," my students sometimes say, "but they're not practical." "I'm getting a double major," others insist, "because, even though I love American studies, my parents want me to study something practical." Students often contrast college life with the so-called "real world;" I once heard a student contrast professors and "real people." However scholars might eventually describe the intricate interdependencies of American identity, they will likely conclude that Americans are a practical people, who want to see that something pays. When students use the word "practical," they usually mean it as a synonym for "occupational." Since the work of American studies for college students isn't paid work, because these studies don't lead directly to jobs, students see American studies as impractical,

American studies could become more practical. The field already serves as a small academic employment service, keeping otherwise eccentric individuals off the streets (although in this regard it is not idiosyncratic, but simply a reflection of academia in general). It's a relatively small occupational niche where people with broad minds can find good work in a culture of narrow specializations. It also serves as good training for a variety of careers—in politics and policy, in

journalism and broadcasting, in advertising and advocacy groups. One St. Olaf American studies major even became Miss America. But I think it's unlikely that we can find jobs for all of our students, and even unlikelier that we would want to.

Still American studies exist, I think, for several practical reasons. As a site for the scholarly study of America and Americans, and their impact on the world—social, political, intellectual, and environmentally—American studies can be a way of paying attention to the moral ecology of everyday life. American studies can (and often do) focus on the goodness of the so-called “good life,” and offer both critiques and recommendations for making the good life better. American studies might even take justice as its particular purview, and it might consider whether Americans could invent institutions that would make it easier to be good.

In doing so, however, American studies would need to take as a model Emerson's American scholar, and not the pedant professoriate of the modern academy. If we were “American Scholars” in our classrooms, Man and Woman Thinking, we might even be able to show students the deep practicalities of good scholarship. Indeed, I'd like to suggest that, even in the classroom, American studies are as practical—or more practical—than American practical culture.

“Practical,” says the dictionary, involves practice, and learning through practice or action, rather than through theory, speculation or ideals. All of the disciplines of American studies are practiced daily, in and out of classrooms, as they have been for thousands of years. History and philosophy and cultural criticism have been practiced longer in human history than double-entry book-keeping or spreadsheets. At their best, the studies of American studies involve intensive practice for the imaginative leap, even though it's not yet an Olympic sport. They involve theory, but theory applied—like the theory of civil engineering—to bridges: to bridging the past and the present, the text and its readers, the language and its meanings. In an age when human skills are routinely replaced by machines, the skills of American studies persist in practice and action.

Something that's practical can be used or put into effect. In *Meaning Over Memory*, Peter Stearns suggests that the humanities offer practitioners transferable analytical skills—the ability to combine and decode diverse source materials; the ability to discriminate between interpretations of cultural issues; the ability to express and evaluate reasoned arguments; the ability to test theories applied to society and culture; the ability to think about the causes of cultural change; the ability to assess the impact of cultural factors on human institutions and activity; and the ability to compare cultural patterns to enhance understanding. Anybody using these analytical skills would be an informed voter in the presidential primaries; that most American voters haven't yet mastered these competencies explains a lot about the quality of presidential timber.<sup>9</sup>

To be practical is to be designed to do something simply, without a lot of elaboration. To be practical is to be level-headed, efficient and unspeculative. We

speak of practical clothes, or practical tools, and the skills of American studies are, in fact, practical tools. Empathy and understanding—both of self and others—are handy tools in a world inhabited by human beings. Knowing how cultures work and how change occurs can be useful in a real world of social beings. Critical consciousness and imagination enliven a variety of social—and political—situations. A person can employ thoughtfulness in almost all of life’s situations, even if thoughtlessness is more prevalent in contemporary culture. The ability to make meaning in a world of much meaninglessness is a practical talent.

But the main practicality of American studies, I think, is to show the impracticality of the so-called real world. In the real world, of nineteen major industrial nations, Americans are first in the world in greenhouse gas emissions, and first in contributing to acid rain; first in air pollutants per capita; first in forest depletion; first in paper consumption per capita; first in garbage per capita; first in hazardous waste per capita; first in gasoline consumption per capita, first in oil imports, and first in oil spills affecting our shores; first in TVs per capita; first in cars per capita, and first in use of cars instead of public transportation. Is that practical?<sup>10</sup>

In the real world, the United States is number one among leading industrialized nations in infant mortality, number one in percentage of low birth-weight babies, number one in children and old people in poverty, number one in inequalities of wealth, number one in big homes and in homelessness, number one in credit cards and in private consumption, and number one in executive salaries and inequalities of pay. We’re number one in time devoted to TV, and last in books published per capita. Is this practical?<sup>11</sup>

Too often, the paean of practicality is a call to conform to the world the way it is, whether or not it is the way it ought to be. When practicality is an efficient means to an inhuman end, then the practical is practically immoral. The practical world often accomplishes so much because it encompasses so little. The dictionary doesn’t say so, but, practically speaking, to be practical is to set aside whole dimensions of the human person—aesthetic, spiritual, ethical, and sometimes even political. The purely practical is a structural game of “Let’s Pretend” that asks us to act as if human beings weren’t really fully human. Accepting our conformity and our compliance, this practicality rejects the rest of us. At their best, American studies remind us of our humanness. By keeping our minds apart from the world’s presumed practicality, they free us to wonder how, practically, we might become as good as we could be.

*Locating American Studies* gives us many resources for the ongoing project of American studies. As the old saying goes, when you come to a crossroads, and you’re trying to figure out which way you want to go, it’s helpful to remember which way you came from. *Locating American Studies* locates us in a tradition of much creativity and promise, and invites us to write the next provocative chapters.

## Notes

1. Hennig Cohen, ed., *The American Culture: Approaches to the Study of the United States* (Boston, 1968); Hennig Cohen, *The American Experience: Approaches to the Study of the United States* (Boston, 1968); David Stannard, ed., *Death in America* (Philadelphia, 1975); Daniel Walker Howe, ed., *Victorian America* (Philadelphia, 1976); Leila Zenderland, ed., *Recycling the Past: Popular Uses of American History* (Philadelphia, 1978).
2. Jay Mechling, Robert Merideth, and David Wilson, "American Culture Studies: The Discipline and the Curriculum," *American Quarterly* 25 (1973): 363-89. This essay, more than any other, is responsible for the "anthropological turn" in American Studies.
3. Joel Jones, "The Myth of Methodology," *American Quarterly* 31 (1979): 382-87.
4. On "the connecting mind" of American Studies, see Gene Wise, "Some Elementary Axioms for an American Culture Studies," *Prospects* 4 (1979): 530-31.
5. Janice Radway, "What's in a Name?" *American Quarterly* 51 (1999): 1-32.
6. "Editorial Note," *American Quarterly* 1 (1949): 2.
7. Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York, 1993), p. viii. Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations* (Homewood, IL, 1973), p. xv.
8. Mark Hulsether, "Evolving Approaches to U.S. Culture in the American Studies Movement: Consensus, Pluralism, and Contestation for Cultural Hegemony," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 23 (1993): 1-55.
9. Peter Stearns, *Meaning Over Memory: Recasting the Teaching of Culture and History* (Chapel Hill, 1993), 153-160.
10. Andrew L. Shapiro, *We're Number One! Where America Stands—and Falls—in the New World Order* (New York, 1992).
11. Shapiro, *We're Number One!*