Undisciplined Multiplicity: The Relevance of an American Cultural Studies

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When I began to think seriously about the issue at hand the first thing I did was to get on the Internet. During my explorations I found a site, supported by the Communications Department at the University of Iowa called "BorderCrossings," one of many pages which provides a glimpse into a future American cultural studies in which disciplinary boundaries are shredded by the accelerating invention of characters, spaces, and relationships only tenuously connected to the familiar. These web sites introduce the "lurker" to transexuality, queer theory, minority discourse, transhumanism, and a potentially posthuman future civilization. Here the technophilic imagination destabilizes the immutable truths of race, ethnicity, and gender along with the bodies on which they are written. Political borders, the cartographical limits of place and identity, are made porous by new forms of electronic traffic. Sites such as "BorderCrossings" exemplify the boom in cultural inventiveness brought about by modern communications technologies. With this new thrust of techno-social innovation comes another bout of utopian hope: internet-pioneers predict that their on-line "global village" will produce identities and spaces that slip by the traditional forms of governance and the conceptual tools provided by our disciplines. While some doubt the emancipatory potential of the Internet, bounded as it is by the dominant capitalistic ethos, advocates and critics agree that the technological edge it represents has become an impor-

tant accessary of middle-class thought and action. How does this brave new world effect the (inter)disciplinary mission of American Studies?

Practitioners of American Studies have always professed the ideal of interdisciplinarity, the conceptual springboard that makes the field unique. American Studies has been defined as a "perspective", a "movement" that takes a holistic rather than a disciplinary approach to its subject. Despite the internal methodological battles between social scientists and humanists the field, at its best, has remained uneasy with the exclusions necessary for discipline formation. Discipline, however, remains a key fact of academic life. Curricula, tenure, promotion and publication all hinge on tacit acknowledgement of this fact. As an interdisciplinary institution American Studies has often made its peace with discipline even as it pursued broadly defined research agendas.

For earlier generations of Americanists, the foundation of the field was provided by its object. Despite the important diversity of their interests, methods, or ideological commitments, the object of their critical gaze was America. That America may have been enigmatic but it appeared to have geo-political boundaries, a particular character, a national literature, and a cultural core, all accessible to disinterested inquiry. While searching for the "American character," for example, the well trained scholar could be certain that he (most often) would find something similar to what his colleague had found or would find: the American Adam, dream or mind, the frontier, the garden, or the virgin land. David M. Potter, for example, knew that if it was no longer possible to find the American character in race then it could be found in abundance. The essential nature of the entity, a nation defined by unifying and stable characteristics, remained unchallenged.

The discipline-like security which marked pre-cultural studies Americanist work was predicated on the presumptive stability of its object. That old object of study has disintegrated before the political and technological movements of the past thirty years. The creation of new information-based technologies helped change the landscape of accessible culture as the old machine-based industries declined or moved to the third world. Moreover, the contemporary politics of race, class, and gender have transformed the interpretive projects of the American academy. The establishment of area studies (initially around race) and science, technology, and society programs helped change the subject of academic inquiry and, in many ways, our understanding of the object of study. Thus for Gene Wise, writing in 1979, American Studies without a unifying consensus. In his important treatment, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies" he argues that the breakup occurred during the political ferment of the 1960s and the ways in which it transformed American life. As the world changed and new subjects came into being Wise found the American Studies movement required a new approach to meet the challenge. A reformation of the field,

he argued, could only come about by configuring research around a concept of culture borrowed from social science. In Wise's dramatic account this reorganization of the American Studies movement was a reaction to forces owing little to its mainstream. The avant-garde in American cultural criticism had shifted to the study of cultures produced by race, ethnicity, gender, and mass communication among others (Wise 1979, 319). New fields like black and women's studies changed the subject by focusing on hitherto disregarded histories and actors.

The proliferation of area studies did not, however, disrupt the foundational core of American Studies. Instead, the "new culture studies" that emerged as a response allowed the American character to be split into subcharacters bound by an overarching persona. The American character became hyphenated; the investigated and investigating subjects could be African, Asian, even Mexican, women and popular media appeared on the research calendar, but all in relation to an undisturbed American core. That commonsensical liberal pluralism has now mutated into multiculturalism. At its most radical multiculturalism functions as a polycentrism that fragments our object of study in ways that pluralism could and did not. Shohat and Stam argue that the disintegration of universal American man, the problematization of an "unthinking Eurocentrism," and the not unsurprising revelation that power always matters, creates a cultural and scholarly landscape quite different from that inhabited by classical American Studies (Shohat and Stam 1994, 46-49). Under this rubric the American object and its subjects are disarticulated into autonomous units connected by no certain terms. Ideally, hyphenated identities no longer point to an imperial core. The disruptions caused by this multiculturalism have entered American Studies largely through intellectual trends which originated outside of the American academy. The theoretical and methodological impact of British cultural studies, French poststructuralism, and postcolonial scholarship has made possible an American cultural studies that defines the U.S. as a transnational matrix with no fixed center or periphery. By focusing our attention on popular culture and the political relations embedded in everyday life cultural studies has reinforced the lessons taught by area studies. As an academic movement committed to the critique of power relations, cultural studies has an explicitly political agenda. Graeme Turner has argued that "cultural studies defines itself through its disruption of the boundaries between disciplines, and through its ability to explode the category of 'the natural'—revealing the history behind those social relations we see as the products of a neutral evolutionary process" (Turner 1990, 6). What it brings to American Studies, therefore, is a resistance to naturalized politics particularly those which may be encoded in the disciplinary production of knowledge.

Cultural studies has allowed scholars in American Studies to question and partially dismantle the normalized division between elite and popular

culture, and has opened a space for serious study of oppositional histories and everyday practices. It provides the theoretical and material impetus to move us beyond the literary reductionism which sees the world only as text. Most importantly, cultural studies allows us to remap the zones connecting nation-states and thus to change the meaning of America from a self-enclosed citadel to a landscape of hybrid and rapidly shifting cultures. Thus the focus of American cultural studies has moved from defining the reified entities of the classical discipline to revelatory (re)constructions of subordinate realities. An American cultural studies presents us with a subject in constant motion. The culture core has evaporated into a cultural debate.

There is a renewed commitment in American Studies to the "unthought implications" of "texts and bodies of thought" (Lears 1985, 585) and a concern with the critical influence of "absent structures" on existing and emergent realities (Stone 1996, 4). Increasing numbers of scholarly studies direct attention to the repressed or unseen in the idea of America as an exceptional site of cultural and community formation. Instead, they reveal a noisily uneasy nation shaped more by its relationship to "others" than by a culture core located somewhere in Dorothy's Kansas. What this implies, as Shohat and Stam might argue, is a reconception of American Studies as a polycentric interdiscipline whose investigating subjects and investigated objects are both "multiple, unstable, historically situated, the products of ongoing differentiation and polymorphous identifications" (Shohat and Stam 1994, 49).

Over the past twenty years emergent technologies in artificial intelligence, robotics, and computing have, to some extent, actualized the contingent and discursive realities (and identities) theorized and examined through poststructuralism, postmodernism, and cultural studies. A significant portion of postindustrial America has gone on-line to create an electronic country whose real estate is visible only through the mediation of search engines and web browsers. The Internet collapses the spaces and borders imposed by nations. This medium is shaped by the traffic between nodes and web sites rather than stable landmarks or boundaries. The America integrated into this global network is a dominant but hardly exceptional player. Scholars of the Internet find themselves hacking into a reality in which new subjects of analysis appear and disappear at a rapid rate. Raced, gendered and class-based identities are no longer singular, stable or predictable; they are multiple and in constant play. The national borders which anchor our sense of community have been made translucent by the computer-based, Internet-enhanced mediation of international telephony. While we all still function as citizens in the classic sense, some of us have undergone a partial transformation into Harawaian cyborgs, technocultural avatars inhabiting a transnational and hybrid discursive and

iconographic space. Even the supposedly stable truths of biological identity have lost force as we record the emergence of an imagined transgendered, posthuman civilization fostered by visionary experimentalists and popularizers of robotics, artificial intelligence, medicine, and genetic engineering.

The utopian longings nourished in the middle class by these emergent technologies are similar to those described by Joseph Corn in his classic study, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950*. The desire to conquer, if not to alter radically, nature and human nature which marked the "airmindedness" of the early twentieth century has found new expression as we approach the millennium. Given the promises and failures of technology a strong dose of skepticism is entirely warranted and should guide our attempts to evaluate new techno-utopian claims. The development of new computer-based technologies, however, the intellectual formations they represent, and the narratives they produce have made possible complex artificial landscapes and radically transformed identities and relationships. Those concerned about the fragmentation of the old culture core will retire to their bunkered communities, finding little to praise in such a world. But they will find that the American cultures which result do not sit still. Virtual reality is yesterday's news, "deep interactivity" (between physical and electronic environments) is tomorrow's. How do we account for this as yet undisciplined multiplicity through an American Studies that takes culture as its object? What theories or axioms do we follow in establishing research agendas? What subjects do we allow into our classrooms? Which social formations do we respect?

The papers in this journal on American Studies' movement from culture core to cultural studies presents us with a field marked by a wide variety of opinion rather than a confirmed consensus. The contributors defend very different interpretations of what is meant by "cultural studies" and the utility of its indiscipline to the interdisciplinary project of American Studies. On reflection it strikes this participant that at the heart of our debates lies the struggle to define the core theories and practices of Americanist work.

What interests me about the papers written by my fellow contributors is how personal they are. None of them take the position that the work they defend is objective. This common strategy gives these papers an air of testimonial or confession that indicates, by turns, the seriousness and uncertainty with which they approach contemporary cultural criticism. During a 1990 conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign called "Cultural Studies Now and In the Future," Donna Haraway commented that in cultural criticism, you never take on that to which you are not yourself vulnerable.[1] For contemporary historians and critics of culture choosing to study material that has been important in one's own production, foregrounding the very personal nature of a project

has become a necessary strategy. It serves, perhaps, the same function as the apologias of an earlier generation of historian that begged the reader's indulgence for being unable to present a complete account of their subject. Declaring personal interest is not now done in a spirit of apology but in recognition of the partial, incomplete and always vested nature of any history or interpretation. Haraway's notion of vulnerability has to do with responsible scholarship, and is not a disavowal of serious intellectual effort. The scholar, she implies, has a responsibility not to stand above her subject in an arrogant display of omniscience, condescending to vulnerable participants, but to engage it on its own ground.

In his valuable study of media fandom, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins emphasizes the importance of exploring a culture from within rather than from without. He acknowledges that it was not "academic curiosity" which led him into his course of study but his "fannish enthusiasm" for the narratives and the community within his subset of media culture. In other words, Jenkins's work is motivated by his desire to understand why media culture has the power to move him and so many others. His study, while "not overtly autobiographical . . . is nevertheless deeply personal" (Jenkins 1992, 5). As such it enables him to stake out a dual position both as a scholar who brings a wealth of training to his project and as a participant who has access to otherwise unavailable knowledges (Jenkins 1992, 6).

Haraway and Jenkins represent a cultural studies methodology that eschews condescending to popular culture or to the people who produce and consume it. Their approach is controversial, for the scholar who uses it cannot hide his or her own political commitments. The work becomes explicitly engaged and interested rather than scientifically "objective." The scholar is forced to leave his perch atop the safety of a grand tradition and expose himself to often nasty debates about the kinds of questions he asks, the ideas he considers valuable, and the people and histories he deems worthy of attention.[2]

During the years that I have pursued my own work in the cultural study of science and technology I have often been asked a question that can still surprise me: what's at stake in it for you? This question is fueled by a cornucopia of assumptions about the academy, its relation to popular technoculture, and my place as a raced subject within both. In answering this question I find myself having to fight the increasingly boring canon war, declare the importance of studying popular culture, and the right of African American scholars to range farther afield than our own backyards. Let me, however, restate this question in a more interesting way. Given my history, my multiple subject positions within the United States as a Mid-Western, middle-class, college educated, African American male, what does it mean for me to be involved in American cultural studies and to

pursue an interest in emergent technocultures? And what light does my involvement shed on the intellectual and cultural fashions that have changed the subject(s) of American Studies?

The importance of experience in the papers in this issue by American Studies indicates that personal commitments ground the participants' sense of whether they can embrace, reject, or cautiously support theoretical perspectives and practices arising from "outside" the American community. And those experiences are filtered through very broad presuppositions about American reality and its connection to the human realities which define the rest of the world. These presuppositions may be described as two general forces operating within American Studies: on one hand we have an internalism which carries forward the common sense assumptions of particular aspects of the classic discipline; on the other we have an externalism representing contemporary add-ons, perspectives that break with the old core while retaining a deeply buried allegiance to it. We are not, however, dealing with a flat dualism between opposing sides. As force-filled discourses there are strong and weak versions of both perspectives which allow for some sharing of material, terms, political concerns, and professional and personal experience.

The internalist forces of our conversation are marked by a commitment to defining the limits of our object of study. Here we find that whether or not the internalist rises in defense of either, there is a cultural core representing American values and materials. The nation organizes common sense and the limits of our political and cultural lives. The national experience is a common one in which internal conflict is more "brotherly" than factional.[3] This perspective explains passports, borders, disciplines, and languages not as indifferently determined representations of imagined communities, but as emblems of inevitable and organically determined community formations.

A strong internalist within American Studies will find calls for recognizing differences, hybridities, and transnationalisms irritating rather than enlightening. Accepting perspectives other than those found within a commonly accepted culture core will, from this perspective, seem either pathetic or foolhardy. The recognition that individuals may act or think from American histories very different from that sanctioned by a privileged center will seem a violation of form, a prelude to destructive fragmentation. The weak internalist, however, will allow for the possibility of cultural difference so long as it is organized around the center. She will admit that culture is not a transparent or unproblematic category within American Studies, and that some type of theoretical discrimination is necessary if we are to understand what we are talking about. She will, however, draw the line at admitting perspectives on the American situation drawn from beyond our borders. Where, she will ask, is our commitment to producing

understandings grounded in American ways? Whatever its internal com-
plexities (and this can mean serious disagreement between its strong and
weak varieties) the internalist position dismisses the Americanization of
cultural studies as either something to be taken seriously or as providing
anything more nourishing than home-grown axioms.

Across the field we have an externalism that is either open to or
heavily invested in allowing cultural studies to serve as the Americanist
vanguard. From this position American culture is a cloud rather than a
billiard ball: it is easy enough to see but it is difficult to touch and its
limits are hard to define. Its objectives and subjects change as it drifts into
other clouds, producing positive and negative poles, sparks, and hailstones.
The nation is a metanarrative containing forceful conservatisms and vigor-
ous dissents; conflict is neverending, sometimes bloody, always consequen-
tial. This perspective also acknowledges the existence of passports, bor-
ders, disciplines and languages, but as contested human constructs which
provide no ready index to the good or the inevitable.

A weak externalist in American Studies will see calls taking seriously
minority histories and literatures, the fluidity of national experience, and
the impact that these may have on the classroom as intriguing rather than
disturbing. Their strategy is not to raise rhetorical firebreaks between old
standards and the new wave but to ask what they share and how they
differ. The strong externalist will go farther, insisting that history does not
stop at the national border. The novelties encountered in travel will serve
to make being American and being from America less an act of God and
more a powerful subjectification that troubles even as it secures. And
power is not an untapped, invisible potential resting in an undifferentiated
core but a radiation that can be detected within and between living bodies.
This physical metaphor does not hide the political interestedness of the
externalists. By taking seriously the British and continental marxisms that
produced cultural studies, they seek an understanding of American culture
that explains more than the center stage.

As the reader undoubtedly will have guessed, my political position,
my research interests, and my theoretical commitments engender in me a
suspicion of arguments favoring American exceptionalism and a potent
culture core, no matter how well-intentioned. While it is clear that the
internalist position, as represented by Watts, hopes to be inclusive, and
perhaps, as represented by Mechling, generous, it imposes clear limits on
who carries the authority to define and dispose of American culture. The
externalist side of the field gives me maneuvering room. The perspectives,
theories, tools, and attitudes that are its constituents engage my sympathies
because they privilege comparative reading of a complex reality that never
finds full and final articulation. The implication of the internalist position
is that American racial politics, for example, may be traced to an immacu-

late conception within the United States. At its logical extreme, an exceptionalist theory of race and class would have Frederick Douglass disappear somewhere in the mid-Atlantic in the late 1840s only to reappear in Boston two years later. Naturally most practitioners would readily acknowledge the importance at home of Douglass's speeches to and interaction with white workingmen and dissident elites in the United Kingdom. My point is that the internalist paradigm of American exceptionalism represents a break between theory and practice: while accepting the importance of such historical traffic, it provides no grounds for theorizing an America formed out of a continuous movement between nations. This lack of theoretical grounding becomes a serious weakness when we attempt to analyze such contemporary phenomena as the migratory habits of capital and labor, domestic race relations, and the Internet. My externalism, therefore, emerges from a search for rich conceptual tools, a generous range of intellectual sympathies, and a willingness to allow dissenting voices agency within our research agendas.[4]

In so far as the production of knowledge reflects that which it studies I imagine that the fluidity of contemporary American culture can and does find its match in the scholarly projects produced from within American Studies. In any field, when we prescribe any kind of positive action or research agenda we run the risk of producing a disciplinary normality that will freeze what we do into particular forms. It may be that we will have to recognize that the theorization of our interdisciplinary practice will have to tolerate complexity and contradiction, and that a ritualized rejection of disciplinary or cultural purity is not only desirable but periodically necessary. In doing so we might establish (in our minds if not in our institutions) a disciplinary "in-between" (to use Herbert Blau's term) that would allow us to think across borders even as we redraw them (Blau 1996, 274-275). This move could be seen as a tactical empiricism which recognizes moments of closure, of particular positions on which we can confer meaning, and accepts their evanescent quality. The difficulty will be to avoid totalizing measures that seek to impose eternal truth on transient realities.

Notes

1. Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: Science Fiction, Fictions of Science, and Feminist Theory," Session III: "Fictions of Science and Technology," an unpublished talk presented at the Cultural Studies Conference, Urbana-Champaign, 5 April 1990.

2. These debates are not new. It is not history but nostalgia which assumes that politics and special pleadings have only recently become a part of the academic's stock in trade.

3. The idea that political conflict in America is brotherly rather than nastily oppositional is a popular one. It serves as the core principle behind several Civil War movies and television miniseries produced during the 1980s such as *The Blue and the Grey* and *North and South.*

4. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) provides a good example of where an American cultural studies is leading us, particularly in the field of African American Studies. By avoiding exceptionalist and essentialist paradigms he recovers aspects of the American experience that would remain otherwise invisible.

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