To Kvetch and Define a Field

Richard P. Horwitz

> **kvetch** (kvech or k´vech) *vi.* [ModYid] to complain obsessively about trivial or unalterable conditions, thereby showing that you are not yet brain-dead. See *mishigas.*

Preface

This essay is a three-part commentary on recent visions of American Studies. Part One is quite personal, bordering on a rant. I try to evoke some of what it has felt like to live within the field during the past couple of decades. Part Two offers a definition of the field today, some serviceable norms and variants, as they appear in colleges and universities. And Part Three is a defense of that definition, including cautionary, personal and institutional tales. It is intended to anticipate, largely via caricature, ways that diverse people pursuing American Studies might best describe what they will be doing in the future. Although each of the three parts might be read separately, I hope they together evoke a sense of the field that is worth considering.

I. An American Studies Experience

When Norm Yetman approached me on behalf of MAASA with the plenary question—"From Culture Concept to Culture Studies?"—I must admit leaping at the chance. The opportunity seemed so luscious that even I was left suspicious.

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I could understand why old friends might call on me, either because rounds of professional courtesy left me in someone's debt or because they counted on my propensity for indiscretion to liven things up. I am frequently accused of being obsessive and whiny but rarely bland. Whether or not I was, in effect, being set up like Howard Stern for a guest spot on "The 700 Club," the motivation of my hosts was understandable. But what was the attraction for me? An audience might welcome something "provocative," but why would anyone want to be a provocateur? What associated agenda could be so ominous as to challenge my own capacity for self absorption? All that MAASA requested was someone to catch currents in the field over the past quarter century—the way the wind has been blowing, so to speak—and to track gusts to leeward. What could be so stirring in the prospect of miming a wind sock?

Given the breadth of the subtitle, it could be the Andy Rooney or Chicken Little welling up in me. The topic unleashes a temptation to air every paranoid delusion and pet peeve accumulated since I was a kid. I declared an undergraduate major in American Civilization at the University of Pennsylvania as a teenager nearly thirty years ago, when my teachers were first honing "the culture concept." The major was at once high-serious enough to be intellectually respectable and outlandish enough to be hip. It was a cover for a little community organizing with Students for a Democratic Society, for reading ex-slave narratives, studying commercial architecture, folklore and fieldwork, chomping cheese steaks and dodging thugs in West Philly. As long as courses were passed and tuition paid, I also got to dodge the office on North Broad Street that sorely wanted my butt in Vietnam. Asking me to reflect on changes since then is a little like asking a Dead Head (well, at least when Garcia was alive), "How's the band been doing?"

It would be nice to begin with a simple benchmark, the way things stood in American Studies back when "the culture concept" was first the rage, but it is apt to be mixed up with memories of adolescence and an era that GenXers have already heard way too much about. A single image that may suffice can be drawn from a senior seminar in AmCiv (almost exactly twenty-five years ago) that I took with John Caughey (who was later among the first in a long line of Penn purgees). We were talking about contemporary American values, greed and arrogance, oil conglomerates, misogyny, nuclear holocausts, white racism, and the plundering of the planet. I distinctly remember one session, the first of several, that we agreed to end early, just because these things were too urgent or depressing to cage in a classroom.

I suppose it is the mood of such moments, the mixture of privilege, naiveté, fear and loathing, that seems to so linger. The paper that I arranged for double duty that term—for the seminar in AmCiv and another in anthropology—teased dominant American values from *Naked Lunch*. William Burroughs was for me what Walt Whitman was for my predecessors, and Cora DuBois was my I. A. Richards. That choice might give you an idea of how the "past," back upwind, seems to me. The culture concept emerged during a period in which I was trying

to grow up and do right in a place that seemed horribly wrong. I fell in love and got married, successfully resisted the draft (a rear-guard tour of duty in itself), and worked on marathon committee meetings, full of PLP-versus-SDS intrigue, to organize marches on Washington, that the President gleefully ignored. On surrounding rooftops fellow baby boomers looked down through rifle scopes, knowing that protest-singing flower children and Joe-Hill impersonators were hardly a significant threat. There surely were much better ways for us to have met or to have gone our separate ways.

These were formative, American-studies times for me—not all that different, I gather (at least in their conventionally unconventional quality), from those of prior and following generations, in as well as outside the United States. Whether properly classified under "myth," "hegemony," "culture," ("counter-"or "sub-") or even "lifestyle enclave," the memories are not particularly sweet. They chafe back to attention, like grit in socks after a walk on the beach. An acquaintance in the Psychology Department (where a luscious topic is more like "funding trends in psychometrics") recently introduced me: "This is Rich Horwitz. He's a Professor of American Studies. I am not sure what that is, but I gather they hate the United States."

I don't think I hate the United States or consider hating anything (or for that matter, loving it) among the things that my degrees credential or students pay me to do. It is a familiar, reasonable misunderstanding of my *kvetching,* which actually does seem at home in the field. The only kindred definition that I find more seriously off-putting is the Oedipal variant that can be heard around American Studies Association meetings of late, where even the "slave market" is weak. Unemployed ABDs or under-employed itinerants blow their last eight dollars on a cup of Hilton latte and wonder how great it would be, if only they could rescue the field from red-necked hegemones. I have to wonder if they are referring to the likes of me or the authors and teachers whose legacy, like it or not, I carry.

To hear the most recent round of self-righteousness, you would think that those seminars, twenty-five or even fifty years ago, could have been mistaken for "Paradise of Bachelors," or the ones last week for a "Tartarus of Maids."[1] You would think that the current crop of cultural-studies folk is the first really to care about students, to face a job shortage, to be suspicious of capitalism, dominant ideologies or careerists. No amount of theorizing, instantiating, or standpointing can pull that off without sacrificing solidarity and a chunk of truth. Correcting that misimpression, insofar as it exists, is surely part of the lusciousness of the challenge for me. Thus doth I protest too much.

Whatever my rating on the latest, more-radical-than-thou scale, the score does concern me, if only to maintain membership in the opposition party, that "progressive" minority which is the academic majority. I have always found greater comfort in being the source than the subject of complaints. Workmates in the humanities and qualitative social sciences almost demand as much, while my

workmates on the farm consider it interesting. (They tend to be less doctrinaire, anyway.) Hence, like more than a few of my colleagues, I have felt encouraged to go from adolescence to mid-life crisis without passing through adulthood. No one whom I have met in American Studies, at least in the United States, spent evenings harrumphing in walnut-paneled, white-guy preserves, swigging brandy and sucking cigars. Yes, there were and remain inexcusable gender and race inequities in the field itself (though I have often found them worse outside than inside the U.S.). We are all responsible for challenging such injustice, especially those of us (yes, the likes of me) who benefit from them over the short run, but that is hardly to say we put them there. They did not originate in professorial practices—missed opportunities to "adequately theorize" or to sound sufficiently "radical" when published in a university-press book or read aloud under chandeliers in a convention ballroom. The men and women who contributed to American Studies, back when the "culture concept" was hotter than "cultural studies," were not all that different in their political and cultural commitments than people who currently make the academic rounds. We might even be able to laugh about our lore with some sophistication and affection, rather than leaving humor to the cultural right.

We were not all white guys, and many of us were also only very recently and tentatively awarded "whiteness" for reasons that, we knew, were more for others' detriment than for our benefit. (I wish Pat Buchanan would speak of that history, too.)[2] Racial tensions on campus were fierce enough, especially under the Rizzo reign of terror, that no one could forget how deeply white privilege was understood and resented.[3] Most of us had profound doubts about a nation-state that was using a generation born on both sides of the Pacific for cannon fodder. The daily tally of maimed, missing and dead was a drone on the morning and evening news as health tips are today.

The academic job market was bad enough even then that classmates actually assumed a Ph.D. had little-to-no cash value, except in a "straight" world that was even more "in league with the war machine." Whining, as I say, was cool, but whining about your own job prospects was uncool, a sign (however mistaken) of disrespect for people whose dreams resembled our fall-backs. And there were much more thrilling substances to abuse than brandy.

Memories of living through all of that and professionally identifying with American Studies are thoroughly intertwined. So, as I reconsidered the invitation from MAASA—"How's the band been doing?"—I realize I might go overboard. I resolved to keep a hand on the rail. I also had to face a simple fact: the invitation for this paper calls for a more mature response than I am inclined to deliver. I imagine, for example, assembling, for the umpteenth time, a survey of the literature in American Studies over the past sixty-plus years: books, articles, course syllabi, conferences proceedings, et cetera. (I have had to do something like that to teach the graduate methods course nearly every year since my first job in 1975.) Then, sort off a couple of piles from the last twenty-five years, one for

items with "culture-concept" and the other with "cultural-studies" trademarks. Make yet smaller piles of similarities and differences. Craft an essay that begins with "on the one hand" to introduce the smaller sub-sub-heap; transition with an "on the other hand," leading to a summary of the larger sub-sub-heap. Conclude with a humble, balanced contribution to unnamed, pitiful others who have heretofore over- or under-estimated the relative significance of one or the other heap. Done.

Nah.

There are already a large number of published works that have taken on such a challenge and done a better job of it than I could, especially since I am writing this in Hong Kong where access to the latest English-language material is a little more difficult than it is in Europe and in the United States[4] I would get two words out, and somebody would wave yet another hot-off-the-press Routledge edition in my face, proving that I was hopelessly out of touch. Other articles in this issue are better able to handle such a challenge. Whatever I have to contribute to a discussion will have to take a different tack.

One of the most inspiring precedents I have witnessed in the past few years was staged for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the extremely influential Department of American Studies at the University of Minnesota. Never mind that they decided not to mention that I had taught there (in fact, had turned down more secure job offers for the chance—how naive!—to make a difference in the belly of the beast) or that, outside the confines of this particular love feast, a few faculty were engaged in a blood feud. On this occasion, everyone took the high road together.

I was most impressed by a staged exchange between Leo Marx and George Lipsitz, who simply refused to take the dumb-choice bait: "myth and symbol" in the tragically flawed, distant past versus "cultural studies" in the gleaming present (presumably with "the culture concept," of Penn rather than Minnesota vintage, a forgettable detour). They even avoided the decorous Whiggish salve, whereby the prior generation is credited with doing the best they could and with clearing the way for progress, which inevitably ensued. Instead, they improvised more circumstantial and controlled comparisons, finding plenty of credit and blame to go around.[5]

I am quite certain that most of their agreement cannot be chalked up to gender or class solidarity, though clearly it was there, too. Although speaking English with an American academic accent can be considered a hegemonic act, they showed that good use could be made of it. Even if they were discursively duped or a bit disingenuous in deference to the occasion, I think they were right to recognize great continuity in the field. At least when I reread classic manifestos—such as *American Quarterly* essays by Wise or Mechling, written before the latest British invasion hit Jones Beach—they seem to hold up pretty well.[6]

There are, of course, giant gaps. In particular, (as Wise admitted) institutional considerations—most particularly, those related to hierarchical relations of

nation-state, race, class, gender, and sexuality—were given nowhere near the prominence they deserve. But I think their rise in prominence is more easily credited to activists who demanded attention to those concerns than to people who hung out in British universities or who crafted American renditions of the latest monograph on 007 or working-class lads.[7] I do not mean to belittle the overall importance of cultural studies or even to restrict all usage of the expression to its Birmingham descendants. But I do want to emphasize both more long-term continuities in the field and extremely valuable changes that can be credited to people who were responding to oppressions and inspiration outside as well as inside hallowed halls in the U.K. or the U.S.

What have been the conceptual changes in the field over the last twenty-five years and the ones that have the most staying power? I have been presuming everyone knows the answer and, if not, that it ought to be obvious: the consideration of diversity beyond the United States border and within it, especially the ways that certain sorts of social stratification matter—those based on nationality, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and (in appropriate measure one day, I pray) class. And these items were put on the agenda by people—many of them better represented in university kitchens and maintenance departments than lecture halls—who have personal experience with violence, neglect, la migra (The Immigration and Naturalization Service), and obscenities yelled from passing cars. These were also people who grew up with loved ones who refused to accept hate and fear (or at least used them creatively) and who claimed pleasures of their own, as their ancestors have done for generations.

Many of them and their allies within the hallowed halls also took substantial encouragement from American Studies. For example, at the University of Iowa as elsewhere, both the African-American Studies and the Women's Studies Programs began when diverse students and staff campaigned for them. American Studies responded by supplying staff and funds that helped inspire or shame the Dean into providing some, too. Although the American Studies Program had many fewer resources than, say, English, Communications, or History (not to mention central administration, where they actually do have a taste for walnut and brandy), ours was the only department or program to tithe itself (for several years, about 50 percent of the resources that we were free to allocate) and to require all of our students to participate in those programs. Of course, we had mixed feelings when those programs requested autonomy, but we supported those requests, continuing the commitment we made at the outset, with no talk of debts when they earned substantial resources of their own. After all, we were not contributing to "someone else's" interest; it was ours, too. These are not memories of the Sixties or Seventies, but initiatives that intensified then and continue even today, precisely when larger and larger numbers of scholars in allegedly allied fields are coming to the meager trough of American Studies and asking, "Well, now that we all do cultural studies, what do we need you folks for? What are you old farts bellowing about? Are you trying to be exclusionary?"

As I say, *kvetching* appears to be a pervasive habit (the academic's *mishigas),* but I hope it is now clear that there is a source for mine. The wind has never blown very strongly in the direction of American Studies, and I fear that come-latelies misunderstand the value of wind in our sails in addition to their own, even if we are all, at the moment, flying "cultural-studies" colors. I think their predecessors may have seen that value better, albeit in a more distant past when higher education was less strapped. For example, many programs, including my own at Iowa, originally began only because regular departments—English, in particular—provided support. In the 1930s-60s, they did for us what we did for those "women-and-minority" operations in the 1970s-to-present. But now debts, (including bogus claims by departments that were miserly in the first place) are coming due, under the cover of avoiding duplication in our allegedly common, cultural-studies mission.

The difference in our responses to intellectual compatibility highlight what I think of as the fresh breeze that has long blown through the field of American Studies. It was there even before the days when the "the culture concept" fortified it. It remains dear to many of us still, and it has little to do with "cultural studies" or, for that matter, any particular body of literature or research regimen. It is hardly to be found in younger operations like ethnic studies, where one might most expect to find it. It is a part of the spirit of American Studies that the come-latelies, debt collectors, duplication fighters, and disciplinary tourists do not seem to get.

When people who are committed to American Studies have discovered kindred spirits they have generally (well, ideally, anyway) responded: "Great! How can we help each other and learn about our differences, too?" That disposition—not some recipe for processing primary sources or aping great works, not reciting articles of faith (or, for that matter, devoutly avoiding them)—that more general collegial spirit is at the heart of what I consider the "holistic approach" or "transdisciplinarity" distinctive of the field. MLA or AHA-types, many of them recently slumming on our journal boards and at annual meetings, if not running them, when faced with the same condition have begun to say, in effect, "Oh, I guess we can go back to our disciplines now. Since we've been-there/done-that, we'll scout out other places to vacation. You folks just adapt, OK? And don't count the towels or silverware till we're gone." This scenario, lurking behind the plenary topic, has a diplomatic analogue: the delegation from a neighboring sovereign hoists a new flag and stations troops in your backyard, the day that you invite them over for pot-luck, state dinner.

Of course, people talented in cultural criticism will at this point smell the rotting mullet on deck. I have not specified who these various types are, insofar as they exist, or earned the right to speak, in effect, for them. And such talk of who is or is not in the "spirit" of American Studies, of "we" and "they" with turf and troops, is about as blatant a rhetoric of exclusion as you are likely to find. Noting that I have fallen over the rail, I would not expect anyone to throw me a line:

"Good riddance, and keep the fish to yourself!" But I think there may be at least a shred of sensibility in the paranoia. (To reverse a more common lament) each deliberate act of exclusion might also help us evaluate the qualities of what we thereby necessarily also embrace. I think people who do American Studies—by which I mean people who have gained credentials, a podium or a job that bears its name, who are thereby indebted to the generosity of predecessors and the future of followers—should articulate their understanding of what that name is to mean. Talk of turf may be divisive, a reminder of the difference between hosts and guests, but I do not see how evading the subject is better.

Given prior discussions—including recent feverish threads on H-Amstdy—I do not expect much agreement with that assertion.[8] And I would like to address the strains of resistance to it forthrightly. Unfortunately, much of the resistance is itself not terribly forthright. It frequently invokes purely hypothetical or erroneous historical reconstructions of the sort:

> How would we be poorly served if American Studies for the first time had a canon like a regular discipline?
> —as if it did not have one when the Minnesota/Harvard/Amherst, myth-and-symbol crowd was strong
>
> or
>
> How can we be free of the evils that must have come as a result of being subject to one in the past?"
> —as if it were our syllabi or theories in American Studies that accounts for the social inequity that it has shared with Physics and Classics but not Home Economics or Dental Hygiene.

Of course, I am again overstating the case for dramatic (provocative) effect, but even when the worries are pared back to reality, I think we might better begin with an actual instance of defining rather than cowering before the mere possibility of one.

Fortunately, there is also lot of helpful lore from which to draw. Many of the people who emphasize the dangers of canon formation accept a bit of hypocrisy for the right price. Most of us have to teach students and write catalog copy, where "problematizing" a long list of potential practices is itself problematic. Those who speak plainly have their virtues and may even empower alternatives as frequently as problematizers obscure them. It might be useful, then, to take the sorts of simplifications that instructors ordinarily have to offer nineteen-year-olds, their parents, and the deans, and to consider them seriously ourselves, just to see what happens—remaining mindful, of course, of the concerns of those who resist such an effort on principle. In doing so, then, I am thrashing back toward the rail. While the foregoing has been a highly defensive (I hope, not too offending) account of gettin' no respect, the following is an attempt to earn a little.

II. The Definitional Plunge

"American Studies"

To what should the name "American Studies" refer? That question could be answered by drawing precedent at a variety of points, including any of a large number of regional studies operations that boomed in higher education in diverse corners of the world in the first half of the Twentieth Century. But I begin with the United States where, (despite German protests to the contrary) I believe, the field was first institutionalized and by which other programs so-named have been strongly influenced. In the United States there is reasonably widespread agreement that the name "American Studies" means learning as much as possible about the cultures of a place, America. In most respects, there is nothing unusual about it as a field. Warrants for claims in American Studies are for the most part the same as those in any other academic enterprise: coherence, imagination, depth and breadth.

But there is also a set of standards that may be more particular to American Studies, both in the United States and in most of the rest of the world where the name is recognized. In this field, knowledge is supposed to be limited chiefly to America but is also supposed to span:

1) a substantial period of time, at least a couple of centuries;
2) a diverse social spectrum, including at least men and women and people of more than one racial or ethnic category;
3) insights drawn from a variety of media—non-fiction and fiction, books, music, performance, film, video, artifacts; and
4) the perspective of a variety of scholarly traditions—at the very least including those common in departments of English and history.

I think it is also safe to say that, despite great variation over about sixty years, American Studies in the United States has also tended to express a distinct ethos. It includes an interest in cultural criticism, in evaluating the quality of its subject rather than simply accumulating findings. In fact, there have been relatively few "discoveries" in U.S. American Studies. The most prized works are distinguished by the originality and scope of interpretation, the way they plot connections among facts that have usually been unearthed in a "regular" discipline. The ethos also includes a respect for collegiality and collaboration in teaching and for the solitary critic in research. There is an almost adolescent zeal; enthusiasm, novelty, and transgression can be considered virtues in themselves. In these respects (among others)—despite great variability and adamant resistance to clear self-

definition (a.k.a. "methodolatry")—American Studies in the United States has had a style that can be characterized as critical, sociable but individualistic, and non-conformist. In these ways, it has been stereotypically "American," at least more so than "regular" disciplines with their stronger European pedigrees.[9]

Still, U.S. Americanists disagree in important respects as they define the way the field can and should be practiced. They most often disagree about the two halves of the name of the field: the bounds of what is to be taken as "American" and the spiritual, political, or pragmatic implication of doing something called "studies" rather than a "regular discipline" like history or English. Such definitional squabbles among academics in the United States have been ubiquitous at least from the 1960s through the 1980s. At the moment the terms of the debates have shifted from pedagogy or research to program administration, but they remain strong and have powerful implications.

Two options for "America"

Disagreements about the range of reference of the term "America" are politically charged. Nearly every position can be taken to signal both how scholars respond to inequities of power in and out of the United States and how they bound the range of their expertise.

One ready option is to define "America" as simply the United States and the colonies and territories that it overcame. This is probably the most conventional and long-standing use of the term in as well as out of the academy, and it has distinct correlates in practice. For example, the range of its application tends to constrict as the more distant past is considered. From this point of view, for example, "America" began as a tiny, European (predominantly British) project which expanded over the centuries. This use of the term is more geopolitical than geographic. Hence, for example, in the late twentieth century, the Pacific and Atlantic boundaries may be equally emphasized, but the center of attention is in their northern halves, where non-African racial solidarity and post-World-War I alliances are strong. In this view, African or Asian dimensions of American culture can easily be considered "tributaries" to a Northern-European-American "mainstream."

In this context, the term invites an evaluative approach, whereby investigating "America" also entails identifying good and evil in social life. The exercise often resembles measuring American history and literature against the promises of earlier European invaders ("the forefathers"). This is but one way American Studies has significantly diverged from other area studies (more geographically defined) that matured in the 1950s and 1960s. Hence, American Studies in this vein is also a little more friendly to the humanities and qualitative social sciences where evaluative and informational missions are self-consciously related.

A second set of definitions refuse to equate the subject of American Studies with the geopolitical boundary of only one of "the Americas," much less one that

remains so dominated by citizens of European descent. Since the late 1960s, often (in and out of the United States) the subject is taken as "bigger," stretching from Canada south through the Caribbean and Central America (or from South America up—I mean no nortecentrismo). Scholars with variants on this view still consider the U.S. their subject but only when considered in addition to (or at least primarily in relation to) all of North America. From this vantage it is much easier to fix the size and location of the subject. The boundaries of "America" do not change. It is hence easier to emphasize aboriginal peoples and relations across the south as well as north Atlantic. It is thereby, too, a more strictly geographic (and maybe cultural), less statist use of the term "America." And the center of the subject moves to the east and south, away, say, from Hawaii or Guam, which in this sense of the term become less "American." Political progressives often champion this view in the name of more inclusiveness, but it also more closely resembles the supposedly realistic, cool, detached conception of place (as a physical vs. figurative setting) that has dominated other Cold-War-vintage regional studies. As I hope my tone has made obvious, I do not think one use of the term "American" is simply superior to the other. Each has its strength and weakness worth considering.

Three options for "studies"

Debates about the reference of the word "studies" have had clearer implications for campus than civic politics. Each sense of the term implies different relations among scholars and among "regular disciplines" of the twentieth-century Euro-American academy. These senses can be classified into three recognizable types that generally also have resembled stages of development for influential programs in the United States.

The simplest and oldest way may be called "multi-disciplinary." In such cases, American Studies is a loose confederation of students and scholars who work in a variety of humanities and social sciences and who share an interest in America. Cooperation is purely occasional and instrumental (e.g., for raising money or mounting a conference). For students, the curriculum is a simple sum of everything that is already available, a buffet line from which students pile their plates according to individual appetites. Administratively they require near-zero cost and very low maintenance. Running a program mainly entails repackaging disciplinary courses off the shelf. The key impediments are not intellectual but bureaucratic (e.g., if degree requirements discourage students from electing courses in several departments).

A slightly more ornate conception of the field may be called "cross-disciplinary." Bureaucratically speaking, American Studies becomes an adjunct or semi-autonomous region for people studying America. Cooperation is organized around certain types of situations (e.g., English courses that history students should take or vice versa), and this cooperation is institutionalized (e.g., whereby

American Studies becomes a set of cross- or co-listed courses that fit some rationale, and hiring decisions are affected by curricular commitments that are less strictly departmental). Staff gather irregularly to design a fixed menu or two from which students choose. Program administration usually requires a staff meeting or two each year and a designated advisor, if students have electives.

Finally, there is a way to recognize when the field is "inter-" or "trans-disciplinary."[10] American Studies in this sense exists as field of its own. It is considerably more than the sum of its disciplinary ingredients or the way they are packaged. Purposeful cooperation among disciplinary staff, for example, is a goal in and of itself, as well as a recognized means for better teaching and research about American culture. Staff collectively design and deliver curriculum that represents a shared responsibility. Program administration requires space, staff salary lines, a budget, and a vital, committed, and regularly communicating core of instructors. Maybe then too, there must be a distinction between core and cooperating staff based on a requisite degree of commitment to this sense of the field.

Plainly, this sort of trans-disciplinarity is the one that I was taught and teach. I believe it is good not only for students and staff in American Studies but also for the quality of academic life in general. In making this claim, I know I am in a minority, even among Americanists in the United States, but I think this is so for reasons that can be better explained through campus political-economy than sound reason. I will try to touch on a little of each of these concerns as I aim to justify the foregoing.

III. In Defense of a Definition

Cede some ground

I am confident that cultural critics worth their salt would find in this definition all manner of special pleading on behalf of myself, associated social categories, and the moment. In admitting as much, I hope that we can avoid a round or two of painful and pointless ad hominem. Not that long ago, for example, an elder statesman in American Studies began his evaluation of a proposal I had written—to compare the ways that people in the United States and in South Asia learn about "America"—by saying, "I wish you and all the other Woody Allens would stop navel gazing and get on with it." I am willing to forgive the anti-Semitic edge to the crack, if we can, indeed, respectfully discuss what "it" is that needs getting.

Surely, every definition has power. Every "is" implies an "ought," even if you are naming spoons ("one is for tea; the other for soup"). And when it can delimit a profession or tradition or what counts as a passing grade for a degree that also awards social mobility, the consequences become more serious. People with rallying points are encouraged and better able to recruit and sustain allies next

time around. Others who disagree or who "just happened to be absent" when the rallying points were made are also likely to be slighted in the future, and that can hurt everyone. Most academics of any stripe can recall insufferable committee meetings, absorbing high-serious blather from guardians of academic propriety. They warn how "every Medievalist [or post-structuralist or whatever] would be horrified" or how "all standards will be hopelessly lost," if a smidgen of creativity or sensitivity to new circumstance were accommodated.

Based on such experience, I can easily imagine the above definition coming home to haunt. A course that I have lately been teaching ("America as a Foreign Country") aims, among other things, to explore relationships between the two senses of "America" that I distinguish above. Imagine a cadre of strategic planners making my life difficult for trying to do "too much" by considering both at once. That is hardly the sort of outcome I intended, but definitions do help make it possible. At the very least, the blowhards and bureaucrats would otherwise have to make up their own terms of intolerance.

Of course, few people, even on the fronts of culture wars, would admit aiming for such an outcome, but the possibility must be conceded. Since people in American Studies regularly trespass academic terrain, we are often caught in cannon crossfire, and we should be especially wary of booby traps and pigeon holes.

Costs of ceding too much

Alternatives to a pigeon hole, though, include being left out in the cold . As we often remind "mainstream" America, individual and collective liberty, freedom **from** a group and freedom **to** act as a member of one, are worth distinguishing. Both are freedoms worth prizing, even though they often conflict, and I think the ballyhoo over methodology or definition in American Studies can be considered just such a case. None of us wants to be told what to do, and individual creativity benefits the common good, but there is no support for or cumulative benefit in such individuality without institutions that require definition. At minimum, I am referring to things like budget lines for salaries and research, categories of media to be maintained in the library, opportunities for students in classes, and credibility among their prospective employers. In defining the field, I am trying to help hone our claims on those things, that is, exercise freedom to use instruments of the common good. I do not think cultural critics can do so effectively if we—like a "mainstream" whom we rightly fault—equate the denial of explicit social purpose and the advancement of "freedom."

Furthermore, I do not see many people whom my definition actually excludes (though I must admit a standard here, that is arguably high, intended to preserve a distinction between legal or fiscal and figurative or ritual force. The word "exclude" is, I think, used so frequently that an opportunity is lost to acknowledge the difference between barbed wire and bad vibes). No doubt there

are some people, maybe many, who will be discouraged to find their sense of self or group and my definition at odds. I welcome reminders of who they/we are and help in working together better to take each other into account.[11]

Clearly the definition has its implicit hierarchy. It renders some activities central (those, in effect, of "hosts" of the field, e.g., people working full-time in interdisciplinary, tertiary outfits) and others more peripheral ("guests," e.g., people working as independent scholars or in more multi-disciplinary outfits). And I hope such priorities will be openly discussed, rather than hardened into a cruel system.

Guests should be welcomed, not only because generosity is good but also because everyone stands to benefit. But I think we would be naive to assume that pecking orders—some variety of boundary and social stratification—are things American Studies can do without. Whether discussed or not, they exist. Some people go home after the party; other stay and clean up.

We might as well do so with justifications that have more going for them than an alternative composed of unfettered individualism and perfect meritocracy. Just in case this strikes you as paranoid ("No such straw men exist"), I can testify to having witnessed one come to life, during a formal evaluation of a program in American Studies. Like faculty in most programs, at least when they are under review, these American Studies professors were trying to build a case to support claims on the resources of their institution, in exchange for providing something of explicit value. Members of the program tried to explain to students, prospective employers, and central administration that they, indeed, had a distinctive mission to perform, including one that required as much commitment on both sides as any other bureau. They were, they said, conferring degrees of substance that they could describe. I was not pleased to watch an evaluator—jetted in to represent the field of American Studies in the wider world—remind players in the process how much he thought the program would improve if faculty would stop worrying about doing anything distinctive: "Why not just admit good students and turn them loose with talented faculty? That's how it's done at Yale," he said.

You can imagine, I hope, how discouraging that message might be for students and teachers (who did not "just so happen" to be at Yale) or how administrators might respond when the evaluators (pursuing the same presumption) denied that training in American Studies ought to be a prerequisite for supervising work toward a Ph.D. bearing that name. "Just hire people from Yale," was the implication, I suppose; "any degree will do." If you want an example of just the sort of appeal to fantasies of individualism and meritocracy and their use to justify denying resources to and from American Studies, there you have it, in its boola-boola, boot-strapping splendor: an anecdote in support of my concern.

I want to help people in American Studies be less vulnerable to such pretense in the future. Some of the exclusions of my definition, then are quite purposeful. Implicitly, I am rejecting two justifications that seem to have long been present in American Studies: "Anything Goes" and "Super Method." The one that I have been hammering to this point is mainly the "Anything Goes" model, the one that

is typically opposed to definitions on principle (e.g., principles of inclusion that rely on an individualist and a pseudo-meritorcratic status quo). Accordingly, one might suppose, American Studies deserves resources because it is one of the few places left in the academy with its innocence intact. It is theory and method lite, a place for those credentialed in the hard knocks of regular disciplines to kick off their shoes and refresh, as if they were taking a weekend at a dude ranch or New Age retreat.

In case straw men again come to mind and the prior, relatively bureaucratic example is not sufficiently stirring, you might think of another sort of instance that I regularly witness. A member of an allied department (it could be one of several; so, let us call it, the Department of Seriousness) regularly blossoms in American Studies dissertation defenses. The Professor, holder of a Serious chair, joyously kicks around art, science and society, making playful connections against which she or he counseled the student for the prior six months. Then, just as we are about to end the defense and award the degree, he or she pops The Big Question: "I know this is a degree in American Studies, but [in effect, 'all kidding aside'] how is it a contribution to the discipline of Seriousness?"

Of course, it is valuable for American Studies graduates to have proven an ability to contribute to scholarly life as a whole (and that of other potential employers, in particular), but it is certainly dispiriting to see this occasion, the last formality of intellectual substance before graduation, so hijacked for a purpose that is, yes, valuable but secondary. At least some of us in the room—those who run the outfit that is awarding the degree—are justifiably offended. How would you feel, if dinner guests, chewing the last fork full of dessert, asked, "So, when are we going to eat?" It would be rude, even if they brought the salad.

In case it is not obvious in the foregoing, I do not so parody this option because I am a stickler for manners or tradition, much less asceticism. Any field that restricts itself to proper hosts has little better recipe for reproduction than the Shakers. My extreme examples are basically drawn from disappointments in dealing with the entrenched, but there are still many people and ideas that need a foothold. American Studies should not and cannot survive if its purpose shuts them out. Moreover, American Studies, like any field, should have plenty of room for surprising pleasures, quiet and raucous. In fact, I know that some of the people who primarily identify with history, English or journalism are drawn to American Studies because it is fun. But, insofar as that is the draw, I challenge those friends to work with us to make their fields more fun, too, and to remember that, when budgets get strapped, the fun house is going to be one of those frills that goes. We need each other, including both the good times and mutual support they afford. You also should not be surprised to learn that Professors of Seriousness have been movers and shakers on the committees that have helped see that their salaries dwarf ours and that "regular departments" like theirs maintain veto power over appointments in ours. Yes, these observations have a sour-grape sauce, but they may also help others beware.

I remember meeting with a Dean, for example, asking why these inequities in the allocation and control of resources should exist. And I take his words to be an awkward way of saying, "You folks need a clear definition." What he was actually doing was explaining my "salary situation" by noting that I was the only person in the university without an appointment in a "regular" department. The person who originally approved the deal was new to the job. "It was a mistake," he explained. (How comforting!) I had to remind him that I had, in fact, insisted on that "mistake" and would not have accepted the position without it. His own discipline—one of the social sciences—had only been "regular" for about ten years longer than mine. Why should people in American Studies have to work harder than everybody else, with twice as many committee meetings to go to and twice as many units ruling on promotion and tenure? Furthermore, how could the university justify awarding a degree, if the administration had doubts about it? If the professors who held Ph.D.s in the very same field, needed extraordinary supervision under people who did not?

What he blew off as a "mistake" (with consequences apparently only mine to shoulder) was for me a matter of principle, of a debt due to my teachers and a responsibility to students. I hope you can understand, then, why pleas for freedom from definition do not seem terribly persuasive to me. These freedoms have inflated costs that we should not have to continue paying. If guests do not want to pay or cannot, American Studies should do its best to help them. But I do not think they need to feel slighted if we ask their help in correcting overcharges on the bill.

I also challenge the option of defining American Studies around a particular "Super Method," by which I mean something as specific as I understand "cultural studies" to be. I have less developed reasons for avoiding this model, in part because I hear so little consensus about what the name, "cultural studies," is supposed to mean.

In its broadest usage—the analysis of groups through expressions of ideology and hierarchy—I do not see any reason to get excited, one way or the other. Probably anything done in the humanities and social sciences would fit without an iota of change. If we are going to start reorganizing the human sciences into one, more harmonious outfit, I am all for it, especially if integrating the various strains of that mission is part of the agenda. American Studies has experience that could be extremely helpful. As soon as the "regular" outfits—like History and Sociology and so on—offer to share their more ample staff and budget to that common mission, please let me know. When they have proven that they are more ready to be "inclusive" than we have been, please let me know. Until then, though, please understand if, as I feel a cultural-studies hug, I keep one hand on my wallet.

Permit me, as well, to remind people that one of the interests that draws people to American Studies is gaining knowledge of America. This is especially the case outside the United States, where relatively few people have the luxury of wondering if it is "really" distinct. U.S.N. ships, "Bay Watch," Big Macs, and greenbacks in Sri Lanka make such questions seem "academic" in the worst sense

of the word. At the moment, for example, governmental and educational leaders in China are trying to figure out how to protect their "culture" from "Western influence," especially through media primarily produced by United States citizens and full of U.S. allusions. I would hope scholars of American Studies can supply some information that is useful in such deliberations, and I think it will be useful to the extent that it is based both on global and intensely local knowledge. Such substantive understanding of a particular place, America—much smaller than "groups" in general—is important, properly prized around the world. Of course, it would only make sense to include comparative and global-system perspectives, but I still think that substantive knowledge of America seems a reasonable ground for specialization, at least as reasonable as, say, English, Political Science, and Japanese. From what I can see, though, those units are dealing with "cultural studies" much as they have prior interpretive modes, as a movement within their scholarly tradition, like formalism or functionalism, that happen to resemble those in others. It may or may not last; so, they are not taking a second mortgage on the farm to buy it. I think we should probably do the same.

My mild, largely strategic objection to redefining the field as cultural studies gets more principled as the term "cultural studies" gets more specific. Since other scholars have and will continue to treat this, more refined subject in the detailed way it deserves, I will merely raise a few concerns (complaints, of course) and trust others to elaborate on them or find others that are better.

My attention is mainly drawn, not to what the promotional literature promises—which is generally very inclusive and impressive—but to what I have seen its followers normally do in classrooms and conferences, the folk representations of this emergent tradition. I see at least a half-dozen very common excesses, that seem also to accompany claims to be "doing cultural studies":

1) over-emphasis on the analogy between culture and text (one that Geertz himself anticipates and warns against), to the neglect of other useful analogies, such as performance or game;[12]
2) an over-reliance on ironic interpretations (whereby, groups aiming for A get non-A, a plot line that quickly wears thin);
3) a rhetorical over-dependence on virtuosity in unmasking such irony by the narrator/critic;
4) over-use of expressions of flat, earnest outrage in voice (leaving, as I say, opportunities for humor to the cultural right);
5) with notable exceptions, (e.g., pleasure in film viewing) a picture of human emotional life as fixated on one-upmanship (to the neglect of other sentiments that also appear universal, such as, reverence, humility, or generosity);

6) over-generalization of modern American longing for anchors in social identity across space and time;
7) under-emphasis on principles of social differentiation and organization that are non-hierarchical.

A lot more work would need to be done to show that these matters warrant concern and that cultural studies is distinctly implicated in them. Even without a thorough investigation, I am willing to concede that these alleged problems are not uniquely Birmingham in pedigree. In fact, I often suspect that cultural studies has gained much of its favor because the "excesses," that are here the objects of my *kvetching,* have a longer history in American departments of English, which are now Cultural-studies Central Station. Despite the claims to interdisciplinary vision there, I do not see much on the ground. For example, the gestures toward history and social science (e.g., mantric rants about "the" [singular, continuous?] elite in America and supposed devotion to "positivism" down the hall) are barely recognizable to anyone trained in those disciplines. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the ASA has trouble getting proposals for papers that are not text-based and that some Americanists—people like me, whose humanities/social-science orientation is closer to 50/50—feel estranged.[13]

My point is not to lay all of this at the foot of cultural studies (or English Departments). That would be a very cheap shot. In fact, I offer this little *kvetch* to help others with more careful consideration of its merits. Since I have been arguing that the field needs definition, I can hardly fault anyone for suggesting that we rally around the one that is hot at the moment. The reason I resist is not, I hope, because of the usual red herrings—that I am a white guy or against theory or a Europhobe—but because I would hate to think that we felt we had arrived at a solution in "the search for method." The virtue of definitional and methodological discussion, I am convinced, is its ongoing, dialogic quality. It ought to continue. The fiction of "having a method" is useful only so long as we also remember that every one is imperfect, only so long as it continues to motivate the search for a better one. If we were to declare "cultural studies" our Super Method, I fear that we will be duped by our own fiction.

I hope that the definition of the field that I have proposed keeps the fresh wind of cultural studies in our sails and our eyes to windward.

Getting on with it

This has been an extended plea on behalf of a particular sense of American Studies, one that I hope is both clear and open to contest. It also has been an extended kvetch. Just as I am convinced that it is poses little threat to those worried about freedom and exclusion, I am confident that it poses little prospect of brightening my outlook. I will always find plenty to *kvetch* about. I just hope that this paper and the discussion of issues it addresses help us to do so together even more playfully and productively in the future.

Notes

1. These are the titles of a pair of widely anthologized short stories by Herman Melville.

2. David Roediger, *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London, 1994). See also the paper that Roediger presented at the American Studies Association Meeting in Boston, November, 1993; and Federic G. Cassidy, ed., *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991), II, 838-840.

3. While I was a graduate student living in the low-rent, militarily occupied zone of West Philadelphia, Frank Rizzo distinguished himself as Chief of Police and then Mayor. His henchmen who were paid to "represent" my, predominantly African-American neighborhood were European-American suburbanites who claimed residence in the only Italian-American-owned business (a barbershop) in the vicinity. If only because there were too few chairs in the barbershop to accommodate them in one sitting and because the shop was almost never open, they were hardly a presence, except on election day every four years or so. The Democratic party and city government were generally visible in the form of uniformed thugs who cruised in armored wagons which doubled as beating chambers for anyone—generally Black, teenage males—whom they found suspicious.

4. Just as I had hoped, other articles in this issue cite the canonical sources, probably best sampled in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York, 1992). The only observation that I would add (in addition to my list of "concerns" in the conclusion of this essay) is a subtle difference between the two schools of thought. People emphasizing the "culture concept" back in the late 1970s and early 80s had largely epistemological concerns: of all the phenomena on this earth, which might best be described as "cultural" (versus, say, "psychological," "social" or "aesthetic") and thereby properly subject to interdisciplinary identification, explanation, and criticism? People embracing "cultural studies" within American Studies in the United States since the late 1980s seem to assume that the characteristics of "culture" in general and the "dominant culture" in particular are essentially known or at least ought to be treated as such within the human sciences. More engaging questions are about the ways these (presumably, transparently) "cultural" dynamics are manifest across time and (again, presumably, transparently) hierarchically arranged social space.

5. Leo Marx and George Lipsitz, "From Image, Myth, and Symbol to Cultural Studies," plenary session at "American Studies After Fifty Years: Retrospective and Prospect at the University of Minnesota," Minneapolis, MN, October 22, 1994. See also "Conference Update," *American Studies at Minnesota [Newsletter]* 9 (Fall 1995), 1-3.

6. These classics include: Jay Mechling, Robert Merideth, and David Wilson. "American Culture Studies: The Discipline and the Curriculum," *American Quarterly* 25 (October 1973), 363-389; Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly* 31 (Bibliography Issue, 1979), 293-337.; and Gene Wise, "Some Elementary Axioms for An American Culture Studies," *Prospects 4,* ed. Jack Salzman (New York, 1979), 517-547.

7. See, for example: Tony Bennett, "The Bond Phenomenon: Theorising a Popular Hero," *Southern Review* 16 (July 1993), 195-225; and Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York, 1977).

8. Three related threads—"Am Studies to Cultural Studies—Rationale for Switch," "American Studies Canon—Suggestions?" and "Cultural Studies—Origins and Relation to Am Studies"—spun electronically on the American Studies discussion list (h-amstdy@msu.edu), part of the H-Net Network, from the end of October, 1995 through February, 1996.

9. Joel M. Jones, "American Studies: The Myth of Methodology," *American Quarterly* 31 (Bibliography Issue, 1979), 382-387.

10. I am grateful to Norm Yetman for reminding me that the disciplinary relations I here describe closely resemble those Robert Bellah and his colleagues define and display in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York, 1985). See especially, "Social Science as Public Philosophy," 297-307.

11. I regret inferring from Steven Watts' comments that he felt excluded, but for reasons that I cannot quite understand. Certainly I agree that speaking plainly to diverse audiences ought to be among our ideals. If, however, we include the ordinary classroom teaching and the everyday life of Americanists as well as their cutting-edge posturing at professional meetings, I do not think that "Populists" such as he need feel quite so embattled. In particular, I do not think the recent ballyhoo over national history standards is as relevant or as alarming in its implications as he concludes. As I understand it, the standards committee was dominated by academics in secondary education and in history (none of them members of the ASA or trained in American Studies) and that its purview was secondary public education (rather than colleges or universities). Moreover, as I understand it, the revisions that the Congress eventually approved did not entail any major concessions by the academic left or right—except as an assertion of Congressional prerogatives (a matter on which diverse members of Congress do routinely unite). Furthermore, I do not see how the will of a hundred people

in Washington (none of whom was elected to assess secondary school, much less university, curricula) is a better indicator of popular ideals for university than a couple of thousand people, who not only were trained and hired to teach there (most of them also as public employees) but who also speak from regular, face-to-face experience with the very students who are the people most affected. In other words, if the turf I claim for American Studies still leaves Watts feeling overwhelmed (albeit with the U.S. Senate on his side) and we aim for common ground, I think we will have to work from maps with clearer directions than the ones that either one of us might attribute to "the great political and cultural mainstream" or the way he/we/they might want to "run" it.

12. Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, 1988), 8-14. For a brief survey of such "root metaphors," see Richard H. Brown, *A Poetic for Sociology: Toward a Logic of Discovery for the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, England, 1977), 130-171.

13. After reviewing a couple of thousand proposals, the Co-Chairs of the 1995 ASA Program Committee concluded: "The heart of American Studies is now cultural studies, with a strong representation of historians and material culture scholars. Missing almost entirely from American Studies are social scientists—political scientists, sociologists, economists, even anthropologists." Gary Gerstle and Elizabeth Lunbeck, "Preliminary Guide to the 1995 ASA Program," *American Studies Association Newsletter* 18 (June 1995), 5.