

Three Challenges for the Field of American Studies: Relating to Cultural Studies, Addressing Wider Publics, and Coming to Terms with Religions

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The true utterance is like the brand of beer that commands 95%
of the market and the false like the brand with only 5%.

Richard Posner¹

Shelter line stretching 'round the corner
Welcome to the new world order . . .

Waiting for when the last shall be first and the first shall be last

In a cardboard box 'neath the underpass

Bruce Springsteen²

Since I am from an academic generation that is sometimes accused of being grim and humorless, and since choosing a depressing lyric by Bruce Springsteen as an epigraph might add to that impression, I will begin by citing a second text that performs the basic tasks I advocate in this paper—that is, a combination of intellectual sophistication with an address to a wider public and significant attention to religion. I refer to Monty Python's film *The Life of Brian*. Recall the scene in which Brian attends Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Unfortunately, he only reaches the outskirts

of the crowd, amid the food vendors and various other distractions. The film makes a brilliant comment about the multivocality of Christianity, and in the process it provides a textbook case of reader-response theory, as Brian hears Jesus proclaim “Blessed are the cheese makers.”³

Striking closer to home for the field of American Studies, this film features two small and embattled opposition groups, The People’s Front of Judea and the Judean People’s Front. Both have sworn their opposition to the Roman occupation forces, but they spend most of their time fighting each other. I suggest that if we place classic American Studies approaches and recent cultural studies approaches within a wider map of the intellectual landscape, their differences tend to shrink and the relative vulnerability of both comes into focus. We have the Study of the Culture Concept and the Concept of Cultural Studies. Both have sworn to critique mainstream U.S. society and its intellectual apologists, but are bogged down in arcane internal debates that are sometimes less than productive.

A major premise of this paper is that the warring factions who defend the Study of the Culture Concept and the Concept of Cultural Studies should expend less effort fighting each other, despite all their real and important differences, and pay greater attention to more constructive tasks. I suggest two such goals, among many other worthy ones: first, more focused attention to how American Studies scholars engage with various publics—since if we do not defend our own definitions of what count for “true utterances,” conservatives like Richard Posner will surely do so using the logic of the free market—and, second, greater attention to religious identities and subjectivities within our growing lists of pluralistic subcultural identities. I begin with some preliminary comments about the field of American Studies as a whole, in relation to the field of cultural studies.

On Gate-keepers and Gate-crashers

I conceive American Studies less as a centered discipline than a movement or network of institutional spaces for debate. It is like a large outdoor music festival with numerous stages, or an academic version of an entertainment district whose draw is several dozen clubs with various kinds of music. These images suggest that, although American Studies is an arena for debate, it is not like an arena show of a touring rock band. And although American Studies is a place for learning, it is not like a school purveying one method for performing a canon of classical music. Rather, it is a decentralized field with some nodes that function as centers because of their historical weight or current popularity, but little in the way of boundaries marking insides and outsides. The most powerful centers—the most prestigious stages at the festival with the most discriminating audiences—are constituted through forms of persuasion that are more like

magnetic fields than an electric fence around the perimeter to exclude those who do not play in the approved style.

I conceive my role as a commentator on this academic music festival not as gate-keeper, gate-crasher or aerial photographer, but simply as a participant in the musical interchange, one who floats between the roles of performer and fan while wearing my various hats as teacher, researcher, and conference speaker. In this spirit, I will use most of this paper to promote the two concerns that I have already mentioned, the need for greater attention to publics and religions. These are issues that I, standing within an American Studies crowd, would like to see receiving higher priority on more of our stages; they do not represent suggestions about *the* agenda of American Studies. I hope that enough people will resonate with my thoughts that together we can improve the quality on these particular stages. But I do not imply anything negative about other styles—unless they are played badly, which is a separate issue: I do not like *any* kind of music played badly.

Gate-keepers do have their role at music festivals, clarifying the minimum requirements to be in the space. For clarity, I will sketch a rough map that might help a traveler locate the territory of American Studies. It is a loose alliance of historians, literary scholars, social scientists, and others who study culture, such as musicologists, geographers, educational philosophers, and museum curators. Its institutional base is primarily (although not exclusively) in academia. Its general question is how to understand North American culture and society, and its broad approach to this problem includes intentional conversation and cross-pollination across traditional academic disciplines. It has strong traditions of promoting cultural critique from the left. Anyone who wanders into our festival with concerns too far removed from these things will probably feel out of place and choose to leave. If they stay anyway (let's say they enroll in an American Studies course required in their college) there may be times to call in the bouncers and enforce minimum standards. For present purposes, I assume that most readers have arrived at this article through a process of self-selection based on these interests.⁴

Gate-crashers also have an important role. I use this image to evoke the upsurge of feminist and multiculturalist canon-busting that has reshaped our field for at least two decades. It is well-known that understandings of "American culture" change when scholars take seriously the experiences of traditionally neglected groups.

Asian-American students say that their ancestors came eastward, not westward. African-American students explain that being shackled in a slave galley cannot fruitfully be called an immigrant experience. Native American

and Chicano students affirm that, rather than immigrating, they stood still and the border moved.⁵

To state the issue more sharply, traditional interpretations of history sometimes appear, from the perspective of people outside the Anglo-American dominant classes, as “nothing but a compilation of the depositions made by assassins with respect to their victims and themselves.”⁶ To address this issue requires more than reshuffled priorities in subject matter; frequently it also requires new methods. For example, there are obvious limits to what can be learned from a myth and symbol approach based on literary texts by white men, if the goal is to study immigrant laborers who never learned to speak in English. For present purposes, I will presuppose that canon-busters have knocked holes in enough fences that I do not have to restate their arguments. Problems of cultural pluralism and conflict are not yet solved; on the contrary, they constitute a permanent high priority subject matter at the center of our field. Our reading lists (not to mention the faces of our colleagues and students) do not yet reflect this fully. However, a diversity of approaches is increasingly accepted and encouraged. The key issue, again, is the persuasiveness of various “stages” within American Studies, relative to other stages, for attracting the best conversations on these subjects.

It is tempting, in light of the diversity now present in American Studies, to turn from gate-keeping and gate-crashing toward a synthetic overview: an aerial photography model. My mandate for this paper can be interpreted as a request to produce some such map. However, I am not persuaded that this would be my most valuable contribution. Perhaps some masters of suspicion will suspect that, when I say this, I *really* mean that I am too lazy to do the work of thinking about the history of American Studies as a whole over time. Thus I would like to say in my own defense that I have published a lengthy article on this subject, entitled “Evolving Approaches to U.S. Culture in the American Studies Movement,” which goes back not just to the heyday of the culture concept in the 1960s, but all the way to the 1940s.⁷ Briefly, I argued that if one looked at some key texts that have been influential in our field, one could perceive a broad tendency to move from an abstract sensibility stressing national consensus and American exceptionalism, through more critical and pluralistic models often stressing conflict, to an increasing stress on complex interactions among a variety of overlapping subgroups within fields of unequal power. I suggested that theories of cultural hegemony were helpful for bringing scholarship from all three periods into productive dialogue—if these theories did not turn out to be consensus models in disguise, if the forms of counterhegemony that they identified were not linked too rigidly to class (as opposed to gender and racial formations and other local differences),

and if it did not dissolve into wishful thinking about cultural populism that ignored issues of power and went overboard in its enthusiasm for, let us say, the prospects for a left-wing feminist reading of Pat Robertson.

When I agreed to work on the current paper, I first hoped that I could update the “Evolving Approaches” article and wrestle it into a snappier and more accessible version. Unfortunately, the problem with the earlier article is not its complexity, but its oversimplification: its convenient Hegelian thesis, antithesis, and synthesis leading precisely to my own position! Even with twenty pages of footnotes, I needed strong disclaimers to insist that I was not trying to be comprehensive or prescriptive, but was merely looking at the some major trends from the standpoint of one idiosyncratic scholar with special interests in cultural history. And despite these disclaimers, I am aware of significant gaps and anomalies that proliferate in my argument.⁸ I still believe that I identified real trends that existed outside my perception of them, distinct “musical styles” in American Studies that waxed and waned in popularity over time. And I remain convinced that the rise of approaches based on pluralism and conflict, coupled with efforts to theorize about this diversity in increasingly complex ways, are at the center of the story. However, I have adopted the position that an aerial photography approach is too thin and diffuse to be worth refining further at this time. It is too prone to turn out like a bad world-beat band—the kind that tries to synthesize too many styles and comes out with unlistenable mush—or an oldies “tribute” band. Do we really want to listen to this when fresher sounds are playing on the next stage? At least for today, I suggest focusing on thicker and more situated readings, drawing on understandings of United States culture and history that have less sweeping ambitions.

If American Studies is something like I have described it, what shall we say about its relation to cultural studies? Let us begin with a minimal map to help travelers find the territory of cultural studies, using an acronym that spells the word SIMPLE. The S and I stand for Symbols and Interdisciplinarity. Cultural studies analyzes symbolic representation in relation to wider contexts such as social structure, audience reception, and means of circulation. It does so across established disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. In this part of my acronym there is strong overlap between cultural studies and American Studies, although cultural studies is more international in subject matter and its disciplinary tool box is weighted more toward media studies and various branches of cultural theory.

The M in “simple” stands for Marxism. Compared to American Studies, the methods and critiques of cultural studies give greater attention to issues of economic class within the broad context of Western Marxism. I use a small “m” for minimalist multicultural marxism, because cultural

studies marxism has to coexist in the same acronym with several large P's, which stand for cultural Pluralism (as opposed to consensus culture), Popular culture (versus "high culture") and antifoundationalist methods such as Poststructuralism and Pragmatism that are oriented to unstable meanings discovered through shifting Persuasion and dialog, as opposed to an appeal to stable "facts" and "truths." Compared to American Studies, cultural studies has drunk more deeply at all these wells labeled "M" and "P." At the same time, however, if we compare cultural studies to other tendencies in the wider world of cultural theory, it more consistently specifies concrete socio-political locations and analyzes cultural conflicts within a context of coalition-building and struggles for power. The L in "SIMPLE" stands for this stress on cultural critique grounded in situated Local knowledges.

The "E" that rounds out the acronym has a double meaning. The preferred reading is Extracurricular, signaling the movement's activist and oppositional tradition and its stated goal of nurturing what Antonio Gramsci called organic intellectuals. This "E" has a shadow, however, which stands for Emergent Elitism and Esotericism. Cultural studies includes hierarchies of academic prestige based on highly complex and abstract theoretical performance, even when its ostensible goal is a shift in focus from high culture toward popular culture. Note that I have managed to spell the word "simple" as "SIMPPPLE": this is an apt emblem for too much writing in cultural studies.

Having proposed this rough map of the cultural studies entertainment district, I would say similar things about gate-keeping and aerial photography in cultural studies that I did about American Studies. Here again, we enter a territory better defined in terms of the magnetic attraction of its central stages, rather than any fence marking its perimeter, one that offers diminishing returns to anyone energetic enough—as I am not!—to attempt encyclopedic overviews. In fact cultural studies is markedly *more* hostile than American Studies to gate-keepers. It is less centered as a movement, more emphatic about the need for canon-busting and local knowledges, and more determined to shoot down aerial photographers.

Implicit in my "Evolving Approaches" article is an argument about a growing convergence between cultural studies and American Studies. If the goal of the current paper were to draw out and elaborate upon this convergence, aerial photographer style, I would add little to the fine analyses already offered by Michael Denning and Joel Pfister. As a first approximation Denning is right on the money:

The founding question [of American Studies] remains "What is an American?" Consider the difference if the discipline had been constituted as "cultural studies". . . .

Like American Studies, British cultural studies grew out of a dissatisfaction with an ahistorical and technical literary criticism and with a Stalinist marxism in the 1950s. Both disciplines practiced cultural criticism to recover a usable past for cultural reconstruction. . . . But in “cultural studies” the central questions—“what is culture?”, “what are its forms and how is it related to material production?”—formed a more productive theoretical agenda, and allowed a more serious engagement with marxism than did the question “What is American?”⁹

Denning persuasively argues that American Studies unfolded as a sort of “substitute for Marxism” which now can profitably claim its radical roots more self-consciously, as well as move beyond its limitations more explicitly. In combination with Pfister, he makes a compelling argument about the cumulative weight of marxist and proto-marxist work within the larger field: for example, Sacvan Bercovitch and Michael Rogin’s analyses of U.S. dominant culture as hegemonic ideology, Alan Trachtenberg’s analysis of how U.S. cultural history unfolded in relation to *The Incorporation of America*, and Janice Radway’s reworking of long-standing American Studies concerns about the genre of romance using methods of cultural studies.¹⁰ Together Denning and Pfister’s articles do an excellent job of bringing such American Studies scholars into dialogue with cultural studies.¹¹

I have only two small comments to add. First, Pfister notes that cultural studies often lacks “sustained engagement with the matter of history.” I think this is true and that Denning partly reflects the problem (despite his own exemplary historical research) when he says at one point that “American Studies grew out of literary criticism” and writes about it largely in relation to literary scholarship.¹² If there is one way that my “Evolving Approaches” article makes a distinctive contribution, it is in telling a related story from a standpoint more attuned to historiography and cultural history, as opposed to the literary wing of American Studies. Literary theorists have tended to claim the highest ground in recent debates. This is understandable, given that all evidence and scholarly writing in every field—from history through anthropology to the arts along with all the forms of evidence they analyze—can be approached as “texts” that are symbolically mediated. This means that literary theory is related to the entire field covered by American Studies and cultural studies. Yes, the “hard factual evidence” presupposed by historians appears less stable the closer you look at it. Yes, we must reflect on the literary genre of different types of historical and sociological books. However, it does not follow that literary theory has the highest ground; it only follows that you can see

some aspects of almost everything from its vantage point(s). It makes equal sense to propose history and social structure as the high ground. I agree with Fredric Jameson when he says that “History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis. . . . History as a ground and untranscendable horizon needs no particular historical justification: we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to forget them.”¹³ I also support the following historical argument that seeks to calm postmodern disquiet about using the concept of the public:

When more stringent forms of poststructuralism suggest that the category of ‘civil society’ is an illusion, that power simply produces little blisters on the social body that only seem to be pockets of relatively autonomous discourse, then I have to think such poststructuralist critiques are themselves ahistorical or simply wrong. . . . Poststructuralism itself resides, I submit, in that relatively but not completely autonomous realm from and in which social dissent becomes thinkable and practically possible.¹⁴

Second, I want to underline a contrast that emerges in Denning and Pfister between the births of American Studies and cultural studies as movements, and expand on one of the implications. The roots of cultural studies are in the revolt of the early 1960s British New Left against its Old Left, an origin which is sometimes underplayed in narratives that start from a baseline two decades later, at the time of the upsurge of cultural studies in North America. The roots of American Studies as an organized academic movement, in contrast, are placed by Pfister and Denning in a post World War II U.S. liberal academy reeling from attacks by McCarthyism—although Denning also stresses that many of its founders were trying to keep a “substitute Marxism” alive in this context, as an extension of socialist and popular front traditions of the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵ Suppose, as we reflect on these contrasting births, we move beyond standard congratulatory narratives about cultural studies transcending the limitations of Cold War consensus scholarship. Suppose we ask, instead, how these births can help us understand why people become receptive to cultural studies approaches. What are the conditions for the possibility of a thriving cultural studies movement? This might lead us to inquire which political and intellectual trends in the 1960s United States were most analogous to the 1960s British developments, and arrive with Pfister and Denning at a very productive thought: that the genealogy of cultural studies in the U.S. runs through work by U.S. scholars like Stanley Aronowitz, Eugene Genovese (in an earlier life), Joan Scott, and Warren Susman in

journals such as *Studies on the Left*. Pfister goes so far as to call this “the real beginning of a U.S. cultural studies.”¹⁶

Of course one could nominate many others for the honor roll of people who laid the groundwork for the rise of cultural studies in North America; my own short list appears in my “Evolving Approaches” article. Here I will simply underline the importance of including William Appleman Williams. He is missing from Pfister and Denning’s genealogies, but I believe he serves as a kind of missing link between classic American Studies concerns with dominant culture, international relations, and the frontier, on the one side, and cultural studies concerns with history from the bottom up in *Studies on the Left*, on the other.¹⁷ I have long believed that the great American Studies Williams (William Appleman) is underrated by scholars of my generation, as compared to the great cultural studies Williams of his generation (Raymond). Denning and Pfister helped me articulate this disquiet when they focused my attention on the apples/apples comparison between British cultural studies in the early 1960s and analogous developments in the U.S. at the same time, rather than the more typical apples/oranges contrast between cultural studies in recent years versus American Studies during the Cold War era.

This suggestion is more like a footnote to Denning and Pfister than a master key to unlock our past. For the most part, I am willing to follow the standard genealogy of cultural studies that places it within the broad territory of poststructuralist cultural theory and traces its distinctive genealogy back to the Birmingham Centre in the 1950s. My point is simply that this genealogy can be misleading if it is applied too rigidly. It can neglect significant aspects of our history and beg the question of how and why cultural studies became influential in the U.S.: how the ground was prepared for a positive reception and what related positions in the U.S. were resonant dialogue partners. For whatever my case may be worth, my route into the territory of cultural studies passed through New Left historians like William Appleman Williams, public intellectuals like Noam Chomsky and James Weinstein of *In These Times* magazine, radical sociologists in the tradition of C. Wright Mills, and a dialog between radical strains of the Bible and the work of Gramsci, as propounded by radical Latin American theologians whom I met while studying in Mexico City. This interdisciplinary gumbo was “cooked” academically, first conversation with left-wing Christian intellectuals like Cornel West and Rosemary Ruether, and later in the same American Studies Program (at the University of Minnesota) that Patrick Brantlinger cites in *Crusoe’s Footprints* as his “cautionary example” of how not to do oppositional cultural studies.¹⁸

Of course these specific details are idiosyncratic, but they dramatize an experience that is common among U.S. intellectuals: coming into cultural studies through diverse paths that do not always lead through Bir-

mingham, and which sometimes lead through left-liberal Christianity.¹⁹ Just as my Scandinavian-American ancestors grafted their identities onto the story of “our” Pilgrim forebears, even though they arrived in North America as impoverished peasants in the nineteenth century, I am willing to graft my work onto Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall—but only so long as my North American and Latin American influences are not forgotten in the process. Overstressing the Birmingham connection makes the operational definition of cultural studies more restrictive than its actual practice in the field.

This is not the place to delve deeply into this discussion. On the major points, I am in accord with Pfister and Denning and see no reason to repeat their arguments. A more pressing task is to ask, not as gatekeeper, but as a fan and sometimes performer: where do we go from here?

Will It Be Funny? Cultural Studies and Some of its Publics

Pfister comments that cultural studies is being incorporated into the U.S. academy by people “who rarely have any connection to existing political and cultural movements and are somewhat surprised that this might even be possible.”²⁰ I resonate with this complaint because I agree with Donna Haraway: “Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. Epistemology is about knowing the difference.”²¹ Scholars can analyze many possible topics, touching on many kinds of cultural difference: everything from the most esoteric distinction between two strains of Southern Baptist theology to the gravest structural wounds in human history such as Euro-American imperialism. Wise method is about discerning which of these differences deserve analytical and pragmatic priority in specific contexts. When I pose the basic question of what I am doing with my life as a scholar—which involves access to resources that are significant within global structures of power (although obviously limited compared to corporate and military elites)—I am reluctant merely to reply “I write about the endless play of diversity in cultural texts.” I hope to identify power structures that have concrete consequences for everyday life, explore the roles of culture in relation to them, and—if possible—contribute to changing them in the interests of people who suffer because they are excluded from power.

Thus I presuppose well-known approaches to contestation for cultural hegemony, as developed by scholars like Stuart Hall, Cornel West, George Lipsitz, and Nancy Fraser. As I elaborate more fully in my “Evolving Approaches” article, these approaches are largely neo-Gramscian but use a more plural and multi-layered notion of power than Gramsci and stand in dialogue with poststructuralism. They assume the co-existence of multiple cultural traditions that transform themselves through time, with meanings

that are multivocal and internally contested, all of which form and reform alliances that articulate and/or disarticulate various forms of cultural hegemony. Cultures are multileveled dialogues involving the relatively powerful and the relatively weak. Cultural analysis—whether it analyzes secular or religious issues—involves mapping these dialogues and relating them to structures of power.²²

For this purpose, it is often useful to carry on debates in high-level abstract language. Sometimes you can only say what you need to say in complex ways, or using shorthand (as I have already done many times in this paper) can greatly facilitate a specific conversation. Sometimes, as in the case of Gramsci's prison writing as well as some quests for tenure, opaque writing is necessary for survival. However, at other times the SIMPPPLE style of discourse is an impediment to clear thought, in-group communication, and the goal of building coalitions. I endorse Michael Bérubé's call in his recent book, *Public Access*, to think seriously about addressing this limitation. Bérubé even dares to suggest that cultural theorists might popularize, even if (gasp) they write something unoriginal! We laugh when he tells his aunt that he is turning his dissertation in literary theory into a book, and she asks "Will it be funny?" But indeed, his book *is* funny. Consider how he approaches the vexed matter of defining the postmodern: is it "that pomo gives you 30 percent more modernism for your money (more uncertainty, more fragmentation, more playful self-consciousness)?" Or is pomo "modernism's evil dwarf twin, hell-bent on knocking down everything modernism took such a long time to build?" His book is also accessible, at least for upper level undergraduates and the sort of educated liberal public that reads *The New Yorker*. He doesn't just talk abstractly about how elite discourse can rearticulate aspects of culture toward hegemonic ends. Following Douglas Kellner, he shows how Rambo is an example, one that seamlessly blended counter-cultural values like long hair, health food, love of nature, and hatred of military bureaucrats into one package with a preferred reading that was Reaganite. Then he comments, "I have yet to find a nonacademic who does not understand Kellner's point."²³

I am not simply arguing that accessible writing is a virtue, all else being equal, but also that there is a tragic flaw in excruciatingly rarefied attempts to be less complicit with elitism than any competitor. Bérubé catches the flavor in his comments about a cultural studies conference in Champaign/Urbana that produced the proto-canonical volume entitled *Cultural Studies*.²⁴ Some people complained that "the conference reinforced the very hierarchies it proposed to dismantle . . . [and] prevented a truly emancipatory practice of cultural studies." Bérubé elaborates:

As the initiated among us are aware, the crime of 'reinforcing the hierarchies you seek to dismantle' is the

single worst thing any progressive intellectual can be charged with, and it's usually followed by the counterclaim that such charges *themselves* reinforce the same hierarchies insofar as they reproduce the hierarchical practice of criticizing hierarchies from some ideological position 'above' hierarchy.

He comments that after a week of such controversies among people who "haven't seen an antagonist further right than Al Gore in a long, long time," many attendees "left in a paroxysm of self-loathing."²⁵

Remember my image of the music festival? Bérubé's work is important, in part, because my vision of a bright and open bazaar of free communication can take a sudden nasty turn. Given that there will apparently be no jobs for a majority of current graduate students, the festival can appear more like an elite club to which no one under forty can obtain a ticket (except in rare exceptions subject to revision by a neoconservative board of trustees.) And in light of the fact that many existing jobs are targeted for downsizing, the entertainment district can appear like an industrial plant in the midst of a lockout, with a management pressing its employees to accept increasingly unattractive conditions of work. Part of the problem is competition for spaces at this shrinking music festival: just when jobs and resources are scarce, the SIMPPPLE system of prestige substantially increases ticket prices (measured in verbiage), and this has serious implications for who can gain entrance.²⁶ However, the primary conflict is between the festival as a whole and the people who would like to close it down. Despite all the conservative complaints about the nihilism of "politically correct" scholars, coupled by calls for a return to "traditional values," conservative theorist Richard Posner makes an impeccable neo-pragmatic move when he says "The true utterance is like the brand of beer that commands 95% of the market and the false like the brand with only 5%."²⁷ And despite all the conservative hand-wringing about the politicization of the academy, neoconservative public intellectuals are acting as exemplary Gramscian organizers. Indeed, Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition has even cited Antonio Gramsci as a model in a book aimed at conservative evangelicals.²⁸ They clearly do not want the left-liberal part of the humanities as presently constituted to increase its market share, and they are actively seeking allies among the academic downsizers.²⁹

Of course, it might turn out that if a larger public knew what the average scholar in American Studies thinks about the United States, we would be in even more trouble. However, if this is true, it leads down a dead-end street, because if we and our various allied publics cannot develop arguments more persuasive than those of the cultural right, they show every intention of organizing us out of the academy. I see no choice but to act as if our ideas *are* for the most part valuable—if not to the

world at large, at least to larger parts of the population than we currently reach. I do not believe that this is a particularly difficult case to make.

But here a complex question arises. If some parts of "the public" will hate us more if they understand us better, and if we are not talking about some formless phantom called "mass popularization," what kind of public(s) *are* we talking about? One essential point implicit in the breakdown of consensus approaches is that there are many publics and counter-publics, overlapping in complex ways, holding varying amounts of power. José Casanova points to several kinds of publics and corresponding privates: the public state vs. private economy; the public economy vs. private realm of family; and public intrapersonal exchanges in groups (including families) versus the private realm of individual subjectivity.³⁰ Bruce Robbins points to the result of this ambiguity: my ringing speech for "more public engagement" might garner unanimous support, but one person might be agreeing that we should strengthen the state's regulative power, another might be supporting a radical feminist movement opposed to state policies, and yet another could be valorizing the "realities" of economics at the expense of feminist issues. Suppose that for good measure we add a few understandings of private religion vs. public religions to this mix: distinctions between individual and group beliefs, voluntaristic denominations vs. established churches, and "the spirit" vs. "the world." And let's not forget the distinction between *SlmPPPLE* discourse in private ivory towers and a *simple* address to wider public constituencies.

With so many different kinds of public on the table, and in light of the growing body of scholarship showing the historical connections between national public spheres, patriarchal metaphors and racial exclusions, it is tempting to throw up our hands and say that the public simply does not exist, and *should* not exist.³¹ However, Robbins points out that this response is uncomfortably close to what Walter Lippmann argued in the 1920s: that the masses cannot be adequately informed to participate in decisions about social policy; they have no viable choice except to delegate authority to technocratic elites (or trust Posner's free market in truth and beer.)³² Thus Robbins says that "if there is some reluctance to see the public melt conclusively into the air, the cause may not be vestigial piety so much as the fear that we cannot do without it." He calls for building publics that can defend collective democratic interests against elite interests. However, it is essential to abandon unitary conceptions of the public and recast them in pro-feminist and multiculturalist forms: it becomes "a matter of local investigations into particular collectivities and practical politics."³³ One especially helpful version of this approach is Nancy Fraser's concept of "counter-publics" committed to social transformation. They form a middle ground between unitary concepts of *the* public, on one side, and forms of micro-politics, consumerism, and discourse theory that abandon public work toward socio-political change, on the other.³⁴

Many of the publics and counter-publics that hold interest for American Studies are local or transnational. However, one public among them is the public of the nation, the United States. At the barest minimum, many problems at the local and international levels require attention to issues at the national level. It feels odd to call for attention to nationalism in a paper on the field of American Studies, since (as I have already argued) our field inherits a problem of being overly tied to the nation as an analytical category. For many people, however, in my academic generation, the category of the nation has been distinctly subordinated to other categories like race, gender, and class that create conflict within nations and cut across national boundaries. Moreover, as we think about empire, our work of gate-crashing—in this case national border-crashing—is far from complete. Amy Kaplan's point is crucial:

The new pluralistic model of diversity runs the risk of being bound by the old paradigm of unity. . . . American nationality can still be taken for granted as a monolithic and self-contained whole, no matter how diverse and conflicted, if it remains implicitly defined by its internal social relations, and not in political struggles for power with other cultures and nations, struggles which make America's conceptual and geographic borders fluid, contested, and historically changing.³⁵

However, having said this, I fear that we might push so hard to undermine the "givenness" of nations that we outsmart ourselves and underestimate their continuing importance. There are holes in the fence and we need more of them; but the fence is still there, and this has real consequences. Some of these consequences are negative factors in struggles for greater justice, but not all of them are. In this connection, Benedict Anderson posed an interesting question at an American Studies Association panel in 1995.³⁶ Speaking to a room full of virtuosos at deconstructing U.S. patriotic discourses—the type of scholars that Fredric Jameson spoke for when he spoke of "the old thing called 'nationalism,' long since liquidated here and rightly so"—Anderson suggested that some people who attack the concept of the U.S. nation still presuppose it.³⁷ He asked how many would endorse throwing out the U.S. Constitution and starting over. Would a new Constitutional Convention, called tomorrow, result in a polity that is better or worse? My sense of the crowd was that they granted the force of this argument because they thought the answer was "worse"—but that they did so grudgingly.

At the national level in the United States, as I write, the New Deal coalition appears to be comatose. In the name of pragmatism, our Demo-

cratic President promotes policies more like Nixon's than FDR's. The richest 1 percent of the population owns 40 percent of the marketable wealth—up 100 percent since the early 1980s and rapidly rising—and the real wages of production and non-supervisory workers fell almost 20 percent between 1973 and 1989.³⁸ Of course some people are riding a wave of economic growth; however, huge numbers have been swamped by this wave, especially in the inner cities, and many others are anxious about the future: women one divorce away from poverty, families at risk of losing medical insurance with their next layoff or move, and anyone concerned about children and grandchildren in a society where prisons are among the leading growth industries and the international labor market increasingly pressures workers to sell their labor for less.

There are many ways to speak to the fears of such people, one of which is Pat Robertson's. But another way is suggested by Bruce Springsteen's recent recording, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. I suggest it as a model of public intellectual work with important things to teach about our nation:

Shelter line stretching 'round the corner
 Welcome to the new world order . . .
 Waiting for when the last shall be first and the first shall
 be last
 In a cardboard box 'neath the underpass³⁹

Those who associate Springsteen primarily with his rock and roll persona should not imagine these lyrics with similar soundtrack. This music is more like his *Nebraska* album; it sounds like early Bob Dylan and reaches back into the tradition of Woody Guthrie. At one point Springsteen sings about a young military veteran who takes a job with the California Border Patrol. Speaking of his friend and co-worker, he says

Bobby Ramirez was a ten year veteran, we became
 friends
 His family was from Guanajuato, so the job it was differ-
 ent for him.

The two of them spend each night chasing impoverished farmers, drug runners, and children through the canyons, and, as Bobby Ramirez comments, "We send them home and they come right back again . . . hunger is a powerful thing."⁴⁰ These songs evoke a world far removed from speculations about the policies we might want to implement if we were policy planners, holding enough power to act on behalf of a national or international public. At least for the moment, Springsteen can only narrate

credible hopes in small scale acts of solidarity and resistance, in relation to publics that are local and specific. In this song, the narrator sees a Mexican woman in a holding pen with a child in her arms, and she looks like the spouse he is mourning. He helps her cross the line and abandons his job.

However, recall Springsteen's comment: that since Bobby Ramirez was from Guanajuato, working for the border patrol "was different for him." This makes sense. But why? Isn't he an ideal example of the kind of person that deconstructs overly rigid national identities? No doubt his experience includes many kinds of differences—personal, local, international—but some of them result from the distinctive histories and current situations of Mexico and the United States. With all due qualification, it is possible to make useful generalizations about differences between these countries. The mix of Native American, African, and European influences in the population is different, and the central valleys of Mexico have been the home for some of the world's greatest civilizations, continuously, beginning centuries before Europeans arrived. Although both the United States and Mexico gained corporatist capitalist states with family resemblances in the 1930s, Mexico has only one dominant party while the United States has two, and Mexico's version emerged from a revolution in the twentieth century. Although both countries exist in a world of globalizing consumer capitalism, the level of absolute material misery in Mexico is much higher. All Mexicans, from the richest to the poorest, can tap a historical memory of being underdogs versus the imperial conquerors who stole half their land and still dominate their economy. These are serious national differences. To question the rigidities and taken for grantedness of the United States-Mexico border is essential. But to forget the differences enforced by the border, including at times the publics formed by them, is indefensible.

So, here is one cheer for comparative studies of national identities, especially when they look south to Mexico and to other settler outposts like South Africa, and not only east to Toqueville's France and the old Soviet Union. It is only one cheer and not three, because insofar as the nation defines public issues that we address while seeking to build oppositional coalitions, caution is in order. Even though we have no choice but to address the issue—nationalism will come to us, if we do not engage with it—building on the analytical and political traditions of U.S. nationalism is playing with fire. In the past, even when national traditions have taken New Deal, popular front, or left populist forms, it has often turned out that while the abstract possibilities of nationalism are attractive, its roads to the left are rocky while its roads to the right are smooth. Its rhetoric of democratic inclusion is markedly better than its actual track record. Therefore, it is crucial to ponder Ronald Reagan's efforts to co-opt Springsteen's political message, and to listen to Springsteen along with

other musicians who are not white men. For starters, I suggest the Fugees, a popular rap group that blends references to Woody Guthrie, the Bible, African-American musical traditions, and the Haitian roots of some of their members when it says “Come with me to the land of Abraham/This land’s your land, this land’s my land.”⁴¹ Also, consider the feminist songwriter Ani DiFranco, who comments about work and patriotism as follows:

I am not an angry girl, but it seems I’ve got everyone
fooled
Every time I say something they find hard to hear
They chalk it up to my anger and never to their own
fear . . .
I have earned my disillusionment, I have been working
all of my life
I am a patriot, I have been fighting the good fight.

DiFranco’s style of patriotism does not prevent her from calling the bluff of males who imagine her as a helpless “kitten up a tree.” She says she “knows how to get down/Whether or not you ever show up.”⁴²

If American Studies gate-crashers have taught us anything, it is that exceptionalism can screen out race, gender, and empire, and can explain why “all of us Americans” do not have to think about class like “less fortunate nations.” If this assumption becomes dominant, as it sometimes did in “classic” American Studies, it is offensive whether it looks east to the “Old World” or south to Chiapas. It is no improvement to turn south, only to contrast undifferentiated affluent gringos to undifferentiated impoverished Mexicans. This allows Mexican agribusiness executives with children at Harvard to posture as “oppressed” while minimum-wage clerks in Texan supermarkets feel guilty as “oppressors”—and it makes the complex realities of Bobby Ramirez’s life disappear into thin air. Springsteen does a fine job of undermining this sort of ideology. The crucial point is that he does this without forgetting that inequality and empire remain, and that they are structured partly along national lines. He also does so without neglecting struggles for justice within the United States, where he is still waiting for the ghost of Tom Joad.

I conclude this section, then, calling for more stages at our festival that are engaged with wider publics. In the next decade, I hope to be part of an American Studies crowd that looks as much to people like the Fugees and DiFranco as to SImPPPLE theorists. I hope we will maintain our distinctive interests in United States national history, although as only one layer in a larger analysis that also thinks in local and global frameworks, and that through this process we will turn enough attention south and north, rather than east, so that we can with integrity change our embarrassing name to *North* American Studies.

Bill Graham and Billy Graham: On Religion in American Studies

Recall the complaint that opened the last section, that too many scholars in cultural studies lack “any connection to existing political and cultural movements, and are somewhat surprised that this might even be possible.”⁴³ Scholars who confront this issue seriously in the United States will sooner or later have to address a further issue: many of these movements are grounded in the cultural traditions and institutional matrices of religions. Even when the movements are secular, the publics that they depend upon for support claim high rates of religious belief and participation. More than half of all U.S. citizens say that they attend church and 85 percent accept the Bible as divinely inspired. Religious themes are deeply integrated into many aspects of life in the United States, from the institutional histories of universities, to the forms of popular music, through the high percentages of charitable giving that are channeled through religious organizations, to the rhetoric of politicians.⁴⁴ Of course, religion is not all-important, and there is some question how to interpret such data. In one famous poll, half of the people who told pollsters that religion was very important in their lives simultaneously claimed that religion had no influence on their ideas about politics or business.⁴⁵ In light of such information, scholars who perceive secularization eroding the power of religion can still score points in ongoing debates, although religions seem more likely to bury sweeping theories of secularization than vice-versa.⁴⁶ However, there is no doubt that religions remain significant forms of cultural identity and that dozens of major social issues, from abortion to Zionism, cannot be understood without attention to religion.

In view of such considerations, it is striking how little cultural studies has to say about the cultural identities we call religious. It makes no sense to *substitute* a focus on religions for attention to race, class, gender, and nation. However, I do suggest *integrating* religious identities as variables in the mix of analysis: for example, analyzing both gender and religious differences within nations, both class and religious identities cutting across national boundaries, both race and religious differences within classes, and so on. No one attempting a broad analysis of North American culture can ignore nationalism without making their analysis vulnerable—not even the poststructuralists who are most determined to dissolve the fixity of national boundaries, accent the oppressive dimensions of nationalism, and write complex accounts of structures like race that cut across nations. However, almost *anyone* in cultural studies can choose to ignore religions without being challenged to think twice about it. One need not claim that religions are the sole variables in our society, or the most important ones, to be troubled by this situation.

Nor must one adopt the worldview of books such as Stephen Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief* and George Marsden's *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, which present mainstream Christians as underdogs on the defensive against a secular liberal establishment.⁴⁷ Although my argument in this section overlaps with Carter and Marsden in some ways, my central point is different. Far from being underdogs pitted against the establishment, Christians constitute pillars of the establishment on many of the issues that interest me the most.⁴⁸ And as Mark Silk shows in *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America*, Christianity commands great respect in the mainstream media.⁴⁹ Thus my point is not that "the media" or "the dominant culture" typically exclude religions—although, true enough, they sometimes do—but that secularized academics often fail to appreciate the importance of religions (both inside and outside the dominant culture) relative to other factors, and are too quick to assume that most religions are monolithic and conservative.

Consider, as one symptom of this problem, a recent collection on the culture and politics of the 1960s, with contributions by leading scholars in our field. Even though its editor frames the book by stressing that a key legacy of the 1960s was the rise of the new Christian right, the book barely mentions religious developments during the decade. It treats Bill Graham, who promoted the Grateful Dead, and its index lists no less than seven items under "Brown": H. Rap Brown, Helen Gurley Brown, Jerry Brown, and so on. However, it never mentions the evangelist who preached at the White House, Billy Graham, nor two leading Browns who linked religious ideas and institutions to the events treated in the book: Robert McAfee Brown in liberal circles and Harold O.J. Brown on the right. These omissions might be understandable, if we learned instead about some of their colleagues such as Daniel Berrigan, Reinhold Niebuhr, Bill Bright, Marabel Morgan, Benjamin Chavis, Dorothy Day, Mary Daly, Will Campbell, and so on. However, except for the obligatory section on Martin Luther King, Jr. and a nod at the liberal anti-war group, Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, attention to religion is virtually absent.⁵⁰

Of course other American Studies scholars do integrate concerns with religion, sometimes on the central stages of our field. It is easy to think of good work on religion; the major issue is bringing this work into focused dialog with other issues.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the collection on the 1960s is symptomatic of the "sound" on two stages where my disquiet is strongest: twentieth-century studies and the parts of our field most committed to cultural studies. A call for papers for a cultural studies conference at Bowling Green suggested no less than twenty-nine extremely wide-ranging topics: disciplines from History through Art to Media Studies; analytical categories like class, sexuality, and geography; and subjects including

sport, music, folklore, science, social movements, internet culture, and Nineteenth Century Studies. Nowhere on this list was any mention of religions as general subjects, nor any related subtopic such as belief in miracles, religiously-based activism, astrology, feminist spirituality, millennialism, and so forth. In a similar vein, the American Studies Program at Michigan State sponsored a conference on “What is an American? Changing Faces of Identity in American Life.” In its call for papers on boundaries and cultural identity, religion did not appear in another long list of suggested topics. No doubt many presenters at these conferences addressed religious matters under rubrics like history, music, and ethnicity. Still these lists are revealing, since presenters could also speak about music under the rubric of gender, art under nineteenth century studies, and so on.⁵²

Often, when scholars do turn their attention to religious issues, the treatment leaves something to be desired because they are not equipped to understand the complex range of possible meanings of their subjects. For example, when the *Nation* magazine described the left-wing Mexican bishop Samuel Ruiz, who has played a key mediating role between the Zapatista movement and the national government, it wrote that Ruiz “began a hunger strike—which he prefers to call a religious fast.”⁵³ By a similar logic, could one say that Martin Luther King, Jr. “gave motivational pep talks—which he preferred to call sermons and prayers”? No doubt it was a hunger strike; but its meaning and effectiveness at all levels—from how it was received in Chiapas to the international press—cannot be understood without exploring the range of possible internal meanings of Christian discourse and ritual within larger social formations. At a minimum, one should approach a sermon or religious ritual with the same appreciation for internal complexity, multivocality, and social context that one would bring to a popular song.

Springsteen tells the story of a Vietnamese refugee, Le Bin Son, who moved to Texas only to be targeted for murder by the Ku Klux Klan. Fighting in self-defense, “Le stood with his pistol in his hand.” This splendidly understated moment is easily overlooked by anyone who does not have ears to hear. Springsteen echoes the famous corrido, “The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez,” thereby connecting struggles of Asian Americans to the historic battles of Mexican Americans to find justice in the southwest.⁵⁴ When a listener makes this connection, the song opens onto a notably deeper level of emotional resonance. This allusion offers a paradigmatic opportunity for showcasing the strengths of American Studies method, which can bring together the historical clash of cultures in the borderlands, the imperial history of the United States in the Vietnam era, and analysis of the meaning and significance of popular music in an age of mass media.

Let us speculate about how a typical American Studies or cultural studies scholar might respond to a comparable musical allusion touching on religion. It is probably evident to most *American Studies* readers that when Springsteen's preacher waits "for the last to be first, and the first to be last," he quotes the Bible and alludes to Preacher Casey in John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. However, how many of us are equipped to showcase the complex resonances implied by this? What do we know about the meanings of this Bible text—for example, do we understand its close relationship to Jesus's "blessed are the peacemakers" sermon (the one rendered by Monty Python as "blessed are the cheese makers") and the bitter struggles within Christianity to interpret it? Recall that Tom Joad's commitments drew explicitly on religious mysticism—"maybe it's like Casey says," Tom told his mother, "A fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one."⁵⁵ Can we assess how this relates to a wider range of religious debates during Steinbeck's era? Can we make an informed judgment whether Tom's speech should be read as a shallow precursor to "We Are the World," or a powerfully resonant statement like Springsteen's vision of interracial solidarity in Texas today?

Now let us turn to a song with a less heavy-handed religious theme—a subtler, understated case more like the Gregorio Cortez connection in Springsteen. I first heard Sinéad O'Connor's powerful anti-racist lament, "Black Boys on Mopeds" with one of the most perceptive critics I know in the field of American Studies/cultural studies—a person highly receptive to the idea of counter-hegemonic religion. Yet when O'Connor sang "Remember what I told you/If they hated me they will hate you" and "Remember what I told you/if you were of the world they would love you," my friend was not aware that O'Connor was quoting words of Jesus from the gospel of John, thus placing a left anti-racist reading of Christianity at the heart of the song.⁵⁶ Like someone oblivious that they were missing anything as they failed to relate "Le stood with his pistol in his hand" to borderlands cultural history, my friend was in no position to understand the preferred reading of this song, nor the historical resonances and future possibilities it was (at least potentially) suggesting. Obviously, it would never occur to anyone in this position to inquire about audience reception of these potential meanings, or their impact on larger religious formations. "Black Boys on Mopeds" provides a paradigmatic opportunity to showcase an inquiry into religious identities in cultural studies. But how many people notice this potential? How many can both notice and credibly explain how the religious allusion can do anything besides undermine the oppositional meanings of the song? How many would be willing to read even one scholarly book on the politics of Biblical interpretation, to inform their readings?

Ironically, scholars in religious studies and theology are sometimes complicit in the problem of cultural studies downplaying the importance of

religion, in-so-far as they fail to explore their subject matter in wider theoretical and socio-political contexts. One must have access to good books on subjects like the politics of Biblical interpretation to be able to follow my advice. Although these do exist, not all scholarly books on religion fit the bill. All too often it seems as if scholars agree that Ruiz's behavior must either be a political hunger strike or a religious fast but not both. They proceed either to discount his action as mere politics, or to deem it religious but split off its ritual and/or theological dimensions from its social ones. There are strong traditions in the academic study of religion to divorce essentialized religious meanings from inquiries into sociological and historical dimensions of religious experience: thus a song like O'Connor's might be analyzed as a politicized musical commodity or a "truly religious" expression that transcends such concerns, but not both. Although these methodological traditions by no means hold a monopoly among academic specialists in religion, especially among the historians and social scientists most closely allied with American Studies, the ongoing legacy of this approach does help explain why many American Studies scholars neglect journals in religious studies.

I would not press this criticism too far, since in some contexts scholars in religion do have plausible justifications for their attempts to isolate distinct and separate religious dimensions. This approach can be developed with varying levels of subtlety, and it offers a way to define "religion" so that it means something distinct from "culture" in general, as well as to focus attention on this difference.⁵⁷ Jenny Franchot moves in this direction when she says that "religious questions are always bound up with the invisible; it is in the nature of religious belief to insist upon a domain of the private that transcends cultural explication." She argues eloquently that such dimensions are underappreciated in the field of U.S. literature. "Religious voices, like certain kinds of shame, have become unmentionable," and religious faith "dwells among us somewhat like a chronic disease." Yet when expressions of religious faith are excluded from focus or reductively translated into more prestigious categories like "engendering" or "the subject," this amounts to "a detour around America's engagement with 'invisibles'. . . . [that allows us] to become ignorant."⁵⁸

Although I sympathize with Franchot as far as she goes, I also see drawbacks in defining religions with such heavy stress on their transcendent interior dimensions. This does not hold as a satisfactory cross-cultural definition of religion, and it turns attention away from other dimensions of religious subcultures and identities. Even though we need festival stages that explore many different levels of meaning, including those that concern Franchot, my own priority is not to revise existing cultural studies theories so that they better account for things unique to religion. It is simply to create a stronger body of scholarship that relates standard cultural studies

approaches to religious communities and traditions, and to persuade scholars to pay more attention to such studies that already exist, on both sides of the gulf that often separates religious studies and other disciplines in the humanities.⁵⁹ Our most pressing need is to build up a stage that takes for granted “up and running” religious discourses (conventionally so described) from recent North American history, and clarifies their varying meanings within specific socio-political formations.

In other words, I suggest a stage where most performers bracket classic approaches in religious studies that inquire whether languages and rituals conventionally associated with the adjective “religious” have a unique capacity to create transcendent meanings unlike any others. I suspect that there is no single essence of religion—not one defined by transcendence or anything else.⁶⁰ Specific religions do have distinctive particularities, just as artists can express certain ideas using Elizabethan poetry or rap samples that they cannot express with precisely the same nuance using any other idiom. However, most of the things that most people want to articulate most of the time can be expressed equally well in English, Spanish, or Japanese—and most things that people say and do using religious symbolism and ritual can be articulated equally well through the discourses of literature, art, sociology, anthropology, or historical analogy. The major reason for paying attention to religious discourse is like the reason for learning to speak Spanish if you go to Mexico City or Los Angeles. At some times and places—“religious” ones—people speak versions of “religion.” If some utterances in these dialects “transcend cultural explication” so radically that they are untranslatable, we can leave them for another stage on another day.

Along with analyzing these religious languages using standard neo-Gramscian approaches to contestation for cultural hegemony, it is helpful to approach them through an analogy with two other theories that are currently influential in cultural studies. In a widely cited article on transnational culture, Arjun Appadurai describes a chaotic interplay of ethnoscaples, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes.⁶¹ Can we fit religious identities into this approach? Perhaps. If Appadurai’s list exhausts the choices, religious landscapes are most like ideoscapes and mediascapes. Sometimes they are like ethnoscapes. However, we can also approach religions through an analogy with the concept of racial formations, as developed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant.⁶² Racial formations are related to ethnicities, nations, and classes, but are not identical with any of them. Similarly, I suggest that religious formations are a sort of “religioscape” related to, but not identical with, Appadurai’s suggestions: they are their own particular imaginative structures. Although they may overlap with ideologies and ethnicities, they are distinct. They may develop their own institutions, networks of communication, and capital

flows, or they may participate in larger ones. Often they are their own kind of diaspora. In general, they are caught up in the same jumble of cross-cutting loyalties and contexts described so well by Appadurai.

Scholars must judge on a case by case basis how much weight to give religious formations compared to other issues. At times religious actors hold significant power, as when social protest was channeled through churches in parts of Latin America during the 1970s, or when Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson were leading contenders for U.S. President in 1988. At other times the role of religions is thoroughly marginal. Most often religions weigh in somewhere between these extremes, playing varying roles in relation to different facets of each situation: for example, the same church might nurture struggles against racism while acting as a bulwark for conservative gender politics, or provide an important space for female empowerment while reinforcing middle-class complacency about class issues. In any case, Stuart Hall is persuasive. He says that despite good reasons for cultural studies activists to be suspicious of religions, such that “it would be idiotic to think that you could easily detach religion from its historical embeddedness and simply put it in another place,” nevertheless religions have

no necessary, intrinsic, transhistorical belongingness. [A religion’s] meaning—political and ideological—comes precisely from its position within a formation. . . . To struggle around religion in [a particular] country, you need to know the ideological terrain, the lay of the land [Sometimes] no political movement in the society can become popular without negotiating the religious terrain. Social movements have to transform it, buy into it, inflect it, develop it, clarify it—but they must engage with it.⁶³

Based on past experience, I realize that some readers will respond to this section of my paper with the same sinking feeling that I might have if my children (who, like nationalists, are people I cannot choose *not* to engage) were to say to me, “Gee-willikers, Pop, let’s go hear that cool Christian rock group that sounds almost like pop radio.” However, I am not calling for a stage within American Studies for “Christian American Studies.” I want us to listen to the same music that we already listen to—for example, Public Enemy, John Coltrane, Madonna, and Bob Marley—but with greater critical attention to religious ideas that are fused with ideas about gender, embodiment, race, empire, and class in such artists’ works. There is no need to abandon critical thought or retreat into a separate ghetto when studying religion. American Studies scholars commonly

assume that one can be a critical scholar of popular music and still love to listen to it, a critical scholar of political culture and still have political commitments, or a critical scholar of gender roles and still be a feminist. The analogy holds for scholars who study about religion. Some scholars working on religion in the general orbit of American Studies are “believers” or “participant observers” and some are not; often this depends on complex questions of how “belief” is understood. But most of us assume that we are critical when we talk about religious practices that we may or may not share, *and* about music that we may or may not love.

Of course we may be deluded in such thinking if it turns out—contrary to my argument above—that there is some invisible essence of religion, after all, and that the only way to understand it is to enter a conceptual realm that is essentially incompatible with critical thought.⁶⁴ But until this is proven, a more troubling objection to my suggestion (at least for anyone who shares the left-liberal goals common in American Studies and cultural studies) is pragmatic: since the political center of gravity in U.S. religion is moderate to conservative, would the result of following through with my analogy (if feminists and rap fans, then why not religion fans?) be to shift the spectrum of debate in American Studies to the right? If so, would I be playing a role like Ralph Reed’s, when he claims that all honest people who supported Martin Luther King, Jr. must now support the activism of the Christian Coalition?⁶⁵ In a recent exchange on the American Studies discussion list, H-AMSTDY, Paul Lauter asked me whether “those few instances of religious progressivism—like Garrisonian abolitionism and Catholic base communities in Nicaragua—are anything more than the contraries that prove the rule: namely, that formal religion in almost every instance has, in fact, been a mainstay against change, when it has not been an active force for reaction.”⁶⁶

This is a fair question, but one which cannot be answered without studying religions more carefully than American Studies typically does at present. As we seek to answer it, there is no reason to follow Lauter’s lead, when he narrows his focus to “formal religion” as opposed to a wider range of popular religious expression, nor to assume a “know your enemy” stance as opposed to a more open one. However, let us grant for the sake of argument a worst case scenario: suppose it turns out that all oppositional religions *are* exceptions that prove the rule. It is *also* true that resistance within commodity capitalism is more an exception than the rule—but cultural studies talks about this incessantly. Moreover, people from every camp within American Studies, past and present, have criticized universities while still holding out qualified hopes for carving out constructive spaces inside them.

Religions, commodity cultures, and universities are not monolithic, even though they are structured in dominance. In popular culture studies,

it becomes tedious when you have to keep stressing that you are not endorsing everything about MTV, simply because you are interested in some aspect of a video by Madonna. The same is true on the religious front. No doubt, we may meet a few people who promote uncritical versions of “Christian American Studies.” If so, they will be like uncritical fans in the music analogy, scholars of politics who distort the evidence, and so on. Weak scholarship on music makes me conclude that I should do it better, not that music fans can’t write about music. In any case, there is a trump card, sufficient even to answer a skeptic who clings to the blind faith that *no* religious person can be critical and *all* religion is politically regressive. Somebody in our field still must pay attention as long as religions remain important in the lives of a majority of the people. I believe that there are compelling intellectual reasons to build up this particular stage, and—contrary to the “know your enemy” approach—good reasons to suspect that it will draw a sizable oppositional constituency.

I conclude, then, with the hope that my article will not share the fate of Brian’s speech in the Monty Python film: that I will not be understood as trying to be a gate-keeper or Messiah for American Studies as a whole, and that I will not be pre-judged too quickly based on anyone’s preconceptions of the Study of Culture Concepts, the Concept of Cultural Studies, or the True Essence of Religion. I simply hope that my thoughts will make some positive contribution to the quality of music at the stages devoted to “publics” and “religions” in American Studies during the coming years.

Notes

1. Richard Posner, cited in Henry Louis Gates, “Statistical Stigmata,” *Deconstruction and the Possibility Of Justice*, ed. Druscilla Cornell (New York, 1992), 330.
2. Bruce Springsteen, “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” from *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (Columbia Records, 1995).
3. *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, Handmade Films, 1979.
4. I am aware of the limits to this self-selection imposed by institutional constraints of the academy, and will return to this issue.
5. Renato Rosaldo, “Others of Invention: Ethnicity and Its Discontents,” *Voice Literary Supplement* (February 1990), 29.
6. Simone Weil, quoted in Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation,” in William K. Tabb, ed., *Churches in Struggle: Liberation Theologies and Social Change in North America* (New York, 1986), 48.
7. “Evolving Approaches to U.S. Culture in the American Studies Movement: Consensus, Pluralism, and Contestation for Cultural Hegemony,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 23:2 (1993), 1-55.
8. Anyone who reads my examples against the grain of my argument can find problems, even before they add all the things that I never thought about. For example, I relegated Clifford Geertz and Peter Berger to footnotes, even though if we use the mid-1960s as a baseline, they were two of the crucial theorists of the culture concept. If the 1950s was a time of consensus, what to do with an influential radical like C. Wright Mills? Put him in a footnote! Many key voices made limited sense as simple consensus scholars or pluralists, so I developed a category of “consensus as domination” for people who assumed something

like a consensus about a dominant culture but made intense critical comments about it. Then I developed subcategories of pluralists. There were the textbooks enamored of George Washington Carver, or those that presented a few select white women and black men doing most of the things that white males mostly did—thus barely representing a cultural alternative. Then there were working class historians who saw their heroic alternative subcultures going down to inevitable defeat and succumbing to a liberal consensus; were they part of my thesis, antithesis, or synthesis? One of my arguments concerned a broad tendency in the past two decades to move from attention to autonomous and self-contained subcultures—mini-consensus-cultures in opposition often defined through social structure—toward more focused attention to cultural history and the complex discursive interactions between elites and non-elites. But alas! Some of my exemplars from the 1960s and 1970s came into my narrative sideways, as precursors of my third stage, appearing out of sync with the true teleology of the movement.

9. Michael Denning, "'The Special American Conditions': Marxism and American Studies" *American Quarterly* 38:3 (1986), 356-380, quotation 360; Joel Pfister, "The Americanization of Cultural Studies," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 4:2 (1991), 199-229.

10. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, 1978); Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, 1987); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984).

11. In this connection, I also recommend Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York, 1987), Linda Kerber, "Diversity and the Transformation of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 41:3 (1989), 415-431; and George Lipsitz, "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies," *American Quarterly* 42:4 (1990), 615-636.

12. Pfister, 206, referring to the Champaign/Urbana conference; Denning, 362; see also Fredric Jameson, "On 'Cultural Studies,'" *Social Text* 34 (1992).

13. Cited in Cornel West, "Ethics and Action in Fredric Jameson's Marxist Hermeneutics" *Postmodernism and Politics* ed. Jonathan Arac, (Minneapolis, 1986), 131.

14. Michael Bérubé, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (New York, 1995), 217-218. I suspect that Denning might agree with these points. In any case, they are not intended as a strong criticism of his article; rather this is a general caution about not narrowing the field excessively and tilting its center of gravity too much toward neomarxist literary studies.

15. On this history, see also Gene Wise, "Paradigm Dramas in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly* 31:3 (1979), 293-337.

16. Pfister, 214.

17. William Appleman Williams, *Empire as A Way of Life* (New York, 1980) is a good synthetic statement; his "The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy" *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (1955) 379-395 clearly links his project to classic American Studies themes. Other works include *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* 2nd ed. (New York, 1962) and *The Contours of American History* (Chicago, 1961). On Williams' place within American Studies see David Noble, "Revocation of the Anglo-Protestant Monopoly: Aesthetic Authority and the American Landscape," *Soundings* 79:1-2 (1996) and Noble, *The End of American History: Democracy, Capitalism, and the Metaphor of Two Worlds in Anglo-American Historical Writing, 1890-1980* (Minneapolis, 1985), 115-145. On his relation to recent trends in history, see Bradford Perkins, "The Tragedy of American Diplomacy: Twenty-five Years Later," *Reviews in American History* 12 (1984), 1-18; Thomas Paterson, et. al., "Round Table: Exploring the History of American Foreign Relations," *Journal of American History* 77:1 (1990), 171-244; and Dina M. Copelman and Barbara Clark Smith, eds., "Excerpts from a Conference to Honor William Appleman Williams," *Radical History Review* 50 (1991), 39-70.

18. Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York, 1990), 26-33. Brantlinger's first caution is about the limits of political critique within Minnesota's American Studies Program during the 1950s; his objections are well-taken, although these 1950s limitations appear in a harsher light when judged in the light of alternative positions in the 1980s, as opposed to the universe of alternative possibilities available in the 1950s. His second caution is about the relative marginalization of American Studies within the academy; this seems as much a cautionary tale for cultural studies as American Studies.

19. Of course the paradigmatic alternative route (increasingly well-respected in cultural studies) leads through civil rights and black power; in my personal case these influences came relatively late (through studying with West) and indirectly since I was nine years old

in 1966 and lived in rural Iowa. I hope it is clear that I do not put these sentences forward as an exhaustive inventory of my intellectual influences, nor defend everything I learned from this motley group.

20. The comment is by Alan O'Connor, "The Problem of American Cultural Studies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1984), 405-413, quotation 407; it is cited by Pfister, 205.

21. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's," in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York, 1990), 202-3.

22. Examples of the approach I have in mind include Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10:2 (1986), 5-27 and other articles in this special issue on Hall; Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York, 1994) and *Prophetic Fragments* (Grand Rapids, 1988); George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, 1990); Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis, 1989) and "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990), 56-80. See also Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London, 1987) and Arthur McGovern, *Marxism: an American Christian Perspective* (Maryknoll, 1981).

23. Bérubé, *Public Access*, 89, 120, 145, 168. See also Bérubé, "Public Academy" *New Yorker* (Jan. 9, 1995), 73-80.

24. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York, 1991). Two other helpful orientations to cultural studies are an issue of *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10.2 (Summer 1986) and Simon During, *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York, 1993).

25. Bérubé, 156, 30, 158.

26. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987), 51-63.

27. Posner, in Gates, "Statistical Stigmata," 330.

28. Ralph Reed, *After the Revolution: How the Christian Coalition is Impacting America* (Dallas: 1996), 130, cites Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York:, 1972) and says: "What Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci termed the 'cultural hegemony' may finally be cracking. Gramsci forwarded a Marxist critique of the all-pervasive ideology of capitalism. He suggested that the real power of the capitalist system was not its control of the economy but its complete dominance of the culture. Gramsci might well have spoken of the cultural hegemony of the institutions controlled by elites [which Reed identifies as liberal secular humanists] in the United States. People of faith must build their own institutions that represent their views fairly."

29. Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism Among the Theorists" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, 1988), 35-73; Ellen Messer-Davidow, "Manufacturing the Attack on Higher Education," *Social Text* 36 (Fall 1993), 40-80. See also Cary Nelson, "Lessons from the Job War" *Social Text* 44 (1995), 119-134.

30. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1994), chapter two. At this point his analysis is heavily indebted to Jeff Weintraub.

31. For example, Andrew Parker et. al., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York, 1991); Amy Kaplan, "Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of the American Culture," in Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, 1993), 3-21.

32. On Lippmann, see his *The Essential Lippmann; a Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy* (New York, 1963) and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Walter Lippmann: the Intellectual v. Politics" in Marquis Childs, ed., *Walter Lippmann and His Times* (New York, 1959) 189-225.

33. Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, 1993); x, xxiii. See also his "Some Versions of U.S. Internationalism," *Social Text* 45 (Winter 1995), 97-124. For further thoughts about public religions, see Hulsether review *William Dean: The Religious Critic in American Culture* *Soundings* LXXVIII:3-4 (1995), 661-665 and Hulsether, "The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual: Some Recent Works by Cornel West," forthcoming in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*.

34. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere" and *Unruly Practices*. My thinking about this matter has been influenced by Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis, 1990).

35. Kaplan, "Left Alone with America," 15. On this issue see also Katherine Verdery, "Beyond the Nation in Eastern Europe," *Social Text* 38 (1994), 1-20; Andrew Parker et. al., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York, 1991), and Robbins, *Some Versions of U.S. Internationalism*.

36. Author's notes from panel, American Nationalism in American Studies, American Studies Association, Pittsburgh, November 11, 1995.

37. Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986), 65.

38. Edward N. Wolff, "How the Pie is Sliced: American's Growing Concentration of Wealth," *The American Prospect* (Summer 1995), 58-64; Simon Head, "The New Ruthless Economy," *New York Review of Books* (Feb. 29, 1996), 47-52. Wolff's measure of "wealth" does not include consumer durables—things like furniture—nor social security and pensions. Factoring in consumer durables has little effect on overall figures, but factoring in pensions and promised future social security benefits lowers the share of the richest 1 percent to 22 percent. It is hard to assess this lower figure since the future of social security seems precarious.

39. Springsteen, "Ghost of Tom Joad."

40. Springsteen, "The Line," from *The Ghost of Tom Joad*.

41. The Fugees, "Nappy Heads," from *Blunted on Reality*, (Columbia Ruffhouse, 1993)

42. Ani DiFranco, "Not a Pretty Girl" from *Not a Pretty Girl* (Righteous Babe Records, 1995)

43. O'Connor, "The Problem of American Cultural Studies," 407.

44. Figures cited by Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, 1992), 2-3 and 13-15, from polls in the 1980s. See George Gallup and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York, 1989). For a summary of data on religion and U.S. politics, see Robert Booth Fowler and Allen Hertzke, *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture and Strategic Choices* (Boulder, 1995).

45. Cited in James Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: the Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick, 1994), 116.

46. Two fine studies that address debates about secularization and have a strong overlap with American Studies are R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York, 1994) and Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*. For my thoughts on Moore, see my "Interpreting the 'Popular' in Popular Religion," *American Studies* 36:2 (Fall 1995), 127-137. Casanova, chapter one and *passim*. makes an important distinction between three distinct meanings of secularization: secularization as the differentiation of political and religious institutions at least in the west, which he defends as the valid core of the theory; secularization as the decline of religious practice, which is not supported by the evidence; and secularization as privatization of religious practice, which he believes is a common trend but not an exclusive one, and which he argues should not be considered normative.

47. Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York, 1993) and George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York, 1997).

48. I develop this point in more detail in "Interpreting the 'Popular' in Popular Religion."

49. Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (Urbana, 1995).

50. David Farber, ed. *The Sixties: from Memory to History* (Chapel Hill, 1994). My point is not to hold Farber personally responsible; on the contrary he has opened an important discussion and the book's limitations reflect the wider priorities of historians; see James Lorence and James Grinsel, "Amen: the Role of Religion in History Teaching," *AHA Perspectives* (October 1992), 20-23. Studies showing how religious actors fit into Farber's themes include Doug Rossinow, "'The Breakthrough to New Life': Christianity and the Emergence of the New Left in Austin, Texas, 1956-1964," *American Quarterly* 46:3 (1994), 309-340; James Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: the Making of Postwar Radicalism* (New York, 1996); Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York, 1995); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York, 1988) and my own forthcoming, *From Liberal Preaching to Radical Teaching: Culture, Politics, and Religion in Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993* (Knoxville). Also, see John McGreevy, "Racial Justice and the People of God: the Second Vatican Council, the Civil Rights Movement, and American Catholics" *Religion and American Culture* 4:2 (Summer 1994), 221-254.

51. For example, Moore, *Selling God and Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York, 1986); Jon Butler, *Awash in the Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge 1990); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: the Cultural Work of American Fiction* (New York, 1985); Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*; Ann Braude, et. al., "Forum: Female Experience in American Religion," *Religion and American Culture* 5:1 (1995), 1-22; David Hackett, "Gender and Religion in American Culture, 1870-1930," *Religion and American Culture* 5:2 (1995), 127-158. For samples of recent work see David Hackett, ed., *Religion and American Culture: a Reader* (New York, 1996) and Thomas Tweed, ed., *Retelling U. S. Religious History* (Berkeley, 1996).

52. Call For Papers, "Against the Grain: Cultural Studies as Oppositional Criticism," Second Annual National Graduate Student Conference in Cultural Studies, March 1-2, 1996, Bowling Green State University, downloaded from internet 10/16/95; Call for Papers, "What is an American? Changing Faces of Identity in American Life," American Studies Program at Michigan State, downloaded from internet 1/29/96.

53. Bill Weinberg, "Rumbles of War, Rumors of Peace," *Nation* (Feb. 6, 1995), 166. On Ruiz, see Gary MacEoin, *The People's Church: Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Mexico and Why He Matters* (New York, 1996) and Alma Guillermoprieto, "The Shadow War," *New York Review of Books* (March 2, 1995), 34-43.

54. Springsteen, "Galveston Bay," from *The Ghost of Tom Joad*; Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero* (Austin, 1958). I cannot prove that this is a conscious direct quotation by Springsteen—the song is not sung in corrido style—just as I cannot prove that other song-writers I discuss in this section are consciously quoting the Bible. However, in the unlikely event that these are "coincidences," they are coincidences of a most fascinating kind that are as telling, in their own way, as self-conscious quotations.

55. James Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939; New York, 1972), 570.

56. Sinead O'Connor, "Black Boys on Mopeds," from *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got* (Chrysalis Records, 1990). The Biblical allusion is to John 15:18-20 and its parallels.

57. For a representative selection of sophisticated work in the field see Sumner Twiss and Walter Conser, eds., *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion* (Hanover, 1992); for a fine critical survey relating such approaches to other social science methodologies see Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion* (Cambridge, 1987).

58. Jenny Franchot, "Invisible Domain: Religion and American Literary Studies," *American Literature* 67:4 (1995), 840, 836-837, 841-842. She cites Cotton Mather on "invisibles."

59. Two helpful bridges between religious studies and cultural studies theory are David Swartz, "Bridging the Study of Culture and Religion: Pierre Bourdieu's Political Economy of Symbolic Power," *Sociology of Religion* 57:1 (1996), 71-87 and especially Bruce Grelle, "Hegemony and the 'Universalization' of Moral Ideas: Gramsci's Importance for Religious Ethics" *Soundings* LXXVIII:3-4 (1995), 519-540.

60. Here I am relating my proposal to William Paden's pragmatic (non)definition of religion: "Religion is not an independent subject matter just sitting there for all to see, but a term that its user chooses to associate with certain kinds of phenomena. . . . The term has become completely equivocal." Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion* (Boston, 1992), 5-6.

61. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" *Public Culture* 2:2 (1990), 1-24, especially 6-11.

62. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1980s*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1992). See also their excellent statement on how race relates to democracy and "the public" in Stanley Aronowitz, et. al. "Special Section: Radical Democracy" *Social Text* 23:3 (1994), 127-134.

63. Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," ed. Lawrence Grossberg, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10:2 (1986), 53-54.

64. For a nuanced rebuttal to a similar objection from the Marxist camp, see Denys Turner, "Religion: Illusions and Liberation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Marx* (Cambridge, 1991), 320-337.

65. Ralph Reed, *After the Revolution: How the Christian Coalition is Impacting America* (Dallas, 1994) repeatedly appeals to King's precedent beginning with the very first sentence of its foreword by William Bennett.

66. Paul Lauter, posted on H-AMSTDY, 4/1/96.