

New Voices Conference

New Voices in American Studies: What We (Can) Do *or* Postcards from Elk Mountain

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The essays that follow represent the edited efforts of twelve speakers invited to attend a symposium at the University of Wyoming, in late March 2003, titled “New Voices in American Studies.” The symposium was modeled on one organized by Werner Sollors at Harvard University, which similarly presented a series of “Young Americanists” in 1997, which I had the pleasure of attending. The opportunity to meet a small cohort of colleagues with scholarly interests different than my own, but with institutional interests and concerns in common, had been valuable; I had hoped since then to create a similar opportunity for emerging scholars to meet at Wyoming. Thanks to the enthusiasm and logistical support of my program chair, Eric Sandeen, and our American Studies Program’s Fiftieth Anniversary to celebrate, we had this chance last spring.

One path of introduction would lead directly into the content of these essays—the ostensible location of what is “new,” with the intention of raising excitement and curiosity (if also inviting cynicism). Editors of the new necessarily focus on what we haven’t heard before in scholarship, or what challenges complacencies—what might be “right” in a way that changes how anything will be said in the future. They give us a map to the new paradigm or invoke the grave necessity of reckoning with a particular corner of contemporary insight. But the anthology, as a vehicle for what we are just learning, is not new. And the

assumption that some special part of the new rises like stars in the hearts, minds, and bodies of freshly-trained scholars, is a condition of academic life as we know it. Because these essays are documents of an event, not just scholarship, the event itself demands attention, including the special status of those invited to *be*, as well as to articulate, “the new,” and the conditions—by design and by accident—that made this particular event different than most academic gatherings. Let me say at the outset, then, that what this introduction offers is an interpretation of a series of gestures (an event and the documents it occasioned), not a reading of the documents as texts. It is also a call for others, perhaps through the American Studies Association, to undertake similar events in the future.

Both Young Americanists at Harvard and New Voices at Wyoming highlighted the work of a small group of emerging scholars, all with recent PhDs in American studies from programs around the country. Snapshots of the field, both the Young Americanists and New Voices captured a range of scholarly approaches and interests indicative of some of what the next academic generation is up to. Each event invited emerging scholars to reflect on the field as a whole from their special moment in time. At Wyoming, in a two-day lecture/response series held in the Cooper Mansion (which houses the American Studies Program), forty-five minute presentations by American studies PhDs Davarian Baldwin, Andaluna Borcila, Carolyn de la Peña, Patrick Pynes, Stephen Rohs, and John Streamas, were paired with shorter but prepared responses by Beth Loffreda, Garth Massey, Paula Rabinowitz, Bruce Richardson, Susan Kollin and Barry Shank, established scholars in a variety of fields with connections to American studies, who helped contextualize the speakers’ work and opened conversation for the audience. The venue was small (we could seat about thirty), but most who attended came to the entire series. As Werner Sollors had done for the Young Americanists, we invited representatives of academic publishing to attend the New Voices symposium: Sian Hunter, acquisitions editor for the University of North Carolina Press, and Norm Yetman, an editor of *American Studies*.

Following two days of presentations, the entire group decamped for a two-day retreat at a remote historic hotel at Elk Mountain, about sixty miles from Laramie, which we had entirely to ourselves for the weekend. There we had uninterrupted time to talk about professions and jobs, the structures of institutions, conditions of work, expectations, disappointments and fears, and relationships among colleagues of different academic generations. More than once we ventured into why and how we believe our work is important, or to whom and under what circumstances it might be. One of the easiest things to think, and the hardest to disprove, is that someone’s work is “irrelevant,” and this specter hangs over any discussion of one’s (work’s) importance. Sian Hunter could at least address the more prosaic aspects of public visibility in print, demystifying the book publishing process (for New Voices and “old voices” alike), and Norm Yetman in the end suggested the possibility of collecting the lectures and responses as a

special issue of *American Studies*. Perhaps it isn't surprising that the tone and scope of conversation changed dramatically when this prospect arose; had any of us been thinking about publication from the beginning, I have no doubt the entire event would have had a different flavor.

As it was, we shared good meals at the long hotel dining table, plenty of time for tête-à-têtes on walks or over cigarettes or in rooms, late-night music courtesy of a student's borrowed guitar and the combined talents of the group, a radio broadcast of a Jayhawks game, the company of two babies and a teenager (whom their mothers had brought with them) and a young woman, a former American studies major (who helped care for the new-born)—it was definitely an all-ages show. I'll return to these aspects of the retreat below. More than anything, it was this unstructured time that brought a disparate group of people together, intellectually as well as personally, beyond the unavoidable expectations, anxieties, and attitudes attendant on any event presuming to present "New Voices" to each other and their audience. I regret now the choice of the name of the event.

The eagerness with which we expect something new to come specifically from our transformation via a degree to a working professional life, both in ideas and in personal experience, is only matched by the eagerness with which potential colleagues expect the same thing. People learn continuously and negotiate expectations all their lives, but the kind of expectation that attends a PhD and the first fruits of professional employment is special. Take for example *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* recent article, "Rising Stars," indicating for us on the cover "New Ph.D.'s to Watch" (I: 2, 5 September 2003, A10-A14). Though the article gives us plenty to think about in terms of the scholarly promise and insight of the four people it profiles, each profile bears the unmistakable stamp of a very particular narrative—a romance—that vividly captures the special status of those just out of graduate school.

We read that a herpetologist has been offered "two of the country's most prized academic jobs in herpetology—before he has completed his Ph.D." (A10). One job interviewer said, "we could all just sense we had a star here" who "just blew everybody away." Like other students who had worked in the same professor's lab, all "the jobs they've gotten have been really desirable ones that everyone was talking about." We even learn of the young scientist's good fortune in salary and start-up support: a \$250,000 "research package" and entry-level pay at about \$50,000 (A13).

If this doesn't remind one a little of Jane Austen, maybe the case of a bright philosopher can bring home the point. This young woman had "gained the respect of her fellow graduate students . . . [and] the admiration of her professors" (for an admittedly peculiar academic skill: seizing "an issue by the jugular and refus[ing] to let go" [A11]). Shy, quick to credit her mentors, and methodical, "everyone" expected her to "turn heads last fall at the American Philosophical Association's conference, the annual event where would-be professors try to

dazzle their way into departments.” She had fifteen interviews, “an impressive number for a field in which the candidates far outnumber the openings” (A13). What was the fate of this academic Emma Woodhouse so clearly deserving—by accomplishments and temperament—the best outcome? A courtship drama in which she and her husband held out for good offers to each of them from the same institution. Campus visits went well, one university made an “attractive” offer, but the couple “would be forced to decide whether to accept the offer before they heard back” from a more highly attractive institution where they had interviewed. They had already rejected a third offer inferior by comparison. “Saying no again wouldn’t be easy.” They “decided to gamble,” turning down the remaining offer while waiting for news from the place they most wanted to work. “‘It was scary,’” the philosopher admitted, and for “‘48 hours we were offerless.’ Then the phone rang . . . they got the jobs” (A14). *The Chronicle* cheerily relates the stories of two other promising and successful scholars as well.

Never mind what these people study: the debut ball, the drawing-room, the suitors and the Proposal are visible enough in conference interviews, the ritualized appointments and meals of campus visits, and the Offer. Money and station matter, as do manners, charisma, and accomplishments (not to mention appropriately expressive dress, as any conference demonstrates). The “job market” is no less stylized and hazardous than the marriage market in any of Austen’s novels, and the stakes are similarly high—life-changing, absolutely material.

And what is a “rising star”? Traditionally, it would have been an astrological body rising over the horizon at the moment of birth, hopefully imparting good fortune and success to the newcomer. What was “new” was the person, not the star. We who live under a crowded firmament conflate the two, launching new stars all the time, learning to navigate by them, ignoring them at our peril. We burden ourselves and those who come after us with a duty to be worthy, not just of work, but of a permanent celestial place, a role as protagonist in a grand (and familiar) story.

It is no wonder, then, that graduate education pits emerging scholars (and the colleagues they become) in ruthless *personal* competition with one another, which it would be a mistake to attribute solely to the selfless exertions of “the life of the mind” (or “politics”). Students are in the business of preparing their habits as colleagues, sharing work and learning from one another (or at least learning to appear to do so), sharpening knives as well as the gentler arts of mutual respect on each others’ thick and thin hides. Prepared thus for roles as mature professionals by the standards of a fairy-tale of stardom, perhaps believing themselves (or the work) very important, or unworthy, or only worthwhile for the dental plan, every academic gathering is a little gauntlet thrown down: you will perform. By convention, hosts introduce their guests with the appropriate banners of education and past performance, but everything after that is all in the

moment, here and now, gifts and accomplishments and appearances, the stuff of letters of recommendation made real in flesh, improvisatory, indelible. Gossip flies afterwards. A wrong word, a brilliant insight, an attack, a conversation . . . anything can happen. Apprehension—in every sense of the word—is among the finest tools of the trade, learned early and practiced often, like oiling a rifle, or tuning an instrument.

New Voices in American Studies, as an event, certainly called up all the participants' expectations of being, and seeing, what was ascendant in American studies, with all the wariness and apprehensive care that that entails. You can hear this apprehension—this calculating ahead of time what is expected, the claiming and performance of expertise of different kinds—in both the essays and the responses here. The limited number of recent PhDs invited reinforced the sense that these were among a chosen few, as indeed they were, on the basis of recommendations solicited from home departments, and provided by enthusiastic dissertation advisors proudly promoting the success of their recent graduates. The New Voices themselves came prepared to live up to these expectations, above all steeped in their work, but also poised, nervous, generous, informative, and argumentative.

But there was more to this event than awaiting and assessing news, and much of the planning involved adding more informal and intergenerational exchange to what otherwise could have been merely concert performances on everyone's part.

There is no escaping the fact that any selection is made by someone in particular (and with a budget in mind; for those interested in hosting something similar, honoraria, travel, and the retreat cost about \$12,000). Where Harvard could invite nine, we could invite six (with three of six responses coming from outside Wyoming), but we still wanted to choose as wide a range of interests and approaches as possible, in a flexible conception of what a "field" might encompass. Given the chance, we wanted to include someone whose degree had led to a non-academic position. Those already fêted by the American Studies Association (through the Ralph Henry Gabriel Dissertation Prize) would have ample opportunity to be recognized elsewhere. The six people we invited would bring not only their fine research, but also would represent a range of employment situations, and would suggest connections through American studies beyond the United States, beyond a familiar nexus of humanities and social sciences, and outside the academy.

The choice of formal respondents was likewise guided with other factors in mind than research interests. We wanted respondents who represented a continuum of career stages and types of appointment, and also a variety of relationships to American studies as a field. The six who agreed to participate included a colleague with long experience in the public sector, several with ties to or primary responsibility for other interdisciplinary programs and fields (international studies, women's studies, African American studies, environmental

studies), one busy building a new American studies program, several with interdisciplinary interests though trained in traditional departments, and a couple with bona fide American studies graduate degrees, one (indeed, a Gabriel Prize winner) working in a traditional department. In this way, too, we wanted to create a “snapshot of the field,” in all its generational and interdepartmental complexity.

One way of presenting something new is to underscore how it is different (ideally better, more insightful, more useful) than what has come before, and in the case of scholarship, an obvious judge of that would be someone who shares the research interests of the newcomer. (At Harvard in 1997, formal responses to the Young Americanists came in fact from Harvard PhD candidates, whose own research was closely aligned somehow with that of the person to whom each responded.) This approach makes intuitive sense because that is how conferences operate, and how fields devolve into sturdy sub-fields. By repeating these conventions, it also silently reinforces the competitive standard pitting things *against* one another: the new against the established, and bearers of the new against one another. Though it might display the “goods” of the field explicitly, and the habitual structures of the field implicitly, it does not necessarily encourage anything new in the interactions of colleagues across lines of scholarly interest or generation.

At Wyoming, those invited to give formal responses to the New Voices in no way neatly matched the scholarly outlook of the papers they responded to. If the New Voices felt on the spot to shine, their responders felt on the spot, too, outside genres and habits they knew perfectly well under other circumstances. This caused some initial dismay, flurries of reading, or protestations that they would have “nothing to say,” but these people were at liberty to exercise skill and insight beyond a narrow assessment of the work at hand. Their responses, as these essays show, are unpredictable, divergent in style and tone (varying even within a single response), and much more widely suggestive of possible readings—indeed, ways of reading and interacting—than we usually have occasion to reveal, especially in print.

Moreover, the “assignment”—for all the invited speakers—explicitly included the organizers’ intention that this should be as much as possible a warm and congenial event, not an occasion simply to display critique. No one can really tell anyone to “be smart but be nice,” but the message (that delivery mattered) was clear enough I believe to disrupt business as usual. Readers will see punches pulled, straws grasped, fierce argument sublimated into various other demeanors, and straightforward compliments. What these documents display together, I think, is an awareness not just of an “audience,” but anticipation of relationships: tenuous, face-to-face, where the rules of engagement could not be taken for granted. What we see here are simply people working, figuring out what to hear and say with one another. The New Voices’ essays refer occasionally to one another; their notes refer to their responses, the audience conversation,

and frank disagreement, directly and indirectly. This was only possible, in the text of the central presentations themselves, *after* the presentations, in the days and months of talk and revision. What was new in the end was not so much a burden of the recent PhD's to display and justify through their scholarship. A different kind of novelty occupied a lively place *between* the lectures and responses, indeed among all of us present; we had a shared chance to think, talk, and learn from each other (not neatly, but not formulaically either) somewhat outside the institutional habits we learn too well.

I mentioned earlier that the prospect of publication came up at the end of the retreat, days after all the presentations had been given. These essays were not solicited with publication in mind, but for live delivery and genuine interaction, none of which translates perfectly into print. All these people could have produced and performed written pieces, with footnotes, ready-made for the press. They did not. And they did not transform their oral presentations entirely for publication even now—these are essays in the literal sense, things tried, in person. I am grateful, actually, that Andaluna Borcila and Patrick Pynes resisted sending a fixed text to which they were committed before their lectures. All the New Voices engaged in conversations with *American Studies* editors afterwards, arguing, shifting, but not in the end rebuilding these essays as if they were merely texts, like chapters of a book. (The six shorter responses retain most of the spoken gestures they had when we heard them first.)

The result, in publication, is a little strange, but its oddities indicate what kinds of things were possible in person, away from texts, and what kinds of things are missing but still faintly discernible here. Of course we don't have the video and film footage that two essayists wrote about. These essays also don't reflect the extent to which, through spontaneous comments thinking on their feet, each speaker referred to what had come before, in a living conversation over the course of the series. (We did not record the event—an oversight, but perhaps just as well in remaining focused where we were.) More importantly, though, what is irrevocably lost in print are other kinds of things: Davarian's voice, even a line of song, in this text; we don't have Steve's patience in the flurry of a student delivering a CD player so we could hear Steve's friends perform reenactments of Irish songs; we don't have Carolyn's lively asides and visible sense of humor; the quiet forward movement of Patrick's spoken narrative; the visceral intensity of Andaluna's delivery even when she wasn't feeling well; and John's soft-spoken determination. There are still traces of humor, strong feeling and personal investment, and some written versions of ways of speaking and being that would enliven a gathering, that would invite and respond to lived conversation and physical presence, that has to be considered part of intellectual work. It is important in this context to remember, then, that the lectures and responses that appear here were only the first part of an event; it was the retreat that brought the possibility of publishing, and I think helped retain a commitment to some of the less textual qualities of these presentations in print.

Anyone who teaches (presumably anyone who pays attention to how people anywhere regard and listen to each other) knows that the “what” of what is said is only part of what’s said. The rest isn’t “discourse” properly speaking (or necessarily “power,” or “politics” or “subtext”) but mundane and miraculous presence. Indeed, each in their own way, these essays speak to presence, conjuring the real in an unreal medium, representing things impossible to represent but no less real in their moment: the places and occasions of intellectual work, the experience of dislocation, memories without images, bizarre objects, a traversed landscape, one day in 1855. . . . It is an intellectual as well as a personal mistake to ignore the felt presence of these speakers in privileging their (recorded) words, even if their daily work depends on their mastery of those words.

When my dissertation advisor David W. Noble published *Death of a Nation* last year (Minnesota 2002), parts of which I had read in manuscript, I looked forward to “hearing” his seminars again, but I had to recognize that though the “voice” is clearly Noble’s, and the ideas and stories a recognizable culmination of his thought (and his life, always close by), the book is not David Noble, not even Noble as a scholar. His classroom presence was such that I couldn’t take notes at some early point; I have no written record of what he said with us, only a memory without words. But that was where the learning happened. So much of what we do is done with print in mind, and not just because academic lives in particular depend on publication. We live almost as if something that hasn’t found print (or at least words or an image) doesn’t exist. Certainly we know this isn’t true as scholars, but we don’t live as if we believe it. The mystique of print (and words and images) is obviously larger than professional exigency, beyond a desire or need for “audience.” Print is a lasting, if impoverished, form of presence. Had the New Voices lectures and retreat been preoccupied with print, we would have missed simply being there together, which was not, in the end, so simple, whether any of us ever have words to say all that happened. The point here wouldn’t be to establish some new standards for written texts (or to force past physical presence into language after the fact), but to remind us to *do this again and again*: to listen in person, to be people working and living, vitally aware of the ephemeral on its own terms.

This was what the retreat really allowed—a break into ephemeral things, through talk and food. Age and status are among the most ephemeral things imaginable, immediately evoked by naming anything “new.” The “new” implies the “old,” or more politely, the established, both ideas and people with documented histories of authority that emerge over time. Both terms inexorably call up the whole machinery of professional advancement and long, complicated stories of accomplishment, accident, and disappointment, all the convoluted ways that work and lives (not to mention the world at large) impose themselves on one another after the moment of professional debut. Not every milestone along the way is as widely celebrated as the first, and perhaps at no time do people have the luxury of engaged readers (however contentious the experience

may be) that they do when they are still closely associated with the accomplishments of graduate school. As Susan Kollin mentioned at the retreat, “When I was invited to come here to respond to one of the papers, I thought, ‘but aren’t I still a new voice?’” There was a generational element intentionally built into the Wyoming symposium; the retreat allowed us to talk at some length about the conditions of a career.

A recurring thread in the retreat conversation had a curious quality that sheds some light on a general condition people face as professionals. What is difficult or impossible is often what we talk about first, and is I believe what many of us feel first. That it’s a feeling, and not just something we think about, is important. Never mind for a moment that our bread and butter are in the quality of how we think, and by extension, how we work. That the difficult and the impossible weighed equally on the minds of the “new” and the “old” suggests this is a habit—perhaps as deeply ingrained as apprehension as an emotional tool of the profession. This was clear, for example, after Sian Hunter had talked with us about how books get published. It was still possible, after spending two or three days in her company, to remark about the impossibility of connecting with publishers, the miserable prospects of getting published, *in the abstract*—as if we weren’t face to face with each other, including an actual acquisitions editor whom all of us could say, ever after, we knew by name. This abstraction and assumption of difficulty is the performance of a habit I think we learn exceptionally well very early on, and maintain unselfconsciously afterwards.

Curiously also, the process of a career at every stage appeared often to include an abiding sense of oneself as an “outsider,” being excluded by accident or choice from a group—no longer being “new,” for example, as Susan Kollin put it. By way of getting to know one another, and chattily (nervously?) attempting to account for their presence, several people early in the retreat volunteered their apprehension (even dread) that they would be an unusual presence in the group—Garth Massey as a sociologist in international studies; Carolyn de la Peña holding her new-born daughter Eva; Patrick Pynes working in the garden at La Posada; Davarian Baldwin as the only African American person in the gathering, and so on. It quickly became clear that everyone at the table had harbored some reason (or several) to believe themselves outsiders—running a gamut from personal to political to intellectual to institutional. Sian said, “But I wanted to be the outsider!” A funny and telling remark.

This outsidersness spoke as much to people’s relationships with American studies and the people they faced that moment around the table as it did to their experience where they worked and lived. It struck me as a profound comment on what had brought us together right then, indeed who we believe we are to each other, though we would not have heard it out loud without a table full of fruit and bagels and some leisure to just sit with one another. There is no question that much of our lives, including academic lives, is spent negotiating limits: what is and is not and should be possible within a society, a family, a town, a

university, a job. What is poignant, though, is that these real and ongoing struggles can form an emotional habit, as well as a scholarly one, reinforced at every turn by academic hierarchies (among other things), to steel oneself as *The Outsider* under all circumstances.

Imagine, then, rooms full of Outsiders, with all the grievance and privilege of perspective that status implies. And you will probably recognize the graduate seminar, the faculty meeting, the conference, and the job interview, among other settings. Add to this the ease with which cultural studies types can disable “community” just in small talk, little throwaway recitals—always constructed, contentious, exclusive, suspect, or else something one studies but does not have (or no one does and should not want)—and you have a recipe for the doubly impossible. As a psychologist might tell you, what you have is a script, all the more powerful because it is often reliable, but importantly a private, emotional script we carry with us perhaps in spite of public or scholarly efforts to find, reinvent, and celebrate even tenuous connections and collaborations. A script that encourages us to suspend real judgment and act indiscriminately as if it were always reliable. The extent to which a sophisticated group of highly educated scholars could believe themselves outsiders with one another, and the range of experience entailed in exclusion, was startling. (Perhaps, at this moment in history, the power and reality of “insiderness” is all too overwhelming—a point Paula returned to several times over the course of the weekend.) But, for American studies especially perhaps—where we allegedly know better than to invent “American Adams,” the single rational view set apart from the teeming corruption of colleagues and everyone else—it seems important to point out that our most theoretically ambitious work may not have done much for us personally, every day, in the moments and occasions where we actually meet one another. How much more difficult then to talk to anyone else. It took some time, on this occasion, to allow people to expand beyond these habits; that we were able to do so is, I think, in large part because there *was* enough time to get to know and enjoy one another a little bit as people.

By necessity, much of the talk at the retreat was anecdotal; it should come as no surprise that every person’s relationship to institutions, fields, and colleagues is unique, though some important concerns came up repeatedly. None of these concerns exactly mirror the content of people’s research interests; almost no one teaches or works from their dissertation exclusively or all their lives—none in this group will. And the graduate educations that ably produce dissertations rarely, if ever, prepare graduates for what they face later, in administrative responsibilities, recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty, basic colleague-finding and nemesis-management, even teaching, much less how to do public work. The anxiety produced under these circumstances is substantial, but people have a threshold beyond which rote or misplaced anxiety is intolerable (yes, even boring). Regarding all the ways academics can feel pressed and inconsequential facing institutional forces arrayed against them, Davarian said

simply, “Welcome to my world.” And Patrick reminded us that educations should be part of an ongoing life project, not just a job, even an academic job; people should never get so busy and bogged down that they forget what they went to school for. American studies as these graduates learned it offers valuable touchstones—some shared habits and proclivities, if not whole canons—useful in both works and lives. As Davarian put it early in the retreat, method—scholarly and otherwise—is more interesting than content. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, a method is “a regular and systematic way of accomplishing anything.” And there are a million things to accomplish.

Immediate public relevance ranks high on that list. Whether the reference was response to impending war, helping international students secure visas in a moment of national security crisis, or finding and creating places for American studies work in (and for) communities outside the university, people at all stages of their careers wanted their efforts to matter. (Reflecting on Alan Wolfe’s recently published attack on the field thankfully did not matter so much [“Anti-American Studies,” *The New Republic*, 10 February 2003].) As Patrick said, he had learned a profoundly relational habit of thinking in school, bringing in whatever tools were necessary to understand the subject at hand. That is what helped sustain his work at La Posada and other places. It was clear that a fluency with meta-messages was second nature to everyone there—seeing how disparate things of any kind are connected in unexpected ways and can be understood together. Over the course of the retreat, reflecting on whether these recent PhD’s represented an identifiable agenda, they concluded by looking at what they had actually *done together*, not what their research had in common. “Collaborative work, not content but connectivity” is what I wrote down as they spoke quickly and words flew; they were self-conscious about avoiding making false distinctions among them, spurious disruptions based on being “new,” or positioning themselves in a combative way with anyone there. They weren’t brought together with a set question (or a single subject or approach). They were the subject. The connections they made between them in a small way mirror the way relevant connections are made anywhere, in or out of the academy.

If American studies methods are broadly useful in this way, it is for precisely the same reasons that make interdisciplinary work both strange and valuable to academic colleagues—these are improvisatory gestures, situation specific, in research and in public work. The old difficulties still exist, especially *within* the academy: if you have “no method,” “no discipline” (which I think only matters to people who believe that they *do* have a discipline), this can produce tension with colleagues in traditional departments. If you’re building interdisciplinary programs, whose subject coverage is easily contentious, departments (and even other interdisciplinary programs) have their turf to police; if you’re up for tenure, hopefully your colleagues are willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of how you work. In both cases, basic commodities—money and time—are at stake. And Steve noted that disciplinary expertise—well-known brand marketing of a

sort—gives people capital at faculty meetings: “If you have a method based in a discipline you have a lot of ‘cash;’ it’s helpful to know where the ruptures, boundaries and continuities are in method so you have that cash in meetings.” “We choose to be interdisciplinary,” Andaluna said, “in spite of the precarious situations we’re in, where work is misconceived or misrepresented; we’re not glamorizing ourselves, but it’s a risk institutionally.” The work can be perceived as “wacky,” “loosey-goosey,” people agreed, and argued about whether those terms were useful or not. “What’s wrong with ‘wacky’?” As Paula pointed out, the social sciences and humanities are behind on this issue: sciences to a large degree gave up disciplines. And no one wants to hire someone who can do only one thing; programs and departments both want, as she put it, “service infielders.” “You’re valuable,” she said; “they *want* you, they *don’t want not* to tenure you.” Always useful encouragement to hear in a field possibly, in Paula’s exuberant terms, “on the cutting edge of wack.”

Finding the connections, colleagues, opportunities for working differently (or meaningfully) in any job is a necessary lifeline, an exciting prospect, but the groundwork is extensive, and most people learn to do this as they go, often without much mentoring. (Unselfconscious belief in oneself as “the outsider” wouldn’t help.) Acknowledgement and support of some kind from the field that trained them would be valuable, as John mentioned—a system “that recognizes our specific predicaments.” New forms of field-wide mentoring (or, I think more likely, a mentoring *habit*, an expectation to find it and do it) are imaginable and desirable, but this was also a gesture possible in this very group: “keeping up with each other’s situations and asking for help when you need it.” Haphazard mentoring means even recently tenured faculty don’t know entirely what they face. “Why don’t we do this more?” Susan asked, speaking of the general scope of a conversation about a career; “We need to know more about what happens after tenure.” Junior faculty are somewhat protected from service and administration, but successful junior faculty become tenured faculty, and so on. Barry said, what happens is “in the process of learning how to work in our institutions we forget why we did this and start to think about it as work—‘Oh God, not more work’—there’s no cross-departmental, cross-disciplinary conversation or engagement that doesn’t feel like more work.” Certain forms of prescribed mentoring would have the same result. Importantly, as Barry pointed out, we need more venues to enjoy the pleasures of work, which would also include the pleasures of maintaining supportive connections to one another; we need to promote spaces where that pleasure can happen.

This is where that long dining room table, the Jayhawks, the babies, and the guitar become important theoretical tools, accidental riches in the case of this particular event. Through them, and over time, people could say more than what they can write, and could be more than the performances they came prepared to offer each other. The commonest ephemera of simple things, banal comforts and discomforts, delights and irritations, the time and willingness to talk, actually

led to a few plausibly concrete things. These came on the heels of a conversation just among the recent PhD's, at the end of the retreat, with the possibility of publication in view. They weren't done talking about relevance yet, how to make their work matter, how to make something move in the world. What would come out of this weekend, for example? Happily enough, a publication, and a roundtable at this year's American Studies Association conference ("After the PhD: Doing American Studies in the Academy and Beyond"). But there was something fine and small, more remarkable (if also demanding), and not possible for any of us to think the day they met, vitally connected to other kinds of relevance, possibility, and change: We can make a commitment to each other, they said. This was brave. They are not without profound differences in outlook and temperament, and of course most of them live and work hundreds of miles from each other. Four days and mountains of food by Chef Jonathan by no means created anything as sweeping as a politics or a paradigm, but it did offer a glimpse of connection, presence, and immediate personal relevance within reach in a place no one necessarily expected it. This was perhaps the most valuable lesson on the table.

For the rest of us, there are other mundane but useful lessons too. It is not too much to expect to be treated well, under any circumstances. It is not too much to expect that a profession give way a little for the birth and presence of a child of any age. It is not too much to ask that colleagues remember how to be polite, fully present, even generous when they are able. It is not too much to expect to enjoy oneself, even working. To fail to expect these things, and to *create them wherever possible*, gives away too much. Left to our own devices in classrooms, meetings and conferences, people with PhD's have a hard enough time knowing how or when to lay down the knives (or the rifles, or the violins or what have you) and simply regard one another. It's not such a bad thing to have time to walk, enjoy the food, talk basketball, or hold the baby. People do these things every day.