American Studies in a Moment of Danger

George Lipsitz

Critical American Studies
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In the Midnight Hour

*American Studies in a Moment of Danger*

More than simply a superpower face-off having broad political repercussions, the Cold War was also a form of knowledge and a cognitive organization of the world.

—Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*

Senegalese singer Baaba Maal has a theory about midnight. Acknowledging that others view the middle of the night with trepidation and dread, that they think of it as the time when despair reigns and a new dawn is very hard to see, Maal nonetheless encourages us to embrace the midnight hour. For him, “Midnight is the time when the spirit takes stock and looks ahead to the new day. It’s important for every person to have a midnight in their life—to know what you have done and what you have yet to do.”

For millions of people around the world, the present moment may seem like midnight. The rapid movement across the globe of people, products, ideas, and images seems to undermine foundational certainties about the meaning of local and national identities, the value of personal and collective histories, and the solidity of social relationships and social networks. New forms of economic activity produce both astounding wealth and appalling poverty—sometimes in the same locations. New technologies liberate us from tiresome tasks yet create unprecedented environmental dangers. In some respects global marketing brings the people of the world closer together than ever before, yet consuming the same products, enjoying the same entertainments, or working for the same employers does not seem to make us any less divided, as old antagonisms and new enmities create violent conflicts on every continent.
Educational institutions have trained most of us to think largely in terms of national politics, national histories, and national cultures. Yet the present moment of global social and cultural transformation requires us to develop transnational and postnational as well as national ways of knowing. We see now, if only in retrospect, that industrialization, nationalism, and the cold war were not just historical processes and events—they were also ways of knowing and ways of being. They had their own logics and optics; they encouraged us to see some things and prevented us from seeing others. They trained us to ask how each specific geographic location produced its own specific culture, to define politics largely in terms of citizenship and the nation-state, and to pursue social justice by seeking universal truths that could apply to all people and make us equal and interchangeable. Yet our actual experiences in today’s postindustrial, postnationalist, and post–cold war era confront us constantly with cultural practices and political projects that cannot be pinned down to any one place, that supersede the purview of individual states, and that generate a seeming endless stream of new differences that frustrate strategies for social justice based on equivalence and interchangeability.

Older narratives about national identity, citizenship, and subjectivity do not disappear under these conditions, but they do become recontextualized in light of emerging understandings, ideas, and identities. For several hundred years, questions about social emancipation have been directly related to a relatively fixed understanding of spaces and places. Within fields like American studies, the nation-state has served as the logical—and seemingly inevitable—object of inquiry. Even within the state, physical places have taken center stage as sites of struggle—the frontier, the farm, the factory, and the city. In American studies, this approach emerged in part because of the centrality of the national landscape to the national imagination. But it also originated in social struggles centered on place: in efforts by farmers to retain control over their land, from battles by factory workers to gain control at the point of production, from mobilizations by urban coalitions seeking solutions to shared problems through control over the regulatory and taxing activities of cities and states.

Yet many of the cultural and community crises we face today emanate from the ways in which the sense of place that guided social movements and scholarship in the past has now become obsolete. Containerization in shipping, computer-generated automation, outsourcing of production, Internet commerce, fiber-optic telecommunications, and satellite technologies seem to have terminated the “isomorphism” (the congruence or one-to-one relationship) between culture and place. In the process of losing this dominion over place, ordinary workers, consumers, and citizens have found it more difficult to influence the social allocation of resources and opportunities in their lives.

In the United States today, emerging patterns of migration, trade, investment, and military intervention affect everything from the national origins of babies available for adoption to the ethnic identities of clerks in convenience stores, from the ownership of downtown skyscrapers to the price of drugs on the streets. The most sophisticated and advanced technologies of our time generate new anxieties, but they also enable us to make novel and intimate connections that seem to transcend space and time.

Some affluent children in North American suburbs go to sleep wearing pajamas emblazoned with images from the Walt Disney film Pocahontas. The pajamas they wear are sewn under sweatshop conditions by women workers in Haiti who receive thirty cents an hour for their labor. At the same time, the chief executive officer of the Disney Corporation that markets the pajamas (and the film that they publicize) receives $97,000 per hour in direct compensation. The mechanisms of global cultural production and marketing provide low-wage women workers in Haiti, affluent suburban children, and the CEO of the Disney Corporation with a common frame of reference—the film Pocahontas—but these members of different social groups have very different relationships to the common object that seems to unite them.

Pocahontas pajamas, and the film they celebrate (or to be more precise sell-abrate), keep alive in the twenty-first century a story first fashioned in North America during the seventeenth century. Tales about marriage between an indigenous woman of color and a white male have
long been a staple in Euro-American culture as a foundational myth of national origins. The native woman’s love for the white man serves to establish the moral superiority of the conqueror’s culture. Marriage allows the native woman to “assimilate” into the nation by disappearing, by becoming part of the genealogy of white society. The Pocahontas story, and others like it, turn the brutality and sadism of conquest into a voluntary romance.

The reemergence of the Pocahontas story in the present age of globalization unwittingly directs our attention to the similarities between our own time and the seventeenth century. The expansion of capitalism in both eras created new cognitive mappings of the world and brought diverse peoples into direct contact with one another. But in both eras, unequal power relations structured the terms of contact, communication, and commerce. The exploitation of Haitian women workers by the Disney Corporation enables that company to market worldwide a product that rationalizes conquest as a romance.5

Pocahontas pajamas turn bedtime into a marketing opportunity for a multinational corporation. They connect a shared moment of recognition between North American parents and children to legacies of imperial conquest and genocide from the past, as well as to the raced and gendered exploitation of contemporary workers in Caribbean garment assembly shops. Suburban children and their parents, the director of Disney’s business operations, low-wage women workers in Haiti, and contemporary feminist and Native American activists are all united by their links to the film Pocahontas, but the gender, race, class, and national identity of each of them have everything to do with the nature of that connection and its consequences for their lives.6

The Pocahontas connection does not exist in isolation. Air Jordan athletic shoes made by low-wage women workers in Indonesia secure high prices from consumers in Boston, Berlin, and Buenos Aires largely because they symbolize “prestige from below” as icons evoking the sensibilities and style leadership of impoverished African American inner-city youths. The direct labor costs to Nike for a $90 pair of shoes are $1.20—only 1.3 percent of the retail price. A Nike worker would have to work 60,000 years making Air Jordans at $1.20 per hour to receive compensation equal to Michael Jordan’s earnings from the company in 1998 alone. But Jordan’s endorsement is lucrative only because someone even richer can easily afford his fee. The profits made by paying Asian women workers less than subsistence wages enable Nike’s top executive, Phil Knight, to hire the highly publicized Michael Jordan, but also to control entry into a vast network of jobs in marketing, design, management, and sales for employees in North America and Europe. Air Jordan shoes influence the lives of impoverished inner-city athletes and the style choices of wealthy suburban consumers, they have an impact on the earning power of well-paid corporate executives in Europe and North America and on low-wage women workers in Asia. They create a community of interest that stretches across continents and classes, yet they leave the individuals in that community with permanently hierarchical and segmented opportunities and life chances.

The generation of new points of commonality and new points of conflict among the world’s people embodied in the production, distribution, and marketing of Pocahontas pajamas and Air Jordan athletic shoes occurs within a context of increasingly centralized power and control in the hands of a small group of corporate executives and investors. Economic policy decisions that used to be made by local legislative bodies are now implemented automatically in response to the activities of stocks and bonds markets. International treaties, agreements, and institutions including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) impose fatal constraints on national efforts at antitrust regulation, environmental protection, and fair labor practices. International boards controlled by financiers and corporate executives have been given authority to void local, state, and national laws that impede the flow of capital, even when those laws protect public health, safety, and welfare.

The new spatial and social relations of our time have important consequences for knowledge. New social relations create new social
subjects who inevitably create new epistemologies and new ontologies—new ways of knowing and new ways of being. New social subjects produce new archives and new imaginings. Demographic changes within nation-states, as well as the complex networks and circuits that connect identities, economies, and ideologies across national boundaries, all compel us to rethink some long-established beliefs and concepts. What happens to the individual citizen, worker, or community member at a time of such dramatic transformation and change in spatial and social identities? How do nationally inflected understandings of citizenship, race, class, gender, and sexuality change when they become international, transnational, and national all at the same time?

More than 125 million people around the globe currently reside outside their country of birth or citizenship. An additional 2 to 4 million others join their ranks every year. Remittances sent home by overseas workers make up crucial components of the national economies of many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The exploitation and indignities suffered by immigrant low-wage workers in Europe and North America subsidize the standard of living enjoyed by educated urban professionals on those continents by providing them with low-cost goods and personal services. The remittances immigrant workers send home then subsidize the interests of transnational corporations by softening the impact of the devastation engendered by the low wages and low taxes that those firms enjoy in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Workers leave Kerala in southwest India to labor in Kuwait and become at one and the same time the poorest people in their new neighborhoods and the wealthiest in their home villages. Undercapitalized immigrant businesses in New York City produce revenue that finances new housing complexes and luxury automobiles in the cities of Baní and San Francisco de Macorís in the Dominican Republic, while small huts in Filipino villages feature video recorders and television sets paid for with money sent home by expatriate household laborers in Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, and Rome. Urban professionals in metropolitan “world” cities in Europe, North America, and Asia enjoy lavish consumption-oriented lifestyles largely because of the inexpensive cooking, cleaning, child care, and other personal services provided by exploited immigrant workers.

A handful of multinational corporations now control more than one-third of the world’s productive private-sector assets. Around the globe every day, more than thirty thousand children under the age of five die of starvation or completely curable diseases, some ten million every year—one every three seconds. More than a billion people subsist on incomes less than a dollar per day. The richest fifth of the world’s population controls 85 percent of the globe’s wealth, leaving little more than 1 percent for the poorest fifth. In Mexico, the twenty-four wealthiest families have more money than the twenty-four million poorest Mexicans.

The global economic system is a class system, but it is also a racial system. Built upon the remnants of previous racial regimes, it now produces a proliferation of new forms of differentiation that exacerbate and expand old ethnic and racial conflicts. The shake-up in spatial and social relations in our time does nothing to dislodge long-standing forms of white supremacy. Instead, structural-adjustment policies, mass migration, and attacks on the social institutions traditionally responsible for creating greater equality all function together in our time to make “whiteness” a global as well as a national project, to insure the permanent supremacy of the largely “white” global north over the largely “non-white” global south, and even to restore power in the global south to the light-skinned elites who in the era of decolonization found themselves forced to make concessions to the dark-skinned masses of their own countries. At the same time, in North America and Europe, what Ghasan Hage calls the “psychopathology of white decline” draws on old and new forms of racism to portray hardworking and exploited immigrants as parasites rather than as producers.

As the population of the United States becomes less white, the psychopathology of white decline influences the outcome of all public
policy debates. U.S. citizens invested in the notion of their nation as essentially white and European confront a daunting demographic challenge. The population of the United States now includes thirty million Latinos and ten million Asian Americans. African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos account for more than half of the populations of Los Angeles, Miami, San Antonio, Honolulu, and several other major cities. California, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Texas will be “majority minority” states by 2025. Nearly half of the children born in California and almost a third of the children born in New York in 1996 had immigrant mothers. In 1997, the number of babies in California designated as “interracial” by their parents exceeded the number designated Black, Asian, or Native American. The aggregate minority population in the United States exceeds the national population of many nations, including Great Britain, France, Italy, and Spain. If U.S. racial minorities had their own country, it would be the fifteenth largest nation on earth.

The United States now houses the fifth largest Spanish-speaking population in the world. If present population trends in Colombia and Argentina continue, in five years the United States will become the third largest concentration of Spanish speakers on the planet. Latino children make up more than 40 percent of the school-age population of California, and the Latino percentage of births in California has increased from 20 percent in 1975 to 46 percent in 1995. Almost 10 percent of the population of the Dominican Republic lives in the United States. Three million Puerto Ricans, close to 40 percent of the island’s population, reside on the North American mainland. Nearly one-third of the population of Belize lives in the United States.

Secondary migration complicates the picture even more. Some Korean Americans and Chinese Americans in Los Angeles came to the United States after first migrating to Brazil and Panama. Significant numbers of Dominican, Haitian, and Leeward Islander immigrants to New York first migrated to Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. As early as 1970, nearly 40 percent of the population of the Virgin Islands had already moved to Canada or the United States, while

the percentage of foreign-born residents of the islands climbed above 34 percent. More than 1 million Haitians live in the United States, 150,000 in the Dominican Republic, and close to 40,000 in the Bahamas. Migration to the United States and the Bahamas has helped make English rather than French the second language of many kreyol-speaking Haitians.

Immigrants make up 34 percent of the population of Miami and 27 percent of the population of Los Angeles. Nearly half the people living in Miami and about one quarter of the people living in Houston are Latinos. New York, Miami, and Boston each have more Haitian residents than Cap Haitien, Haiti’s second-largest city. Forty-five percent of the people in Los Angeles County speak a language other than English at home, and students who attend classes in the Los Angeles Unified School District include native speakers of more than 120 languages and dialects.

Twenty years ago, the United States imported almost no mangoes from anywhere in the world. But the food preferences of immigrants from Asia and Latin America have propelled a 200 percent increase in mango imports to the United States between 1986 and 1995, making the nation currently the world’s largest importer of mangoes. According to Robert Alvarez, nearly half of U.S. mango consumption takes place in Los Angeles.

New York City is now the Caribbean’s largest city, even though it is not in the Caribbean: New York has a larger Caribbean population than the combined populations of Kingston (Jamaica), San Juan (Puerto Rico), and Port of Spain (Trinidad). Immigration from Guyana, Haiti, and Jamaica has made New York the second largest Guyanese, Haitian, and Jamaican city on the globe. More people from the Caribbean island of Nevis live in New York than live on Nevis itself.

Approximately 3.7 million people of Mexican ancestry and 1.3 million people of Asian ancestry reside in Los Angeles. The city is also home to 300,000 Salvadorans and 159,000 Guatemalans. Los Angeles is now the second-largest Mexican, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran city in the world, as well as the third-largest Canadian city. The Los Angeles metropolitan area houses the largest Iranian population in the Western
world and is home to what are generally considered the largest populations of Armenians outside of Armenia, Vietnamese outside of Vietnam, and Koreans outside of Korea. More Samoans live in Los Angeles than in American Samoa itself.

Immigration from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America since 1965 has transformed the demography of the United States, increasing the nation's nonwhite population significantly. But immigration has also changed the composition of aggrieved racial groups. Nearly one and a half million African Americans are now immigrants from the Caribbean. Their ranks include native speakers of English, French, Spanish, Dutch, and indigenous languages such as Garifuna. At least one-half million of the immigrants to the United States from Spanish-speaking countries alone between 1990 and 1998 were Black by North American standards, bringing the total number of Black Latinos to about 1.7 million. At the same time, 600,000 Asian Americans are also Latinos—mostly secondary migrants who stopped in Latin America before settling in the United States, but also products of interracial marriages. California's American Indian population of 307,000 includes 118,000 Latinos, while nationwide an estimated 7 or 8 million people now classified by the census as Latino are probably also Native American.

Under these conditions, immigrants inevitably experience new forms of racialization in the United States. Nationals from Asia and Latin America appear to be people of color by North American standards, and consequently face both nativist and racist hostility in their new surroundings. But immigrants also bring with them traditional forms of racism learned in their home countries from local practices as well as from global media. At the same time, competition for scarce resources in the North American context generates new racial enmities and antagonisms, which in turn promotes new variants of racism.

These dynamic transformations produce new kinds of social subjects, as people increasingly perceive themselves in need of new cognitive mappings and understandings. Yet these radically new reckonings do not erase the very old inequalities and injustices on which they are based.

Corporations at the present time are often wealthier than countries. According to Karen Brodkin, the Philip Morris Corporation is wealthier than Chile, and Wal-Mart is wealthier than Greece. The holdings of Chrysler and Nestle are about the same size as the economies of Pakistan and Hungary. Yet the power of transnational corporations does not mean that the nation-state disappears under the present regime of globalization. Although political leaders everywhere plead powerlessness in the face of the imperatives of corporate profits in the transnational economy, the nation-state remains a crucial part of the architecture of transnationalism. The very existence of national borders allows employers to play one location against another, to ensure international investors that they can secure labor, markets, and raw materials worldwide, but in doing so confront only national political resistance.

U.S. consumers enjoy lower prices because of the exploitation of workers in the rest of the world. The tiny nation of El Salvador sends nearly three hundred million garments to the United States every year. In special export production zones, Salvadoran armed guards make sure that labor ministry officials cannot enter factory grounds to check on working conditions. Some sixty-five thousand maquiladora workers in that country labor fifteen hours a day, seven days a week in factories surrounded by ten-foot-high cinderblock walls with barbed wire on top. Workers are allowed one bathroom visit in the morning and one in the afternoon. Women employees are routinely given pregnancy tests and are fired if they test positive, so that the companies can avoid paying mandatory prenatal care and maternity-leave benefits. Salvadoran garment workers are paid sixty cents an hour, about one-third of the subsistence wage. A woman's jacket made in El Salvador and retailing for $198 in North American clothing stores includes a labor cost of eighty-four cents.

More than fifty thousand workers from China, the Philippines, and Bangladesh work twelve-hour days, seven days a week, for less than the legal minimum wage in Saipan (in the Mariannas, a U.S. possession), making garments for various U.S. apparel firms including Wal-Mart,
Sears Roebuck, and Tommy Hilfiger. These workers live seven to a room in barracks surrounded by barbed-wire fences. Their passports are confiscated on arrival to prevent escape or resistance to the compulsory overtime, low wages, and sporadic beatings that are a routine part of labor discipline in the production of garments that reach the public adorned with labels that read “Made in the USA.”

The export of production to low-wage countries overseas has a decided impact on wages and working conditions in the United States as well. Structural adjustment policies imposed on people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank exacerbate inequalities on those continents and provoke people to migrate to higher-wage countries like the United States. Asian American women, many of them recent immigrants, make up more than 50 percent of the entire labor force in the U.S. textile and apparel industries. They work for low wages in largely unregulated small shops, contracting respiratory illnesses at high rates because of repeated exposure to fiber particles, dyes, formaldehydes, and arsenic. On the assembly lines in California’s “Silicon Valley,” the production of “high-tech” computers depends upon the low-wage labor of Latino/as and Asian Americans. Forty-three percent of these workers are Asian Americans. At work on high-tech assembly lines, Asian and Latina women experience illness approximately three times as often as workers in general manufacturing—illnesses that often entail damage to reproductive and central nervous systems.

Although they often complain about an immigrant “invasion,” middle- and upper-class consumers are triply subsidized by the exploitation of low-wage workers. Immigrant labor assures them of lower-priced products and easily acquired personal services. Immigrant low-wage workers dominate household and personal service jobs in advanced high-consumption countries. They clean houses, cook food, and care for children and seniors for little monetary compensation. Their labor enables high-income professionals to sustain high-consumption lifestyles, to have more time for earning and spending. The low cost of immigrant labor makes child care, convalescent care, and old-age care less expensive for families and for the state; it discourages savings and encourages spending. Low-wage immigrant labor in North America and Europe even subsidizes capital flight. As Neferti Tadiar’s important work demonstrates, remittances sent home by overseas workers often provide the crucial margin of difference that enables workers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to survive on the below-subsistence wages paid them by transnational corporations.

All U.S. consumers enjoy lower prices because of the exploitation of workers in poor countries, but the resulting benefits are not distributed equally. Despite a decade of extraordinary prosperity and economic growth, the net worth of the median U.S. family actually declined in the 1990s. The share of net worth of the richest fifth of families, however, rose from 83.5 percent to 84.5 percent. In 1972, the top 1 percent of the nation’s families owned 27 percent of the country’s wealth; by 1987 the richest 1 percent of families controlled 36 percent of the national wealth. Economic inequality in the United States in 1998 was greater than at any time since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Nearly one half of the nation’s income now goes to the wealthiest fifth of households. The wealthiest 10 percent of families in the United States own 94 percent of the business assets, 90 percent of the bonds, 89 percent of the corporate stock and 78 percent of the nation’s real estate.

The globalization of economic production, distribution, and consumption transforms the nature of national politics and national cultures. Simple binary oppositions between the local and the global or the particular and the universal no longer seem useful; the isomorphism of place, culture, nation, and state can no longer be taken for granted. Jean-Bertrand Aristide and other Haitian politicians compete for followers in each of their country’s nine states (called départements), but they also seek support from what they refer to as le dixième département, the tenth department—the more than one million Haitians living overseas in Miami, Brooklyn, Montreal, Paris, and other diasporic centers. Major-league games in the United States use baseballs fabricated in small workshops by low-wage women workers in Haiti and other Caribbean and Central American countries.
Although contemporary and emerging economic, political, and cultural relations may give the impression that the power and practical utility of the nation-state has been superseded by transnational corporations and the global market, the state continues to be an indispensable component of the global system. The state serves as a crucial resource to multinational corporations by supplying mechanisms for capital accumulation and technological innovation through direct investment by governments, indirect support for research and development, tax abatements, and research and development spending on the infrastructure of global capital, especially containerization in shipping and the Internet, which were originally developed by the United States Navy and Department of Defense. The state also supplies transnational capital with political regulation through direct repression of insurrections and strikes as well as through agreeing to international treaties like the GATT agreements that deprive citizens of the power to use politics in order to challenge multinational corporate environmental pollution, labor exploitation, or market monopolization. The state helps discipline the labor force and imprisons surplus labor. As Etienne Balibar reminds us, “The state is the form through which nations enter the modern world system.”

Under contemporary conditions, it is important to understand the things that all nation-states have in common as well as the things that distinguish them. This might seem a sharp departure from the core categories and concerns of American studies under the pressure of present events, but in actuality such an inquiry will enable us to revisit traditional American studies scholarship with new insight and understanding. By looking at the state functionally as a transnational entity rather than as a discrete and atomized national body, we can learn that elites in every nation have a stake in perpetuating differences among nations. The very existence of nation-states encourages cessation of internal hostilities in order to face outside foes. It justifies national inequalities and injustices while projecting anger and resentment against outside enemies rather than internal elites. The mere existence of national borders enables differential rates of pay for the same work and creates artificial divisions among workers. In addition, ruling groups in every country have a stake in national exceptionalism—in attributing a unique character and destiny to the national project as a way of making actions taken in their own self-interest seem predestined, necessary, and even inevitable.

The hegemony of the nation-state as the ultimate horizon in American studies (and other nationally based inquiries in the humanities and social sciences) has deadly consequences. It encourages us to confine politics to the realm of the citizen-subject, to view emancipatory movements for social change as primarily efforts to reform the state and its privileged institutions. This emphasis on the state as the primary (and often exclusive) site for political action occludes the unity of politics, culture, and economics in social life, leading us to an idealist and inaccurate view of culture as the site where economic and political exclusions become neutralized by the purported inclusiveness of cultural practices and stories. These acts of cognitive mapping leave us poorly prepared to understand the ways in which culture functions as a social force or the ways in which aesthetic forms draw their affective and ideological power from their social location.

Purely national studies may encourage comparisons between states, but they do too little to reveal the degree to which nation-states are formed by their relations with one another. By encouraging us to see the different ways in which nation-states make war or legitimate their rule through different racial and ethnic categories, purely national approaches have obscured the interests that states have in common, especially the ways in which the nation-state is so often a racial state and the racial state is so often a warfare state. Perhaps most important at the present time, excessive focus on unilateral national histories and national cultures directs our attentions away from polylocal relations between sites, from the very circuits and networks most likely to generate new imaginaries, identities, and intersubjectivities.

Anthropologist Katherine Verdery argues that the end of the cold war generates a particular crisis for well-established knowledge regimes. The cold war was not simply a face-off between two superpowers with
contrasting economic and political systems, she argues, but also an impetus for cognitively mapping the world through strategically useful divisions between “east” and “west,” “right” and “left,” “north” and “south,” and “first,” “second,” and “third worlds.” From Verdery’s perspective, these spatial metaphors do little to help us find the battleground where the decisive final conflict actually took place. She suggests that the decisive conflict was not one of geographic entities or even of social systems, but rather a clash between two different concepts of time.

Starting at least in the 1960s, new management techniques and new technologies generated a “speedup” in capitalism, a compression of time and space emblematized by computer-generated automation, instantaneous electronic transfers of money, and new forms of production based on “flexible accumulation” and on-time production. This speedup exacerbated faction fights inside socialist countries between government leaders committed to “socialist time” based on centralized planning methods and bureaucrats in charge of foreign trade who saw that increased turnover time cost them hard currency. The initial compromise between these factions revolved around borrowing from the West in order to meet the challenge of the capitalist speedup. But the massive debts incurred from this borrowing did not lead to commensurate increases in productivity. As a result, officials interested in production for export secured additional loans, which resulted in even larger debts. The collapse of socialism came about when party leaders and economic policy planners in socialist countries felt compelled to adopt capitalism as the only way to service their debt.

Verdery notes the irony of this turn of events: “If socialist economies had not opened up themselves to capital import and to debt servicing, perhaps their collision with capitalist speedup would have been less jarring—or at least would have occurred on more equal terms. But the capitalist definition of time prevailed as socialist debtors bowed to its dictates (even while postponing them) thereby aggravating factional conflicts within the elite. Because its leaders accepted Western temporal hegemony, socialism’s messianic time proved apocalyptic.” Thus, in its final stages, both sides in the cold war believed in the inevitability of capitalist time. Verdery points out that the socialist countries could have very probably brought down the world capitalist system simply by acting in concert and defaulting on their debts while encouraging other debtor nations to do the same. “That this did not happen,” Verdery continues, “shows how vital a thing was capitalist monopoly on the definition of social reality.”

Verdery’s account will do little to satisfy those who believe that the cold war was a righteous crusade against an “evil empire,” who want to credit the defense buildup of the Reagan era for the “fall of Communism.” Yet even the adherents to that view might want to explore what they have to gain from a transnational analysis like Verdery’s that does not automatically grant the United States a messianic role at the center of history. Her explanation of the end of the cold war helps us understand why the demise of officially existing communism has left the world with so little democracy and so much plutocracy and profiteering. Following political scientist Ken Jowitt, Verdery argues that the extinction of Leninism in the Soviet Union is not merely a local problem of interest to Russia and its neighbors, but rather part of a process that requires us to redefine national identities as well as “the entire conceptual arsenal through which Western institutions and social science disciplines have been defined in this century.”

The end of the cold war, the rise of postindustrial forms of “flexible accumulation,” production, and consumption, as well as the emergence of transnational cultural, economic, and political entities all require new ways of being and new ways of knowing. Scholars may still have the luxury of thinking in exclusively national terms, but workers, citizens, migrants, artists, and activists do not. They have become transnational as a matter of necessity. They can no longer assume the isomorphism of culture and place or of citizenship and the state. American studies scholars need to join them, to reckon with the vexations and challenges that we face with the emergence of new social relations and new social subjects.

We need to appreciate the ways in which new social, cultural, economic, and political practices are rupturing traditional connections
between culture and place, making local identities both less and more important at the same time. We need to learn from people and cultures that have been forced to make themselves as mobile, flexible, and fluid as transnational capital, yet still capable of drawing upon separate histories, principles, and values. Fashioning scholarship in American studies appropriate to our time requires us to move beyond either simple celebration or categorical condemnation. Deciding on a new course for American studies obligates us to understand where our field has been in the past and where it might go in the future.

As Michael Denning demonstrates in his wonderful volume *The Cultural Front*, academic American Studies emerged out of the redemptive “America” fashioned in social struggle by the democratic mobilizations of the 1930s, out of the imagined America that social movements both asked for and authorized. As the product of a particular place and time, American studies shared its conditions of possibility with the emergence of the class-conscious interethnic coalitions during the 1930s, especially the organizing drives of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the political campaigns of the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota, the Anton Cermak coalition in Chicago, and the Fiorello La Guardia alliance in New York. Joined with the efforts of radical immigrant journalists like Louis Adamic who celebrated the multiethnic history of this country and aided by mass mobilizations like the general strikes of 1934 (which were central to the egalitarian accomplishments of that era), what Denning describes as the Age of the CIO helped restructure the contours of politics and culture in this country.

Mass mobilizations and electoral initiatives during the 1930s drew upon disparate sources of resistance and opposition. They forged uneasy alliances, linking antimonopoly capitalists with Popular Front Marxists, connecting desires for ethnic inclusion into mainstream society with proletarian self-activity. They met with mixed success in their efforts to redistribute wealth and power, but they won enduring victories on the terrain of culture. The New Deal coalition laid claim to the national legacy by celebrating the multiethnic and immigrant roots of the republic. In the process, it helped turn unwanted alien immigrant outsiders and their children into triumphant redemptive insiders, “rewriting” the past as well as the present. The “cult of the common person” that circulated inside the era’s film, photography, fiction, and theater projects established a cultural consensus so powerful that its ideology permeated not only the work of Popular Front writers and artists, but the cultural expressions of monopoly capitalist filmmakers in Hollywood as well.

Academic American Studies was not an intentional creation of this social upheaval and cultural transformation, but the field emerged as one of many unintended aftershocks of the social and cultural struggles of the 1930s. That is the way history happens. Social movements shake up social life. They throw a pebble into a pond and produce ripples everywhere. Even when social movements fail to achieve their own stated goals, they send a message to people in other places about the potential for struggle and resistance. They provide tools for people to ask new questions, to settle old scores, to speak about parts of their lives that have been repressed and suppressed. The creation of American studies had everything to do with the cultural and intellectual spaces opened up by the mass movements of the 1930s.

Mass mobilizations during the Age of the CIO included southern segregationists and northern European American ethnics, old-line aristocrats and minority workers. During the 1930s these antagonistic elements worked together to help pass legislation initiating old-age pensions, aid for dependent children, and disability compensation. They established the National Labor Relations Board to regulate labor-management relations, and created agencies like the Federal Housing Administration, which put the full faith and credit of the federal government behind the home loan industry and made it possible for working people to borrow money to purchase their own homes. For the first time they could accumulate assets that might appreciate in value and subsequently serve as a source for intergenerational transfers of wealth.

An interracial “culture of unity” worked together to win these victories, but the spoils won in the struggle were apportioned according to white supremacist principles. The Social Security Act and the Wagner Act excluded farm workers and domestics from coverage, channeling
benefits to white workers who secured jobs in manufacturing because of discriminatory hiring while denying segments of the labor force dominated by minorities the benefits of legislation that their activism had helped to produce. The Federal Housing Administration adopted explicitly racialized categories in determining eligibility for home loans, funneling 98 percent of federally supported home loans to whites between 1934 and 1965. The New Deal State became a racial state, and it evolved into a warfare state with the entry of the United States into World War II.10

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt himself declared that “Dr. New Deal” had to get out of the way and make room for “Dr. Win the War” after the Japanese military attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Mobilization for World War II co-opted the political radicalism of the social movements of the 1930s, quickly enabling the establishment of an undemocratic alliance among big business, big government, and big labor in the form of the postwar corporate liberal welfare/warfare state. But the cultural radicalism of the 1930s could not be suppressed completely. After the war, bureaucrats acting on behalf of the national security state used the excuse of anticommunism to direct the full force of legal and extralegal repression against activists, artists, and intellectuals in an effort to purge labor unions, universities, the media, and community groups of their “subversive” tendencies. Yet even in the darkest days of McCarthyism, social movements, cultural practitioners, and traditional intellectuals continued to draw on the legacy of the past to preserve oppositional thought.

At a time when history departments encouraged “consensus” school interpretations that celebrated the status quo and attempted to erase all memories of the oppositional interpretations advanced by New Deal–era scholars, in an era when English departments turned to New Criticism largely as a means of isolating cultural texts from their social and historical contexts, American studies prospered as an institutional site where literature could be studied in relation to history, and where historical inquiry concerned itself with the culture of ordinary people as well as the actions of elites. Whatever the limits of these endeavors by the 1930s generation—and there were many—they nonetheless kept alive a critical tradition that proved itself extremely useful to a later generation looking to interpret and understand the many challenges to political and cultural hierarchies that emerged inside and outside the academy in the 1960s and 1970s. The myth–image–symbol school of American studies did not adequately address the nation’s racial hierarchies or its imperial relations with the rest of the world—in large part because the social movements of the Age of the CIO failed to address those elements of the national life, but academic American Studies nonetheless functioned as a democratic, egalitarian, and progressive force because it preserved an institutional site for exploring the chasm between the ideal and the real in the United States.

The social movements of the Age of the Civil Rights Movement focused on what the 1930s generation did not—race, empire, and gender especially. For the participants in these movements, yesterday’s solutions (the America fashioned by the New Deal and World War II) served as the source of today’s problems (racism, imperialism, male privilege and power). The new paradigms that emerged within American studies after the 1960s drew their determinate shapes from these social movements outside the academy. Scholars have become accustomed to discussing “the new social history” and “the anthropological turn” of the 1970s in American studies as purely academic refinements of the myth–symbol–image school, as alterations in the field emerging entirely from within. But I would argue that the emancipatory and egalitarian social movements of the 1960s among women, youth, aggrieved racial minorities, workers, gays, lesbians, and opponents of the war in Vietnam instigated this paradigm shift by demonstrating through their actions the difference between the stories that society tells about itself from the top down and the realities of social relations as they might be understood from the bottom up. The emphasis on the everyday life experiences of ordinary people within the new social history as well as the concern for the uses and effects of culture in enabling people to make meaning for themselves evident in the anthropological turn in American studies did not emerge from the academy alone. Rather, they responded to the new view of
culture in America made possible by social movements in the streets during the Age of the Civil Rights Movement, just as the Age of the CIO stimulated the emergence of the myth-symbol-image school in the 1930s.

The American studies that was forged in the 1930s and 1940s allowed scholars and citizens in the 1950s to understand and interpret the defeats of 1930s social movements. Similarly, the new social history and the anthropological turn of the 1970s emphasized links between micro-social experience and macrosocial institutions that proved extremely important in explaining how conservative mobilizations of the 1970s and 1980s succeeded in reversing many of the egalitarian victories won by the oppositional movements of the 1960s. Seen in this light, the cultural studies approach of the 1980s and 1990s was neither a rebuke of the anthropological and social history approaches of the 1970s, nor a rejection of the myth-symbol-image school of the 1940s and 1950s. Rather, it emerged out of a recognition of new conditions and new connections between culture and social structure.

Many of the victories of the New Deal social democratic era ignored or even exacerbated injustices based on race, gender, or sexuality. Even more important, the defeats suffered by the social movements of the 1960s and the victories secured by the successful countermobilization orchestrated by big business neoconservatives in the 1970s and 1980s placed new emphasis on the role of culture as a political force. The most important social movements of the 1980s coalesced around Balanced Budget Conservatism and the religious right with their shared antipathy to the egalitarian cultural and political changes identified with the 1960s. Because of the power and success of the right-wing countermovement of the 1980s, cultural studies scholars in American studies turned to the work of European theorists, including Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Stuart Hall. Their work offered insights into the political popularity of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher because they helped show how cultural appeals could induce people to support policies that were diametrically opposed to their own material interests. They provided productive ways of understanding the ideological implications of seemingly apolitical practices and activities. The power of patriotism and patriarchy, of war and whiteness as cultural forces in the 1980s encouraged American studies scholars to see the price that previous movements for social change had paid by marginalizing issues of race, gender, and sexual identification, how cultural conservatism rooted in racialized, gendered, and sexualized hierarchies worked against egalitarian social change. At the same time, they also came to see the importance of oppositional, resistant, and negotiated cultural practices among subcultures, countercultures, and even groups within dominant culture itself.

The democratic self-activity of ordinary people is an extraordinarily powerful force. It influences every emancipatory hope and practice around it. When aggrieved populations fight to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, they not only act to free themselves, but also set in motion dynamics that help free others. But the current crisis we face compels us to rethink the role of democratic self-activity in relation to place. The connections between place and culture that have undergirded the cultural and political practices of the industrial era are becoming obsolete, and the current crisis demands a different imagination about culture, place, and power.

In order to combat the ways in which the new realities of social space have given management and investors the upper hand, we now need to think about places not only as specific geographic and physical sites, but also as circuits and networks of communication, physical movement, and commodity circulation. American studies scholarship can be a great help in rethinking the perils and prospects of the present because its history helps us understand the ways in which place has always been a strategic construct, a narrative creation as well as a physical reality. All places are produced by cognitive mappings that give physical realities their social functions and meanings. Arjun Appadurai argues that we should stop thinking solely in terms of physical spaces and landscapes, and instead realize that our world is now cognitively mapped into ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes. Thinking in terms of these “scapes” enables us to see how ethnic
identities extend beyond national borders, how mass media creates common images with radically different local inflections, how technology gives workers in the heavy machinery plants of East Peoria the same labor conditions facing assembly-line laborers in Japan and Brazil, how the policies of the IMF and the World Bank impose a similar urban austerity on cities around the world, and how ideologies, religions, and market practices are both global and local at the same time.

In my view, Appadurai underestimates the enduring importance of local spaces, memories, and practices, and his framework does not account adequately for the degree of oppressive centralized power basic to the creation of these new spaces; but he does us a great service in fashioning new forms of thinking about circuits and networks, about their consequences for the meanings attached to physical places. In this respect, the study of global popular culture becomes an essential task of an American studies attuned to the realities of the present moment, because global popular culture is one of those “sites” that might be interrupted, inverted, or subverted for egalitarian purposes.

Intercultural and transnational cultural creations emblematize the dramatic transformations of our time. Something more than postmodern mixing and the juxtaposition of seemingly inappropriate entities is at work here. We are witnessing an inversion of prestige, a moment when diasporic, nomadic, and fugitive cultures from the “margins” seem to speak more powerfully to present conditions than do metropolitan cultures committed to the congruence of culture and place. Populations that suffer the anguish of exile and displacement—Filipinos and Jamaicans, Puerto Ricans and Pueblos—offer powerful expressions of code-switching and cultural fusion that attract followers from outside their own groups.

The first serious challenge to NAFTA came in the form of an insurrection by Mayan Indians and their supporters in Chiapas, Mexico. The Zapatista movement did not seek state power in Mexico, but rather sought to delegitimize the Mexican state at home and abroad by pointing to the consequences that its submission to global neoliberalism had for indigenous people in Chiapas. Yet while taking direct military action in Chiapas, the Zapatistas also used the Internet and other modern means of communication to foment solidarity around the globe. On the very day they launched their military attack, posters supporting their demands appeared in Mexico City, Los Angeles, London, Paris, and in other cities. Supporters around the globe bypassed the corporate media and followed the struggle by finding their way to Subcomandante Marcos’s communiqués on the Internet.

The feminist Gabriela network centered in the Philippines drew upon the worldwide Filipina diaspora for political support and publicity in the 1990s for their campaigns against sex tourism and against the ruinous effects of collaboration between the U.S. and Filipino governments in perpetuating the large-scale prostitution industry that flourished in that country to “supply” U.S. military personnel with access to Filipina women.

Leaders of the Hawai’ian Sovereignty movement in the 1990s assembled a worldwide coalition of indigenous representatives, feminists, environmentalists, and antinuclear activists in collective struggle on behalf of self-determination for indigenous peoples, limits on tourism and development on indigenous lands, and an end to the use of the Pacific as a nuclear testing zone.

What does this activism have to do with American studies today? It seems to me that there are two American studies traditions in existence. One is the institutional American studies canonized within easily recognized paradigms like myth-symbol-image, uses-and-effects anthropology, the new social history, and cultural studies. All of these offer vital, important, and even essential ways of understanding culture in the United States, but they are tied to connections between culture and place that no longer may be operative. The present moment and the present crisis threatening the connections between culture and place require us to draw upon what we might call the “other American studies,” the organic grassroots theorizing about culture and power that has informed cultural practice, social movements, and academic work for many years. Much of this work has been created by exiles, migrants, and members of other groups that have been displaced and consequently are less likely to
take for granted the automatic congruence between culture and place. This is the American studies of C. L. R. James, whose brilliant book *American Civilization*, written in the 1950s, has recently been reissued. It is the American Studies of Duke Ellington, who used to respond to questions about “Negro” identity by playing a dissonant chord on the piano and saying, “That’s us. That’s our life in America. We’re a thing apart, yet an integral part.” This is the tradition of Américo Paredes, whose extraordinary 1958 book about the ballad of Gregorio Cortez, *With His Pistol in His Hand*, explains what culture means to people for whom displacement, bilingualism, code-switching, and struggle have been constant realities.

The “other American Studies” takes on new meaning in this age of deindustrialization, economic restructuring, capital flight, and economic austerity. We face a crisis within all the institutions whose existence was established by the social movements of the 1930s and the 1960s—public schools and libraries, subsidized housing and health care, youth centers and arts organizations, among others. We face the planned shrinkage of the university as fee increases and attacks on affirmative action change the racial and class composition of our students, sending increasing numbers of poor people to prison rather than to school. Expensive patent sharing agreements and research and development subsidies for large corporations undermine the critical, creative, and contemplative agenda of liberal education, giving a mercenary and vocational cast to the future of higher education in this country. At the same time, millions of workers around the world face a future of low-wage labor, diminished public services, and the continuing disintegration of social networks and communities. This kind of crossroads can be confronted, understood, and mastered, but only by blending both versions of American studies into a new synthesis.

Reframing American studies may be a painful process. Change can always be unsettling, and changes in some of our most cherished ideas and theories may be especially threatening. But social activism and movements for social change can augment our understanding and aid our collective education. Change comes from the bottom up as well as the top down. Demographic alterations, migration patterns, new technologies, and attacks on the social wage are not the only sources of new social relations and social identities in our time. Many people who do not look or sound like the authority figures that run our society are determined to have a hand in shaping the future they will inherit. Their work, and ours, is important. As Grace Lee Boggs reminds us, “When people come together voluntarily to create their own vision, they begin wishing it to come into being with such passion that they begin creating an active path leading to it from the present.”

We have come to a place where displacement matters, where it produces profound insights as well as pain, survival strategies as well as suffering. We can remain rooted in nostalgia and mired in melancholy if we choose. We can fight the old battles forever. But the best work in American studies has always been willing to face the future without fear. We know from personal experience and scholarly study that people do not always accept passively the roles assigned to them by those holding economic, political, and cultural power. The present instability of “place” might help us make a different future take place; the moment of danger that we now face might also become a time of what David W. Noble refers to as “unpredictable creativity.” People who are displaced might not “know their place,” but they might be precisely the people we need to help us discover exactly what time it is.

At one of the most frightening moments of the 1955–1957 Montgomery Bus Boycott, a time when it appeared that the civil rights activists would surely lose their fight, a group of parishioners came to Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and asked him to call off the struggle. Pointing to the defeats they had suffered, and worried that the people on their side would continue to lose their jobs, their savings, and the ability to protect their families in the wake of massive reactionary retaliation from the city’s segregationist establishment, these members of Dr. King’s church expressed anguish about the predicament they faced.

Dr. King was surprised by their surprise. “What did you expect?” he asked, reminding them that entrenched power never surrenders without a fight. Dr. King explained that their shock revealed that they had
failed to learn the most important lesson he had tried to teach them—that we stand in this life at midnight. Principled people in an unprincipled world always confront problems that seem too complex to solve; they always find themselves pitted against powers that seem too strong to defeat. But the very seriousness of the situation contains the seed of a solution. “Even the most starless midnight may herald the dawn of a great fulfillment,” Dr. King explained. We stand in this life at midnight, always on the verge of a new dawn.

CHAPTER 2

Sent for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today

Who Needs the Thirties?

The history of America as a country is quite different from that of America as a State.


At the first International Conference on Popular Music Research in 1981, one of the world’s most distinguished musicologists, Charles Hamm, began his presentation with a startling admission. Gesturing toward the elusiveness of the term “popular music” and acknowledging the difficulty of identifying exactly what makes any particular piece of music “popular,” Hamm told the gathering that they began their deliberations under a severe handicap. The handicap, he explained, was that “we’re not sure what we’re talking about.”

Probably all academic conferences and all scholarly books (including this one) should begin with a similar confession, especially in an amorphous field like American Studies, but not because American studies scholars are incompetent or uninformed. On the contrary, critical work emerging from American studies research has been richly generative of new archives, epistemologies, and analyses in recent decades. It is just that academic fields of study are always artificial constructs that inhibit as well as enable the development of new knowledge. Every optic opens up some possibilities while occluding others.

Disciplinary, subdisciplinary, and interdisciplinary designations attached to different areas of study generate distinct vocabularies and frames of reference. They divide the interdependent and mutually constitutive processes of social life into discrete, atomized, and isolated

1. In the Midnight Hour


2. This is, of course, an old theme within American studies, but I owe my understanding of its importance to the original insights of David W. Noble.


44. Aristede, Eyes of the Heart, 22.


46. David W. Noble, critique of nationalism has been crucial to my thinking on this issue. See his forthcoming book, Death of the National Landscape (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).


50. Lipsitz, Possessive Investment in Whiteness, 24-46.


2. *Sent for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today*

2. The American Studies Association has become the academic home for scholars who find unique ways to interact with artists and audiences such as Michelle Habell-Pallan, Tricia Rose, Suzanne Smith, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, and Nan Enstad. It has also served as an important locus for scholar-artists George Lewis, Roberta Hill, and Elizabeth Alexander. The preconvention collaborators at the organization’s annual meeting in Detroit in October 2000 explored the links between scholarship and historic preservation, ethnic alliances, art and citizenship, public history, performance, cultural history, popular journalism, the culture of activism, material culture, labor history, ethnic history, maritime communities, local and community history, religion, educational assessment, and student internships.


5. Denning prefigured this argument more than a decade ago in “‘The Special American Conditions’: Marxism and American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 38:3 (1986). Journalist Louis Adamic played a key role during the 1930s in mobilizing immigrants and their children to think of themselves as “redemptive outsiders” rather than as unwanted aliens, while the visual art of Thomas Hart Benton, the photographs of the Farm Security Association photographers, the musical compositions of Virgil Thompson and Aaron Copland, the folklore of B. A. Botkin, and the literary creations of Langston Hughes and John Dos Passos among others celebrated a new sense of national unity. David Peeler identifies the iconography of the “common man” as the common currency of New Deal culture, while Lizabeth Cohen emphasizes the importance of the “culture of unity” fashioned through the activist efforts of the CIO. Denning fuses these arguments together by delineating the ways in which what he calls the Age of the CIO forced fundamental reformulation within U.S. culture and politics.


7. Ibid., 277, 208.


12. Ibid., 239.

17. Ibid., 130.

18. Ibid., 450, 453, 131.