



Comments:

Some Elementary Questions for an American Cultural Studies

Response to Mechling and Kilgore

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Jay Mechling and De Witt Kilgore have both produced rich and provocative essays. Jay has provided an elegant re-working of Gene Wise's wonderful essay, "Some Elementary Axioms for an American Culture Studies." And De Witt has probed both the medium and the method of American Studies, exploring the possibilities of the Internet for culture studies. Setting an ambitious agenda for American Cultural Studies, these invite volumes of careful commentary and conversation. I am a person singularly unqualified for this task. While the other commentators, Steve Watts and Al Stone, are clearly in the *Who's Who* of American Studies, I'm still working to get in the *Who's He?*

Indeed, I only became a practitioner of American Studies serendipitously because I was studiously trying to avoid something else. As an undergraduate, I had majored in Political Science because I wanted to be President, and I thought you had to know something to be President. By the time I graduated, I planned to be a high school teacher of history until I met the Constitutional qualification of thirty-five years. But, unable to get a job, I decided kill a semester in graduate school. I killed eight years.

After receiving a Master's in History, I discovered that the Ph.D. in History required a non-American field. In order to avoid that, I found a line in the catalogue that said that you could get a Ph.D. in American Culture by combining History, Literature, Art and Music. Since the program was administered by the

History Department, I asked the chair how to do it. He said, “I don’t know. Why don’t you ask Professor X? He set up the program.” So I asked Professor X. When he replied, “Oh, do we still have that?” I realized that I could create a do-it-yourself Ph.D., and I did. But I didn’t learn as formally or comprehensively as I might have in a more structured situation. Coming to American Studies by this circuitous route, I am still circling and trying to get my bearings. I still have questions about my profession, and, stimulated by the excellent papers of MAASA’s plenary sessions, I’d like to share a few of them here. In the spirit of James Thurber, who claimed that “it is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers,” I’d like to pose a few questions that might continue the stimulating conversation that Jay Mechling and De Witt Kilgore have begun. We might call them “Some Elementary Questions for an American Cultural Studies.”

1) Are American Studies and Cultural Studies singular or plural?

The answer, of course, is “Yes.” In conversations of this sort, and especially in plenary sessions like these, we tend to talk about them as singularities, but I suspect that if we accurately want to map the history of the field, we will need to think about intersecting and overlapping patterns of inquiry. There’s still some myth and some symbol in post-structuralism and postmodernism. We also need to remember the plurality of purposes for American Studies.

We might, for example, think of practitioners in American Studies as a set of utensils. Some practitioners act primarily as knives, and we say that they are “on the cutting edge” of scholarship. A few are adept enough to act as Cuisinarts, spinning theoretical tools for dissection and deconstruction. As planned, the plenary sessions of this convention have been devoted to the cutting edges, and the ways they can be used to slice and dice American culture.

Probably most practitioners of American Studies act primarily as forks, offering nourishment to undergraduates. We serve to get the food from the plate to the mouth of the body politic (or at least the body academic). Still others act mainly as simple spoons, hoping to provide food for thought to the broadest population possible. We need to remember that the “cutting edge” is on the knife, and not on the fork or the spoon, and that many practitioners of American Studies (like me) are always behind the cutting edge of the field. In this essay, I’d like to situate myself primarily as a fork, and to think about the ways in which the slicing and dicing of theoretical perspectives is useful to undergraduates, or at least to undergraduate teachers. At the end, briefly, I’d like to discuss my life as a spoon.

2) Are American Cultural Studies really different?

Yes and no. One main difference is in how Cultural Studies deal with differences, both in what we study and how we study it. In the history of American Studies, the word “American” has come to include a variety of different peoples. At one time, for all practical purposes, “the American mind” belonged to literate (and usually literary) white guys. Increasingly, we are of more than one mind

about what counts as an American mind, and increasingly too, we are as concerned about the body as about the brain. More inclusive in our coverage, we are also more extensive in our inter-disciplinary methods. While we still study texts composed of words, increasingly we study other “texts” and contexts.

The questions and concepts of Cultural Studies help scholars to see how cultured people (and that would be all of us) make meaning—and structures of meaning—by the interactions of everyday life. They offer us tools for inquiring how our words become our worlds, and vice versa. These studies complexify culture by reminding us that culture is not a thing, but shifting relationships of production and consumption, power and knowledge, politics and pleasure. They remind us that “Studies” imply a student, and that inquirers are themselves situated in the body politic they are dissecting.

In this way, these Studies change our relationship to the subject, to subjection, and to our own subjectivity. As we increasingly assume the agency of all our subjects, we come to see culture as constructed not just by architects, but by inhabitants. In studying the artifacts of popular cultures, we try to remember that we do not see as others see: it matters which I is behind the eye. And, thanks especially to feminist criticism, we see our own subjectivity in conversation with our subjects.

Cultural Studies are different, but they are not, I would suggest, as different as we sometimes think. In fact, I would suggest, the “new and improved” American Studies are consistent in many ways with the old-fashioned American Studies. As De Witt, for example, describes the state of the art in contemporary American Studies, it seems to me that his words would also apply in many ways to the myth and symbol school of the 1950s. In that context, they, too, were nurturing a theoretical practice in which the center was always in doubt, where the canon was always provisional, and where our relationship to what we know is never complacent. They, too, were interested in the “unthought implications” of “texts and bodies of thought” and—compared to other scholarship of the era—also concerned with the influence of “absent structures” on existent and emergent realities. As we look back on the progress of our interdiscipline, I suspect that we tend to reify practices that were much more fluid then, because it makes us feel up-to-date now.

I *do* think that the new perspectives of Cultural Studies greatly improve our understanding of American culture, but I worry about what we lose when we treat theoretical perspectives like the planned obsolescence of cars. Difference gets overemphasized as part of an academic discourse of progress in which product differentiation is important. Too often, we speak as if a new theory simply supersedes the old. I tend to be suspicious of the idea of progress in many fields—I don’t see, for example, how to fit Bach or Handel or Scott Joplin or Duke Ellington into any sensible narrative of progress. And I, for one, would be happy if some “old-fashioned” scholar wrote another good book in the myth and symbol style.

3) If Cultural Studies are different, what difference do they make?

One of the most important-but least frequent-academic questions is “So what?” What difference does this knowledge make? How am I different for knowing it? How will I act differently as a consequence of knowing it? Cultural Studies do make a difference, and not just for academics.

They do make a difference to academics, in all of the ways that have been enumerated in our plenary papers. Cultural Studies have been most useful for our understanding of the complexities of American culture.

They make a lot of difference to graduate students, who are paid to be fashionable. The “tradition of the new” affects the academy almost as much as it affects the worlds of cars and couture.

Cultural Studies may make some difference to undergraduates, but, since everything is new to them, it’s not often a discernible difference. For undergraduates, a lot of Cultural Studies is in a foreign language, and for undergraduate teachers, this means that we need to learn from our colleagues in the languages who teach translation all the time.

Cultural Studies make some difference to the neo-conservatives who want to point out the political correctness of the professors that George Wallace derided as “pointy-headed intellectuals.” Cultural Studies have, for better and worse, been an integral part of the “culture wars” that have erupted over the question of canons and cultural conformity, but also over the relevance of academic practice.

Cultural Studies make very little difference at all to the *different* peoples we write about, at least in the short run. Anthropologist Ruth Behan, for example, wrote an ethnography about a Mexican woman, and wanted to give her the book. The woman refused it, saying that she already knew her story. And the book was in English, which the woman didn’t read. So far, the politics of Cultural Studies has been mainly confined to the conversations of our universities.

For most people, indeed, the new Cultural Studies is merely “academic” in the worst sense of the word, and Cultural Studies have not been particularly useful in redefining pedagogical practices. Within our colleges and universities, Cultural Studies are situated mainly in classrooms, within a tradition of learning and forgetting that works seasonally (either by semesters or quarters). As professors, we need to think increasingly about ways to encourage carryover from college to other parts of the so-called “real world,” or to make the boundaries of the academy more permeable in many different directions.

It would be interesting to consider the impact of Cultural Studies on Americans outside of classrooms. Do Cultural Studies have any carryover effect for our students, or do they constitute more theories to be forgotten after the exam? Do Cultural Studies have anything important to say to the non-academic members of our families and communities? Gene Wise contended that “the first and final base of American Culture Studies must be not in the departments of academe, but in ongoing experiences outside.” If this is true, why does it so often seem false?

4) What difference does the Internet make for the practices of American Cultural Studies?

The Internet offers possibilities for American Cultural Studies. But, especially now, in all the hype about hyperspace, it's hard to sort it all out. When De Witt talks about "hacking a reality," what are we talking about? When "virtual reality" is old news, and "deep interactivity" is upon us, what does it mean to do Cultural Studies? Are the new computer technologies affecting the old epistemologies? How does the new medium affect the message (and the messenger)?

Like De Witt, I think that the World Wide Web changes the world of American Studies. But it would be a Webbed feat to substantially change the structures of meaning that have evolved in consumer capitalist societies in the course of the last century. The Web makes information accessible to people with computers (and that's not everybody). But information is not interpretation, nor is it wisdom; therefore, it remains the task of teaching to practice the evaluation of information in the hope of eliciting wisdom.

The Web also mediates our identity, at least momentarily. Some people, perhaps, become "technocultural avatars inhabiting a transnational and hybrid discursive and iconographic space." Some people inhabit the virtual reality in which "the supposedly stable truths of biological identity have lost force as we record the emergence of an imagined transgendered, posthuman civilization fostered by visionaries in robotics, artificial intelligence, medicine, and genetic science."

But most of us, I suspect, have more pedestrian purposes for the Internet. I have a hard time believing that I am transubstantiated by the Web. When I am connected, I concede that I am crossing boundaries. But it's also true that I'm not; I'm still sitting in my office in a particular place in Minnesota, where the freedoms of the Web interact with the boundaries of my embodied life. The Web adds dimensions (mostly metaphorical) to our lives, but it doesn't (yet-or for most users) substantially change the three-dimensionality of our experience.

De Witt sees the Web mainly as a place of discovery, where we can encounter and experience new realities. But, in the culture of American Studies, which is a subset of the culture of the academy, we haven't given much thought to the Web as a place of publication. Can the Internet be adapted to a project of diffusion? Can it help us get beyond a culture of publication—publish or perish—that focuses on academic conferences and journals? Historically, the academy has preached the diffusion of knowledge, but rewarded people who diffuse it mainly to their professional peers. Perhaps the Web offers an opportunity for a culture of publication that would combine professionalism with the broader professing that is supposed to be the purpose of the project. This would necessitate a change in the academic reward structure, and a redefinition of what Rich Horwitz in his essay calls "productive activity."

5) What should we do differently?

Maybe nothing. But I'd like to consider a couple of possibilities. We might begin to think about a normative American Cultural Studies. And we might begin to consider bringing our studies of popular culture to more of the people who populate those cultures.

Jay Mechling provocatively approaches the idea of normativeness. I find it interesting that Jay is attracted to Gene Wise's axioms, because the word "axiom" comes from the same root as the word "axiology," which is the study of values and value judgments. I'm also interested that Jay explicitly includes a normative dimension to his pedagogical axioms. His concern for a virtuous reality in an age of virtual reality seems both old-fashioned and radically new. So far, Cultural Studies has proven more productive as critique than as catalyst. As the old saying goes, it's easier to smell a rotten egg than to lay a new one. In higher education, we are often told that we are preparing students for the 21st century. But we don't think often enough about the character of the century we're preparing. Paul Goodman advised 1960s students to "think about the kind of world you want to live and work in. What do you need to know to help build that world? Demand that your teachers teach you that." If we were responding to such demands, what would we teach? Would Cultural Studies be helpful? Do they help us to understand what's good for people? Do they help us to frame institutions that would make it easier for people to be good?

Finally, my main complaint about American Cultural Studies is that, as different as they are, they don't yet make enough difference, because they don't yet bring the study of cultures to the people of those cultures. I think the purpose of Cultural Studies is understanding and explanation. As a tool for understanding, the different theoretical tools have proven most useful. As tools for explanation, they have proven almost counterproductive. At times, in fact, we seem to think that explaining ourselves is too simplistic, and so we speak instead of "explicating" texts.

In the face of what we might call "trickle-down academics," Jay's injunction to write clearly is helpful. But we clearly need to write clearly for bigger audiences. What language would be useful there? How can we bring the perspectives of American Cultural Studies into the so-called "real world?"

For this task, instead of an audience-response theory, we might think a little bit about an audience-anticipation theory. Maybe ASA could even finance a little market research: I can imagine questionnaires in shopping centers, or phone surveys, asking people which brands of American Studies they might consume. More realistically, if we thought more about what people do read and why, it might help us to think about what we write and why. What do we want Americans to know, and what do we want them to do with the knowledge we have? (For that matter, what do *we* do with the knowledge we have?) How could we frame what we know so that people outside the academy could take pleasure in learning it? Where is the *Reader's Digest* version of the cutting edge journals? What books

would we include in the *Reader's Digest* condensed book series of Cultural Studies? What books in Cultural Studies could I give to my mother, or to my brothers and sisters?

It seems to me that American Studies ought to pay more attention to writing as if everyday people mattered. At some point, some of us (not all of us) ought to strip the jargon from our analyses, and write not just *about* everyday people, but *for* them. For that, we'll need to use the vernacular, a powerful language which doesn't show up much in Cultural Studies as currently constituted.

In the past year or so, I've been making a modest attempt in this direction. As "Dr. America," I give weekly radio tours of "the magnificent (but wholly imaginary) American Studies Museum" on St. Olaf's National Public Radio affiliate. The American Studies Museum is as large as the imagination, containing object lessons derived from objects as diverse as Pampers and airline peanuts. Its Home and Garden Center displays virtually all of the items that make a museum of every American domicile. The museum's Fashion Wing includes clothes—like Hard Rock Cafe T-shirts—but also such epiphenomena as mannequins and suntans. The Knickknack Corner includes items like Beanie Babies and McMemories. The Museum's fully operational Super Market includes a complete collection of foodstuffs and other stuffs—like deodorant and toothpaste and toilet paper—that can be found in the miles of American market aisles. Its Mall of Minnesota is jam-packed with the evidence contained in the average shopping center. The Automotive Garage contains cars and trucks and sport-utility vehicles, as well as parking places and such accessories as radar detectors. The Food Court serves everything from fast food to sloe gin. Advertisements—one of the most important measures of an American mind—are distributed throughout the collection. The Bumpersticker and Billboard Wing contains kernels of American philosophy like "Shit Happens" and "Life is a Journey. Enjoy the Ride." And, of course, the Couch Potato Wing of the Audiovisual Archive contains copies of every movie, television show, and computer display ever shown in the country.

Dr. America, who is interested in everything and in nothing else, counters what Leslie Prosterman calls "the law of inverse importance, which generally requires academics to write most about things that most people don't do. The good doctor, in contrast, is intensely interested in the significance of the insignificant, making the familiar unfamiliar and vice versa. Sometimes he provides what Elizabeth Minnich calls "blinding flashes of the obvious;" on other tours, he probes deeply into the underlying ideas and institutions of American life. In either case, by exploring the meanings of the material world, he complexifies our culture, and helps us to see why we act like Americans.

I know that many other people in American Studies are engaged in such ventures. But I'd like to see more about these outreach projects in *American Quarterly*, *American Studies*, and professional conventions like this. As Jay Mechling and De Witt Kilgore have demonstrated, American Cultural Studies has much to offer Americans. Its time we let them in on the secret.