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An Interview with Andrew Ross

Corey K. Creekmur*

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An Interview with Andrew Ross

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Andrew Ross is Professor of Comparative Literature and Director of the Graduate Program in American Studies at New York University. Since the mid-1980s he has been one of the most influential, productive, and visible figures in American academic and intellectual culture. His considerable body of work from the last 15 years has addressed a dizzying array of topics from modern poetry, film, popular music, television, and painting to ecology, sweat shops, DNA evidence, and, most recently, the Disney-created town of Celebration, Florida, where he lived for a year. Despite this range of interests, Ross's work constantly exhibits what he has recently called "cultural justice," which he defines in part as "doing justice to culture, pursuing justice through cultural means, and seeking justice for cultural claims."

Andrew Ross's publications as an author include *The Failure of Modernism: Symptoms of American Poetry* (Columbia, 1986); *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (Routledge, 1989); *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (Verso, 1991); *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society* (Verso, 1994); *Real Love: In Pursuit of Cultural Justice*

Corey K. Creekmur is Professor of English at the University of Iowa. His publications include the co-edited anthology *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays in Popular Culture* (Duke, 1995) and essays in various collections, including *The Road Movie Book* (Routledge, 1997), *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Indiana, 2001), and *Photo-Textualities: Reading Photographs and Literature* (Delaware, 1996). His other essays and reviews have appeared in *Wide Angle*, *Discourse*, *Film Quarterly*, and *The Hitchcock Annual*. He is currently completing a book on gender and sexuality in the Western genre, co-editing a volume on global receptions of Indian popular cinema, and preparing a study of the film musical. E-mail: corey-creekmur@uiowa.edu.

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(NYU, 1998); and *The Celebration Chronicles: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Property Value in Disney's New Town* (Ballantine, 1999). He has also edited or co-edited *Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodernism* (Minnesota, 1985); *Technoculture* (Minnesota, 1991); *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture* (Routledge, 1994); *Science Wars* (Duke, 1996); and *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade and the Rights of Garment Workers* (Verso, 1997). His many essays and reviews have appeared in venues ranging from *Social Text*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, and *The Nation* to "Weather Report," a regular column he wrote for *Artforum* between 1992 and 1997. He also appeared as George Washington in the 1988 4th of July parade in Celebration, Florida.

In the following interview, conducted via e-mail correspondence, I wanted to ask Andrew Ross to reflect on the history of cultural studies and on some of the ways historical change—whether in the form of intellectual fads, changes in a person's own life, or traumatic events—intersects with the practice of cultural criticism.

Creekmur: Wrenching a line out of context from *The Celebration Chronicles*, I'd like to begin by asking about "tradition, not nostalgia." Can you identify what you understand to be the referent of "cultural studies" in the current intellectual and institutional climate? My sense is that, for a while at least, "cultural studies" identified a fairly coherent body of critics, texts, concerns, and practices centered around the Birmingham school and defined by the work of such key figures as Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, Stuart Hall, and, in the following generation, Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie, among others. I'm not sure "cultural studies" still designates that "tradition," for better or for worse. Is there any point to maintaining that tradition, or would doing so just be an attempt to legitimate nostalgia for an earlier era that was intellectually formative for some of us?

Ross: Depending on your location, and whatever battles you happen to be fighting, it still seems useful, for many people, to identify cultural studies as a coherent lineage. From discipline to discipline, campus to campus, and nation to nation, these battles are all at uneven stages of development. As a result, the impact of cultural studies is still only arriving in some regions of the intellectual and political landscape, while, in others, its lessons have long since been absorbed. Yet even in the latter case, where the old battles are no longer relevant, it may still be important to insist on some basics, if only to correct those for whom cultural studies is simply a slogan to be lazily tossed around in intellectual chitchat.

More important, I think, is to preserve an understanding of cultural studies as a historical formation in and of itself. It takes its place in history at a particular moment—with the rise of the New Left, with the emergence of knowledge and culture as a vital part of the economic base, and with the mutation of higher education, which led to the restructuring of academic labor and the realignment of academic research with late modernity. Cultural studies is part and parcel of these developments, and so it has been acted upon just as much as it has acted as a critical force in these last three or four decades.

Speaking for myself, I don't feel the need for cultural studies to have such a

coherent identity, but there are touchstones within the tradition that I've found it helpful to reinterpret for myself. For example, I've always liked the exhortation to "meet people where they *are*, where they are touched, bitten, moved, frustrated, nauseated," which appeared in the first editorial of the *New Left Review*. It was supposed to be a corrective to the Old Left ethos of "telling people where they ought to be." These days, I think of it as a rationale for doing the kind of ethnography-based work that I feel most comfortable with, and I suppose I do see it as a corrective to doing armchair theory. In recent years, all of my major research projects have been ethnographic in nature: the Celebration study, my forthcoming book on New Economy workplaces, and the work I'm planning to do in Chinese factories.

Creekmur: Whether it remains connected to the Birmingham "tradition" or has mutated in different and possibly productive directions, cultural studies seems to have settled comfortably into most university curricula, and such comfort has of course often been a warning sign for progressive or radical scholars. For one thing, it seems hard to imagine what objects of analysis might now be scandalous if proposed for a doctoral thesis, whereas a short while ago a dissertation on Madonna, *The Simpsons*, comic books, or pornography still promised some intellectual shock value. Is the success of cultural studies in the academy a victory to be savored or a sign of complacency and indifference to the challenges it once posed to traditional research?

Ross: To my mind, the topics are less of a challenge than the methods, but again I think it depends on your location and what tactics you find most useful. In our program at NYU, for example, we still require graduate students to do group research projects as part of their course of study, and they occasionally publish collectively produced books (along the lines of the CCCS). I can't say this is very popular with our Deans. Nor is our policy of asking students to think of themselves as "intellectual activists" rather than as career academics. We encourage them to make links with community politics or with activist groups in the city, and to turn their knowledge and analytic skills into practical tools that will further these movements. This goes against the grain of my employer's efforts to turn NYU into a global research university with elite aspirations, and we are often penalized in certain ways for weaving these commitments into the institutional fabric. None of my colleagues experience the result as comforting, or associate it with complacency. Institutionalization remains a big challenge for us because it's all about finding the right framework for preserving your political values and hopes. Now that may be largely due to the fact that we are an interdisciplinary program, and are therefore always embattled and resource-starved to some degree. In the case of large, mono-disciplinary departments with the capacity to absorb and annex the new, I imagine it's more likely that cultural studies have become a familiar part of the curricular furniture, and its adherents have been able to subsist more easily as armchair radicals.

Creekmur: Keeping with a focus on recent historical changes in cultural studies, I'd also like to ask you to address the issue of intellectual fashion, or perhaps the more neutral notion of critical immediacy. You contributed essays to the volumes on the Thomas-Hill hearings and the O. J. Simpson trial co-edited by Toni Morrison. Your essays, and the volumes they appeared in, clearly drew some of their energy and the interest of readers from the fact that those events were still hot topics when the collections appeared. While there are any number of reasons a scholar might now revisit those events, I suspect the necessary motivation to write a new essay on those topics—or on Madonna's *Sex* book—has waned. In producing such work, exemplified perhaps by your "Weather Report" columns for *Artforum*, is the need to produce an immediate response primary, or can the cultural critic afford to anticipate the "shelf life" of specific topics? Is there any reason for the cultural critic to consider the "lasting value" of their work while also addressing the concerns of the moment?

Ross: The topical essay has a long lineage among intellectuals (as distinct, say, from scholars). In fact, it could be said to be the characteristic brand of the intellectual, whose opinions are valued for their timeliness, or accountability to the personality of the moment. By contrast, again, we look to the scholar for more durable, after-the-fact analysis. Cultural studies, however, encouraged a new genre of analyst, for whom opinion-making was not a religion and research was not an act of dishonor. You could amass the knowledge you needed to do the job, often by scholarly means and methods and by drawing on different disciplines, while still delivering the kind of polemical take favored by the just-in-time essayists. And if you were lucky enough to have found your own voice, as distinct from clotted theory-speak, then your piece could still have a belle-lettristic quality that was pleasing to readers. I like to think of the result as writing "histories of the present." In addition, there is some political responsibility attached to this genre. It's essential to have folks on the left contest the meaning of highly public events as they occur, and before they are spun to the right in the bourgeois media and by the think tank hirelings. Political journalists are on the front line in this regard, but scholars can also play a significant supplementary role.

Creekmur: Let me pose another question that concerns your own history and the institutional definitions you work with as a teacher and critic. I'm guessing (perhaps I'm wrong) that by growing up in Scotland you acquired a particular understanding of—perhaps particular fantasies about—what was distinct or unique about American culture. You've now lived and worked in the United States for some time, but I still assume a few eyebrows were raised when you were selected to direct an American Studies program at a major American university. Do you think your current understanding of American culture retains elements of your non-American upbringing and the version of the United States it offered? At the same time, in the wake of ever-expanding multinational media and commerce, do you still find reason to continue to distinguish "American studies" from possibly more "international" academic categories such as cultural studies, globalization, or postmodernism?

Ross: I've lived in the U.S. for well over twenty years, though I've no doubt that the anti-colonialism and native socialism of my Scottish upbringing plays a role in how I think and write about the domestic system and imperial reach of the U.S. Institutionally, I moved into American Studies when I taught at Princeton in the 1980s, and immediately found it to be a really fruitful haven. The field's strong historical emphasis was very attractive to me, as were the internal challenges. Like all area studies programs, formed under the pressure of wartime ideology, American Studies was still struggling to break its Cold War mold, and it did so by opening itself up to the full panoply of ethnic studies and, more recently, post-national currents. In general, the field has been wide open to new intellectual developments, including the insights of cultural studies. At NYU, we tried to fashion a program that looks at the U.S. on the global stage (in essence as a study of Empire) and, since we have Latin Americanists on the faculty, it functions, in practice, as an Inter-American Studies program. So there's less and less evidence of parochialism, not even in the field studies we do within New York City communities, since they are heavily populated by immigrants. Among our faculty, I am among the most parochial and traditional, in terms of my interests and methods.

As a result of the field's eclectic development, the reactionary backlash from within has been relatively mild, mostly from scholars overseas and mostly around the perception that "anti-Americanism" has become the guiding premise of the field. This latter grievance is ironic, considering the role that American Studies might once again be called on to play as the proving ground of national security. A far-fetched scenario, perhaps, but not so implausible for those who naturally look to scholarship as a serviceable buttress for the war effort. After September 11th, to give you one example, Tom Friedman wrote a *New York Times* column in response to Saudi Prince Alwaleed's offer of \$10m to the 9/11 relief fund. In it, he suggested that the Prince take his \$10m and use it to fund some American Studies departments in Saudi universities. The Saudi people, he reasoned, could learn a thing or two about American Civilization, which they might otherwise presume that they already knew. Sure enough, a quick scan of my *Resources in American Studies* handbook, published by the ASA, confirmed there were no Saudi entries in the ASA listings for international programs, institutes, centers, and addresses. Israel and Turkey are the only countries that feature in the Middle East section, there is nothing at all in North Africa, and precious little in Central Asia, and no, nothing in Afghanistan or in most Muslim countries. In fact, these listings offer a very concise illustration of the global map of U.S. geopolitical interests over the last fifty years. American Studies, like other area studies fields, was heavily shaped by foreign policy-makers as a Cold War instrument, and its international reach still reflects the legacy of that period.

Of course, Friedman knows next to nothing about current scholarship in American Studies (if he did, I'm not sure he would be making the same blithe suggestion), but it is not scholarship that Friedman is after, nor was it scholarship primarily that the USIA sought to cultivate when it funded American Studies in client states or borderline states during the Cold War. Scholarly exchange then and now serves as a respectable cover or vessel for transporting other goods and messages more ger-

mane to the interests of the state. The fact that we are more hip to this does not mean that scholars will not respond to the array of incentives available to them if they prove serviceable to the state. The gravy train comes in all sorts of guises.

Creekmur: While *The Celebration Chronicles* seems consistent with many of your prior concerns as a social critic, it's very different from most of your earlier work in style and practice. Most obviously, you clearly felt that a study of Celebration had to be conducted on site, through active participation and over a significant period of time. Do you anticipate that your future research projects might demand or benefit from similar involvement, or does the Celebration experience feel like a one-time-only immersion in, not just its content, but the critical practice it involved? The result is also your first book from a non-academic publisher, and as such it has been widely reviewed and presumably read outside of academia. A number of academic critics have moved, or wish to move, in that direction in recent years, but there's obviously a residual taint to such crossover work. (I'm guessing your academic peers have responded with more support and perhaps envy than disdain, but I may be wrong.) What is your current view, following this experience, of the academic cultural critic's possible role in the mass media and the marketplace?

Ross: I undertook my residential study of Celebration for a number of reasons. Large-scale communities of that sort are not built very often, and it promised to be a marvelous opportunity for a writer to be in there at a pioneer phase of the development, interacting with the community-makers before they burned out. As a writer, then, I couldn't resist the opportunity. Second, the tradition of residential ethnographies of new suburban communities had slackened off considerably after a wave of interest in the 1960s and 1970s. There wasn't a lot of hands-on suburban scholarship available, and, as a result, urban studies had developed a distinctively anti-suburban mentality that I found to be counter-productive. I wanted to help revive that tradition in whatever way I could. Third, I knew that the Celebration location would give me the kind of access to Disney company culture that other Disney scholars had not been able to get. Many Celebrationites, as I discovered, were company men and women in their day jobs, but were often overtly antagonistic to the company in their capacity as residents. Lastly, the study gave me the chance to do a classic, full-blown ethnography in the field. I'd done bargain-basement ethnography before, but never had the luxury of a year in the field to try it out properly. Since I was also required to do investigative journalism to get the stories I wanted, the book had more of a narrative cast and flow than is customary with an academic monograph. In addition, I was working with a frankly commercial trade publisher with established expectations about form and content. As you can imagine, I learned a lot in the process; about writing craft, about the book trade, and about the circuits of publicity. It's always a shock for academics to see their book in an airport bookstore, and I was no exception. The most difficult part was retaining some ethos of accountability to the residents. Many of them hoped that my book would help dispel media stereotyping of their lives and aspirations, and so they regarded me as someone distinct from the journalistic trade. It was one of the few situations

where being an academic was a plus, so accustomed are we to being viewed, off-campus, as social and cognitive misfits.

The experience was most gratifying to me because I found a voice (and a methodological blend of journalism and ethnography) that seems to suit me, at least for the time being. I have just completed a similar, year-long study of the corporate workplace in two New Economy companies. The book (called *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Costs*) draws on many of the same methods and writing genres that I used in *The Celebration Chronicles*. Just as with Celebration, I decided to try to capture a moment in corporate history that was not likely to last, but which had not benefited from a close study. The book also reflects a growing tendency in my own work to write about labor issues. I have been involved in the anti-sweatshop movement for several years now and intend to do my next large project on Chinese workers in the “factory of the world.” I actually do believe, or at least hope, that we are seeing a “turn to labor” among cultural studies folks.

To address the other part of your question, however, I have no illusions about the role that intellectuals can play in a general market publishing trade. The economics of publishing have squeezed out the middle-list author, where we might have had a sustainable niche, and the expectation of trade publishers that non-fiction writers must present “characters” as part of their narrative produces an environment that is not very friendly to ideas. That’s why we need to also support the smaller left-wing houses like Verso, Basic Books, and the New Press. On the other hand (and largely because I live in New York), I meet trade editors all the time who are hungry for “crossover” academics who have ideas and who can write in receptive ways.

Creekmur: Finally, addressing you not only as a cultural critic but also as a New Yorker, I think people will be interested in your response to the September 11th attacks. Your readers will recall a major section of *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*, in which you emphasized that the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center “proved what public critics had always alleged—that the Twin Towers were a potential death trap.” Now the shock and process of coping with the great loss of life caused in the terrorist destruction of the buildings seems to have effectively rewritten the controversial history of the World Trade Center you summarized almost a decade ago. You were warning us of the possibility of a disaster quite different than what occurred, but I’m wondering how your position as a strong critic of a building you identified as “an ecological catastrophe of vast proportions” interacted with your personal response to such a horrific event in the city where you live and work. In this case, were you aware of your responses being informed by your critical work, or did the shock of the event make an intellectual reaction impossible or irrelevant?

Ross: The shock of the event was extreme. I actually watched the second plane hit the North Tower from the street about twenty-five blocks to the north of the site. My apartment is even closer, in Tribeca, so the whole neighborhood was fully impacted and for many weeks was in the “frozen zone,” accessible only to residents

and rescue workers. In the days and weeks after the attacks, I did some urban research, much of it published in the collection *After the World Trade Center: Rethinking New York City* (Routledge, 2002), and participated in several forums about the challenge, for planners, of rebuilding on the site. It's true, I had done a lot of research on the Twin Towers for the chapter about the 1993 bombing in *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life*. That was the first sustained work I had done in urban studies, which is what I mostly teach these days. The thesis of the chapter was that the building of the Towers had indeed been the culmination of destructive environmental patterns within the city, bridging the disastrous period of urban renewal with its successor—when development would be planned around the needs of the city's FIRE industries. As you can imagine, much of that research was on my mind during the past year. But as it happens, the story about the “ecological catastrophe” is only now beginning to come out. Juan Gonzalez's book *Fallout* (New Press, 2002) is a sordid account of the environmental cover-up around Ground Zero in the days and months after the attacks. Preserving a false sense of security about the air quality was critical to the maintenance of Downtown property values, so the public was misled about the concentrations of dioxin, asbestos, and heavy metals that had been released. The real estate market in the entire metro region hung in the balance. Local folks will be living with the health consequences for years to come.