Introduction: What is American Studies?

As Stanley Bailis’ remarks imply, the answer to this question does not readily avail itself. In the most abstract sense, American Studies is an ongoing debate, a continued formulation of questions and answers relating to the very idea of what America might be, and the manners in which it could be studied, both past and present. This bibliography is an attempt to provide access to the evolution of this debate through a chronological list of ‘important’ disciplinary-historical and methodological articles, with brief annotations summarizing each entry and relating them to one another.

The actual “history” of American Studies has been as much apart of its self-understanding as any specific theoretical or methodological tract. This includes, as Bailis infers, both intra-disciplinary debates and changing modes of scholarship as well as the social, cultural, political, and economic events composing its larger historical context. While all history is conceived as an argument, it seems worthwhile to place, as neutrally as possible, the contents of this bibliography within a larger framework – so as to give it synthetic wholeness, and to suggest themes for different unifying narratives.

An irony in the story of American Studies comes from what might be called its double origins within a single beginning. The beginning of American Studies proper is easily identified by the founding of the journal American Quarterly at the University of Minnesota in 1949, and the subsequent organization of the American Studies Association in late 1951 and early 1952. The scholarly motivations for these organization are traditionally attributed to a shift in larger academic interests:

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28 There were a number of programs in “American Civilization” that started before any professional organization began: the first “course” is usually cited as being the 1931 “American Thought and Civilization” at Yale; the first program was at Harvard with its 1936 interdisciplinary Ph.D. granting program in the History of American Civilization. For an extensive time-line like chronology, see Gene Wise, “An American Studies Calendar.” American Quarterly [1979]. 407-447.

historians were beginning to move away from the older Progressive-style scholarship of the early twentieth century, and younger literary scholars were starting to shy away from the entrenched formalism of New Criticism. Yet, the extent to which these changed interests constitute “reactions” or simply intellectual “movements” plays an important part in disciplinary-historical formulations: to what extent are exceptionalism, innovation, and creativity fundamental themes in the discipline’s origins and subsequent evolution? An explanation for the scholar’s changing directions that competes most directly with the classic “reaction” thesis identifies the gradual rise of the “culture concept” in both literary studies and Anthropology as a causal factor in American Studies less than exceptional intellectual beginnings. However distinct one chooses to attribute the discipline’s origins as being, they nonetheless focussed the aim of early Americanists towards an interdisciplinary approach, which, in the words of Henry Nash Smith’s famous article “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method,” would contribute to “the study of American culture, past and present, as a whole” In some scholars’ visions, this meant integrating literature, history, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, economics, and psychology, and then refracting them through an American lens.

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31 The relative “exceptionalism” of American Studies’ origins [as a pathbreaking leader in the drive towards interdisciplinary and cultural studies] can also be thought of in relation to the “exceptionalism” of America’s history as presented within the movement, and as a feature of larger cultural and intellectual heritages. For interesting articles, with helpful references, see Laurence Veysey, “The Autonomy of American history Reconsidered.” American Quarterly v 31 n 4 [1979]. 455-477; Michael Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration.” American Quarterly v 45 n 1 [1993]. 1-43


34 Many scholars have remarked in hindsight that the sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and psychologists never seemed to have appeared – or at least did so only for a brief moment. While American Studies has primarily remained at the conjunction of History and Literature, it has also done a fair quantity of work that mingles considerably with sociology, and often adopts social anthropological theory; more recently, ideas about cultural geography, and post-colonial historiography have also been utilized. The most explicit attempt at producing an American Studies “meta-language” comes slightly later in the tradition with Stanley Bailis, “The Social Sciences in American Studies: An Integrative Conception.” American Quarterly, [August 1974]. 202-224. Also, an more recently, is Gene Wise, “Some Elementary Axioms for American Culture Studies,” Prospects v. 4 [1979]. 517-547.
In either case, the changes in scholarly interest paralleled a rise in American nationalism that undeniably effected the success of the discipline and shaped the goals of its practitioners. America’s integral role in World War I demonstrated the nation’s success as an industrial power, and the subsequent wish of discovering a literary and historical tradition that would explain its current role in civilization became a popular goal.35 This goal was further re-enforced by isolationist tendencies before the war and during the inter-war period, nationalistic pride fostered in government efforts to combat the Great Depression, and the critical role the U.S. played in defeating the Nazi threat in Europe and Japanese imperialism in the Pacific. These events all accompanied the rise in Americanist scholarship, and directly proceeded the formal establishment of the discipline – which took place during the beginning of the very nationalistic, anti-Communist Cold War.36

The Red Scare directly effected the success of American Studies, if simply in the amount of money made available for various programs’ development, including large donations give with the intent of combating communism through the study of democracy’s superior historical legacy.37 The ideological effects, while harder to specifically identify, also played an important role – although many prominent Americanists understood, and were against, the government’s anti-Communist activities.38

The scholarship that defined these early years in American Studies has been labeled the “Myth and Symbol” school, and the tradition is generally recognized as representing the disciplines’ original unifying method.39 A tremendous amount of debate surrounds the origins of this tradition, its

35 This more or less constitutes the focus of the first five to ten entries in the bibliography: it is important to note the newness of the idea of “culture,” and changing attitudes about history and civilization generally. Additionally, see Susman, “The Thirties”; Guenter Lenz, “American Studies and the Radical Tradition: From the 1930s to the 1960s,” Prospects, v. 12 [1987]. 21-58; and Novick, That Noble Dream, chs. 11-12. For an interesting treatment of the idea of World History and Civilization that also came into being at this time period (in higher education), see David Segal, “‘Western Civ’ and the Staging of history in American Higher Education.” American Historical Review, v 105 n 3 [2000]. 770-805, which contains numerous references that compliment those in the articles in the Bibliography. For the United States, it was an argument in and of itself to justify a cultural heritage and literary tradition that was not simply a bastardization of its British origins.


motivations, and the intent and success of its work, as well as the actual nature of the method that is accepted as having existed.\textsuperscript{40} While the Myth and Symbol approach hasn’t been used in many years, its contemporary influence on the discipline and the effect which it continues to have on American Studies’ conception of itself remains an important topic.

American Studies, well established in many colleges and universities by the mid-1950’s, experienced its first crisis in the late 1960’s and early 70’s. Having focussed mainly on a canon of “dead white men” and “high” cultural history, the discipline was very much shaken by the social and cultural revolution ushered in with the civil rights movement, the Europe of 1968, and Vietnam.\textsuperscript{41} Many of the bedrock assumption of what it meant to be American, including historical “consensus” narratives and the homogenized portraits of a periods’ “mind” and “spirit,” were being challenged from both within and outside the academy.\textsuperscript{42} Scholars and activists alike called for an examination of America’s “denied” past, including slavery, colonialism, and immigration, and for a reorientation towards popular culture, feminist, and minority studies.\textsuperscript{43} A few Americanists, including an ASA Past President, have argued that American Studies was reasonably aware of these concerns, and adapted its scholarship towards them with due speed;\textsuperscript{44} on the other hand, the discipline has also been repeatedly criticized for only doing a very little, and even then doing it slowly.\textsuperscript{45} Regardless of which “side” of the debate is more persuasive, the problem remained for American Studies as a professional discipline and association when numerous independent departments and programs began to position themselves at the vanguard of academic interest.\textsuperscript{46} Black Studies, Latin-American Studies, Feminist and Queer Theory, all became prominent features in other disciplines, or became disciplines in there own right: the resulting fragmentation led

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\textsuperscript{40} See Guenter Lenz’s excellent article, “American Studies – Beyond the Crisis?: Recent Redefinitions and the Meaning of Theory, History, and Practical Criticism,” \textit{Prospects}, v. 7 [1982]. 53-113, and Gene Wise, “Paradigm Dramas’ in American Studies: A cultural and Institutional History of the Movement.” \textit{American Quarterly}, v. 31 n. 3 [1979]. This topic is highlighted extensively throughout the annotations in the Bibliography.

\textsuperscript{41} For an interesting summary of the disciplines methodological reaction to these issues, see Robert Sklar, “The Problem of an American Studies ‘Philosophy’: A bibliography of new Directions.” \textit{American Quarterly} v 27 [1975]. 245-262

\textsuperscript{42} This refers to the classic scholarship of the Myth and Symbol school, as well as the older work of scholars like Perry Miller and F.O. Matthiessen. See the “Major Works” section of the bibliography for further citations.

\textsuperscript{43} Perhaps the most momentous shift by an Old School scholar was Edmund Morgan’s \textit{American Slavery, American Freedom}. Again, see the “Major Works” section for further citations.


\textsuperscript{46} For examples of American Studies scholarship that represented the discipline’s movement towards focussing on these issues, see the “monitory studies” articles selected by Lucy Maddox, \textit{Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline}. Maddox, ed. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1999
Robert Sklar in 1970 to make the blanket declaration, “American Studies, as an intellectual discipline, is in crisis.”

With the “Golden Age” of Myth and Symbol scholarship condemned as nationalistic and ideologically unpalatable, American Studies stood poised to either falter in its past misdeeds or reinvigorate itself with new perspectives and innovate scholarship – an act that many argued would keep the discipline true to its heritage of stepping beyond academic “boxes.” While many 1970’s Americanists realized their situation in these terms, the dichotomy was as false then as it is now; accordingly, American Studies took some sort of a middle road: neither crumbling around itself, nor maintaining the popularity it had previously enjoyed.

American Studies remained rather stagnant in the latter half of the seventies, slowly beginning to look forward while testing the feasibility of integrating other disciplines newer methodologies into their own work on America. This trend of looking elsewhere for theories and methods gradually re-enlivened the debate as to what made American Studies unique from other disciplines: what was it that an American Studies Ph.D. could do that an historian interested in colonial literature could not? Responses to such questions ranged from defensively angsty to over-zealously reformist, and no single answer appeared to take hold: in a very large way, American Studies own debate regarding theory and method was gradually eclipsed by the more encompassing movement around the “Linguistic Turn” towards Postmodernism.

The popular focus of American Studies scholarship came to rest heavily upon the enrapturing theories of power and knowledge developed by historian-philosopher Michel Foucault; the neo-Marxism of Noam Chomsky’s linguistics, M. M. Bakhtin’s literary theory, and Antonio Gramsci’s idea of

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48 This makes use of the aforementioned narratives that promote the “radical departure” from entrenched disciplines theory of American Studies’ origins. Also, broader [perhaps questionable] remarks have been made regarding American Studies causal role in the development of semiotic theory: Jay Mechling, “Mind, Messages, and Madness: Gregory Bateson Makes a Paradigm for American Cultural Studies,” Prospects, v. 8 [1983]. 24.

49 This also reflects general cut backs in financial support to the humanities, and somewhat of a general disinterest in higher education. See the end of Gene Wise, “Paradigm Dramas,” as well as his “From American Studies to American Culture Studies: A Dialogue Across Generations.” Prospects v 8 [1983]. 1-10.

50 Robert Sklar poses the question directly, “If we define ourselves existentially by what we do rather than by what we say, what is it that we do that the traditional departments now cannot do quite as well?” “American Studies and the Realities of America.” 602.


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hegemony; renewed interest in hermeneutics and communicative theory through the work of Jürgen Habermas; the Deconstructionist thought of Jacques Derrida; and the psychoanalytical work of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser – to mention some of the largest influences – as well as new theories in Anthropology and Sociology. However reliant individual Americanists have been on these theories, discipline wide adoption and acceptance did not occur: the “invasion” of “European culture theory,” which corresponded to a renewed increase in American Studies scholarship, has been heavily criticized – from its fundamental tenets, to its mis-application by Americanists, to its further fragmentation of what might be American Studies’ own “context” and method.53 The debate surrounding method in American Studies is ongoing, but less prominent – mostly taking place in prefaces and introductions or in scholars adaptations of other discipline’s theories within their general research, rather than in explicitly focussed journal articles or monographs.

This very brief summary has presented American Studies’ beginning in terms of its “academic” intellectual origins, though I remarked earlier that there was an additional, “double” origin of the tradition. What is meant by this is the intimate relationship between both the nature of the thought and the content of the material that composed the majority of American Studies’ original scholarly repertoire – the first half of the nineteenth century, the period of American Romanticism, or as it was made famous by F. O. Matthiessen, the “American Renaissance” – and American Studies’ twentieth century analysis of it. The “great men” of the period – Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman – were all extensively concerned with what America was, and what is was becoming. Their questioning of America in and through the Romantic ideal of the sublime and their belief in a transcendental aesthetic present intriguing parallels to the Myth and Symbol tradition in American Studies. Additionally, even those Matthiessen deemed “lesser” figures of the periods were very much concerned with what America was, and how and to whom it could be presented: what was the Fourth of July to a slave? Further, Romantic tendencies and questioning of America’s history as American Heritage continued, even if less prominently, in artistic traditions: from Democratic Vistas in 1871, to The Souls of Black Folk in 1903, to William Carlos Williams In the American Grain in 1925 – and arriving finally at the “first” work in “American Studies,” V.L. Parrington’s 1927 Pulitzer Prize winning Main Currents in American Thought. My point is fairly simple: that American Studies’ origins – beyond being either a reaction to Progressive history and New Criticism or as a nationalistic adaptation of the “culture concept” – can also be seen in the material which was studied by those who “began” American Studies, and that the success and popularity of the early Americanists’ work need be examined both in terms of its contemporary historical

53 For an early portrayal of these issues, see the important but unfortunately very poorly written article by Berkhofer, Jr., “A New Context for American Studies?” Also, George Lipsitz, “Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies,” American Quarterly, v. 42 n. 4 [1990], offers and interesting argument, being particularly dependent on disciplinary historical traditions. The “most controversial” American Studies debate was sparked by Steven Watts, “The Idiocy of American Studies: Poststructuralism, Language, and Politics in the Age of Self-Fulfillment,” American Quarterly v. 43 n. 4 [1991]. 623-660, which was responded to by Barry Shank, “A Reply to Steven Watt’s ‘Idiocy’,” American Quarterly v. 44 n. 3 [1992]. 439-448; as well as Nancy Isenberg, “The Personal Is Political: Gender, Feminism, and the Politics of Discourse Theory,” American Quarterly v. 44 n. 3 [1992]. 449-458
situations, as well as in its similarity to the *content and circumstance* of the material that’s study became so popular.

I make this point, rather than to simply introduce what I feel has been a neglected idea, but instead to demonstrate both the dynamic and compelling nature of the debate presented in this bibliography. It is to make the argument that, against certain current trends, a closer analysis of the history of the discipline – using whatever theoretical and methodological framework you choose – presents not only a fundamentally important introduction to current scholarship, but is as much a part of whatever America is as what American Studies might aim to be.
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A CHRONOLOGICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

1937 – 1959


From a disciplinary-historical perspective, the article demonstrates the importance of pedagogy in the construction of America’s social, the goal of presenting a representative, instructive, and “realistic” narrative of American experience [with a brief hint to American exceptionalism in the introductory paragraphs], as well as a semi-transparent innocence regarding the effect of contemporary social needs in prescribing the course of American historical scholarship.

The rise of “social history,” contrasted to the established traditions of “political history,” played a major role in the transformation of early 20th century American Academic interests generally, and was of specific importance in the conceptualization of American Studies. “The ideal of the social historian,” Schlesinger writes, “is to trace the evolution of people with reference to all the conditions and influences that helped shape its aspirations and its ways of life” (60). This definition highlights the generative stage of many of the ideas that emerging in the early American Studies movement: that history can be presented as “what [ways] men actually lived by,” (62) and thus including their “literature, journalism, education, religion, humanitarian movements, cultural interests, the use of leisure, and all the other concerns which historically have made up the round of living” (60). Further, that in order “to understand properly the topography of the human past, there must be included, along with the occasional mountain peaks, the plateaus, planes and valleys where dwelt the bulk of humanity” (62). A large portion of the article addresses what Schlesinger feels to be five major pitfalls in the teaching of social history, which remain items of contention through the present: the “sandwich method… the custom of interlarding the textbook with occasional chapters dealing with social and intellectual life” (61); the “telephone directory method… [listing] names of persons significant by reason of their social and intellectual contributions” (61); the “snob approach… [in] applying some sort of critical yardstick to figures in American social and intellectual history, omitting those which to not meet these arbitrary standards” (62); the “unhistorical method… [only to] illuminate present day (62-63); and the “spasmodic method… consist[ing] of dragging in social-history material only at points of great political stress or strain” (63).


Higham’s article presents a brief synopsis of intellectual history’s place in the American profession, citing the sources of its development and indicating the basic features distinguishing it from the “classic” history of the time. His generalizations regarding contemporary scholarship offer a revealing characterization of academic, social, and political forces at play during the earliest stages of American Studies’ development. Candidly addressing the rise of “new history,” and the reaction against
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scientific historical methods, Higham discusses intellectual history as representative of “the questioning and doubt which have attacked all our historic faiths and hallowed assumptions during the last three decades” (470). He introduces the neglect of American intellectual traditions as a sign of historians having a lack of “cultural pride,” necessitating an alignment in the methodologies of intellectual and social history (456). American Studies proper is noted as stemming directly from the attempt “to extricate a unique, indigenous tradition from part of our intellectual heritage… a deepening search for patriotic values [that] was contributing more than ever to the lure of intellectual history… Thus war encouraged interventionists and isolationists alike to consult the history of American thought” (469).

More specific elements of American Studies’ development are discussed within the intellectual history paradigm, and although he speaks to the disciplines integrative conception, the discussion is mostly of historical contributions – for instance, F. O. Matthiessen’s American Renaissance (1941) receives no mention. One of the benefits of interdisciplinary work (he notes history, literature, and philosophy) comes in the notion that a scholar might be able to present a portrait of a period’s “mind”; he gives particular and salutary treatment to Perry Miller’s The New England Mind, and its ability to organize “the original system of Puritan thought in its many aspects into a tight and comprehensive web of meaning” (468). A lack of methodological coherence is noted for both intellectual history and American Studies, yet Higham concludes by pointing to Henry Nash Smith as making “a notable methodological advance” in his Myth and Symbol approach as introduced in Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (1950). The article also reveals traces of certain scholarly assumptions of old, particularly in its notice of relative objectivity but avoidance of thoroughly self-reflexive commentary (if such a thing is possible), as well as ideas of scholarship as “contributing to knowledge” in an accumulatory way.


Bestor’s brief commentary on the possibilities for American Studies could be summarized as “ironically prophetic.” In a larger exegesis of the values of a liberal education, he asks rhetorically, “Now that American programs have won recognition, however, can we be sure that their further spread will be for the right reasons” (4)? He answers by presenting the dangers of “[t]he narrow and vicious nationalism that stalks the country today,” stating “[t]o the jingoist how inviting such programs are” (4)! Further narrowness to which American Studies might succumb are given as using “education only as preparation for employment” (4), “the trivia of daily living, the toothbrush and the traffic light” (4), “submerg[ing] the schools in the discussion of contemporary problems” (5), and generally avoiding education as self-cultural enlightenment by studying things that fail to recognize how “American civilization is less self-contained than almost any other culture with which he might concern himself… [that] in its later development, as in its origins, [America] was part of a larger whole that knew now national boundaries” (7).
Less prophetic (and differently ironic) are the entrenched elitism implicit in his discussion of the importance of liberal education and the tension between the values of “high” and “low” culture: “Too many students who delve into obscure frontier writers or folklore or hill-billy music lose, rather than gain, perception of what constitutes great writing and great art and what maturity means in the realm of ideas,” thus causing ignorance “of those enduring monuments of human wisdom and artistic achievement that provide the only worldwide standards of judgement” (8). It is also interesting to note Bestor’s reliance on Emerson’s “The American Scholar” and his invocation of Romanticized forms of meaning; additionally, his expectation of a great achievement resulting from the challenges just endured and overcome, as well as those about to be faced, by American Civilization.


Grier’s article surveys the current (1952-53) state of American Studies programs after visits to thirteen colleges and universities an “correspondence with many others,” examining both their logistical implementation and curricular composition. The article gives a clear, if dry, description of the programs, and highlights both the universal and unique concerns facing them. Particular phraseology gives insight into general thoughts surrounding the idea of an American Civilization program – for example, faculty commitment to “a continuing experiment” (181). Grier’s discussion of introductory courses and the appropriate requirements for students can be seen as symptomatic American Studies’ general lack of an unified method and theory (although he states that “the question of theory is perhaps premature” (186).) He signifies much of his observations with a debatable historical observation: “American Civilization programs… entered the scholarly world as a teaching rather than as a research problem”; (186) nonetheless, the statement raises the interesting question of the intimate relation of American Studies and American pedagogy.


The notion that something exists as distinctly or identifiably “American” prefigures the possibility of American Studies as an academic pursuit, and Kouwenhoven offers a resoundingly positive, 1950’s style exhortation of America’s unique, if not exceptional character. Examining twelve “prime American symbols” (26), ranging from the Manhattan skyline, Jazz, and the Constitution to Mark Twain, Whitman’s Leave’s of Grass, and Soap Operas, he concludes that “America is process” (31). The “underlying structural principles with which we are concerned” exhibit directly or metaphorically that “once momentum is established” (29), it can continue until directed by outside forces, and even then they are more “pauses” than stops – all of which speak to the inherent possibility embodied in a civilization that, like Huck Finn, is “without beginning and without end… [with] little need of a ‘conclusion’” (30) – universally positive and thus without “ultimate climax” (31). “What’s American about America?” serves as an important work in establishing a self-consciousness of purpose, stepping beyond the earlier need for defensiveness in arguing America’s worthiness as a topic for investigation. Additionally, the article
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serves as a cultural artifact itself, speaking to Cold War anxieties while congratulating America’s role as a world leader; it also gives silent testimony to the consensual nature of both popular culture and academic scholarship in the mid 1950’s. Also, it is unique in this selection of articles in that it bridges the academic and public realms, indicating the relative closeness between the two during the upsurge in the popularity of American Studies.


Pearce uses R. W. B. Lewis’ *The American Adam* to review the development of American Studies as a discipline. His piece gives positive reception to Lewis’ work, discussing the factors that make it “a point of culmination” in American Studies scholarship. A primary text in the Myth and Symbol school, the work focuses on the widespread 19th century belief that America was “an authentic Adam – a new man in a new world” (104), and “deals with [the idea’s] expression [rather than philosophy or history]; he treats it critically and dramatically, as a working belief held, imaged, and so explored by Americans of major creative vision” (104). Pearce's review gives a good overview of the major tenets of the Myth and Symbol school, and offers indications as to the goals this new historiographic tradition adds to the study of America (“in which intellectual history becomes not a matter of ideas analyzed but of ideas dramatized, ideas so placed in their own cultural matrix that they are shown to be possible beliefs” (106)).


This article shares the title of Marx’s defining monograph, perhaps the most recognizable work of Myth and Symbol scholarship in American Studies, and introduces many of the themes and methods explored therein. Examining the effects of industrialism on the writers of the first half of the 19th century, Marx identifies “the ways in which a sense of transformation of life by the machine has contributed to the temper of our literature” (27). He dismisses the assumption that “artists respond to history chiefly by making history their manifest subject” (28); through a close examination of Hawthorne’s short story “Ethan Brand” he demonstrates the implicit presence of, and the effect worked by, industrialization. Using classic Myth and Symbol terminology, he extends the representative evidence found in Hawthorne to larger themes in Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville – identifying “the experience of the age,” describing what “took hold of the public imagination,” and exploring the greater connections between literature and culture through the “symbolic tableau [that] recorded the tension between two opposed conceptions of man’s relations with his universe” (29, 30, 31). While dated, this article gives a clear example of the often unrecognized complexity underlying Myth and Symbol scholarship, as well as showing the analytical tension found in the combination of literature and history, ahistorical generalization and cultural transformation.

Henry Nash Smith’s classic article – perhaps the most often cited piece in disciplinary historical, theoretical, and methodological work – poses the perennial question of what defines American Studies as a (methodologically) unique form of inquiry. Offering the definition of American Studies as “‘the study of American culture, past and present, as a whole,’” and “‘culture’” as “‘the way in which subjective experience is organized’” (1), Smith argues for a unique and interdisciplinary approach examining the “ambiguous relation between works of art and the culture in which they occur” (3) rather than the autonomous analysis of New [literary] Criticism and quantified sociological [social scientific] content analysis. The level of thought and the depth of methodological supposition offered by Smith give his article an important role in both the evolution of American Studies as well as continued debate regarding the needs and focus of current Americanist inquiry. As a historical text, the article displays the subtle but underlying belief that literature can “objectify the memories and dreams of its public,” (1) and that “individual instances [can] embody whatever uniformities may exist in a culture, and that a really exhaustive knowledge of the concrete case – a work of art, a specific situation, a career – might well lead to the recognition of aspects of the culture which have previously escaped attention” (12).


While American Studies programs increased in size, number, and popularity in the early 1950’s, the scholarship and teaching done under there heading was not recognized as part of a new or distinct discipline. Pearce, identifying the pedagogical focus of the programs thus far, argues that “[i]f we are to have our discipline of American Studies, research must come first and programs second” (179). He also states that the progress needed from this research comes in “work[ing] toward more specialized principles which will let us view civilizations, our own included, as wholes” (182). In an helpful evaluation of current trends, Pearce characterizes and offers evaluations of the differing, but he argues mutually beneficial, effects of “historical-critical methods” and the “history of ideas” on American Studies work (182-83). The article also gives a critical perspective to the pedagogical framework generating American Studies programs, and in a more general sense, displays somewhat of a contradictory portrayal or the development of the tradition: along with (to a lesser extent) Henry Nash Smith’s article, it paints a picture of scholars not quite sure of their own (larger) motivations and intentions – yet scholars who also represent what has been referred to as the “Golden Age” of American Studies, the only group to work within a unified tradition.

The devastation of World War II, the birth of atomic warfare, and the rise of the Cold War tremendously effected both American culture and the American historical profession during the period of American Studies’ development. Woodward’s article does not relate to American Studies in any direct way, but gives an example of the recognized effects of the current political climate on scholarship, and in doing so stands as an artifact in the cultural history of the American Academy. His account calls, in the most practical sense, for a reinterpretation of history in light of modern understandings of war and military power, but also touches briefly on “the collapse of Western imperialism, the revolt of the colored people of Asia and Africa, the rise of Eastern nationalism, the westward advance of the frontier of Russian hegemony, and the polarization of power between the Russian and American giants” (13). Somewhat dry in its composition, the article nonetheless gives a sobering picture of the profound transformation in geographical, political, social and cultural situations occurring in the second half of this century, including an emerging self-conscious recognition of the need for, and effects of historical reinterpretation and reexamination: “We no longer feel that we stand four square in a continuous tradition, and the view of history we have inherited... seems to have little relevance to our current problems and our current needs” (14).


Spiller offers the first disciplinary history of American Studies, giving a brief review to general intellectual trends that fostered increased inter-disciplinary work in the first half of the nineteenth century. He argues that reaction to New Criticism in Literature coupled with innovations in the field of intellectual history prompted a renewed interest in “the conception of total cultures which had inspired humanistic scholarship from classical times through the Renaissance but which had been lost in the disintegrative tendencies of modern scientific research” (211). The choice of American culture is presented as innocently opportunistic, for “[i]nspite of the difficulties inherent in the problem and the variety among the proposed method for dealing with it [American Civilization], there seemed at last to be recognition that here was a single and legitimate field for scholarly research as well as a convenient pedagogical device for liberal higher education” (211).

Secondly, Spiller summarizes the nature of the articles collected in this volume, offering a contemporary perspective on the receivership of Henry Nash Smith’s “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method,” and giving a characterization of the urge towards unity in scholarship underlying much contemporary work. A presentation of the “classic” view of American Studies’ foundation, this article gives an excellent synthesis of many non-topic specific ideas and theories that were prominent during the
Myth and Symbol years, including descriptions of their ‘usefulness’ as well as criticisms of, and rebuttals, to their dissenters.

**Pearce, Roy Harvey.** “Literature, History, and Humanism.” *College English*, v. 24 [1963]. 364-376

A large aspect of American Studies’ interdisciplinary focus stemmed from broadening interest in the ‘culture concept’ as utilized by social scientist in Anthropology and Sociology and as a reaction to the ahistorical modes of literary analysis in New Criticism. Pearce’s article examines some of fundamental epistemological and hermeneutic questions raised, both implicitly and explicitly, by the ‘American Studies’ approach to literary scholarship: “What does it mean for us, coming at our time in history, at once possessing and possessed by our senses of the past and present, to say that literary works have as a necessary condition of their own intrinsic value the fact that they both implicate and are implicated in the conditions of the time and place in which they were created [?]” (365). Expanding his own ideas on this question, Pearce gives an helpful review of some of the major trends in literary theoretical thought surrounding the emergence of the American Studies tradition, and offers insight into the effects of the “classic” texts [Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*] that informed and continue to guide literary and cultural history.

**Sykes, Richard E.** “American Studies and the Concept of Culture: A Theory and Method.”

*American Quarterly* v. 15 n. 3 [Summer 1963]. 253-270.

Quoting Henry Nash Smith’s conjecture that American Studies will develop a method through the practice of undertaking “‘the effort to view any given subject of investigation from new perspectives,’” Sykes argues that in fact American Studies must present a theoretical and methodological justification beyond “a reaction against the narrow perspectives [of other disciplines]” (252-53). [The spirit evoked by Sykes in his reference and quotation of the Smith article is not entirely representative; reference the Smith citation] Smith suggests “a consistent approach to American studies based on the concept of culture, culture pattern and culture construct pattern,” and attempts to explicate their use in such a way so as to distinguish American Studies as a unique discipline. His article serves as an important example of the theoretical attempts at understanding the use and purpose of American Studies scholarship; his use of “culture” well exhibits the influences of different intellectual trends as they are transformed and adopted for American Studies’ uses, notably structuralism in Anthropology, quantificational methods in Sociology, and the seeds of the “linguistic turn” more generally. Sykes also offers one of the first constructive criticism of the ideological and methodological assumptions underpinning the heretofore heralded Myth and Symbol scholarship, exposing some of the unpalatable consequences imbedded in their approach to American Studies.

Welter begins by surveying recent trends in intellectual historiography, identifying “a distinction between internal [‘the history of ideas’] and external [‘intellectual history’] approaches to ideas: between historical examination of ideas as ideas apart from questions of their social origin or their social influence, and the pursuit of ideas in their relationships to events” (599). Identifying flaws in both approaches, as well as critically evaluating the work of Myth and Symbolists, he argues for the need to “restate our working assumptions in very general terms before we can decide what techniques are appropriate” (note, 610). In order to reconcile the recognized problems in light of these “working assumptions,” Welter offers an “history of intelligences” that “recognize[s] both the pressure of events and the pressure of emotions on the actions of mankind… [in order to understand] the ways in which intellectual habits and intellectual inventions shaped historical developments by setting the terms in which groups or generations of men conducted their lives” (613). The article is distinguished by the depth and comprehensiveness of its argument, addressing the methodological underpinnings of previous American Studies work, and their consequences for future scholarship more squarely and discerningly than, for instance, the more often cited Sykes article. This becomes noticeable [particularly in hindsight] in terms of his conclusion that “the importance of any given idea is a matter for examination in the transactions of its time,” indicating the need “to avoid the fallacy of assuming that when an idea has been traced to its origins it has been understood as an historic phenomenon… [and thus] point[ing] to a single general method for examining any sort of idea in a historic setting” (613-614) – an observation hinting a quasi-diachronic awareness absent in many other methodological tracts.


The ability to employ an abstract type of historical scholarship that offers grounded analysis, including a current methodological critique of one’s discipline, defines Susman’s tour de force article on the variable philosophies of history informing particular segments of America’s past, and their consequences in understanding those segment’s intellectual trends and our histories of them. Susman first establishes a spectrum of historical understanding, with a “mythic” and characteristically “utopian” view on one end, and a more analytical, “ideological,” “historical” view on the other. Using these distinctions, he examines how intellectuals have conceived of the past and its uses in their presents, evaluating how these ideas both effected and were effected by other intellectual and historical factors, and the corresponding recognition / creation of their ‘significance.’ While his article focuses on ‘major / defining intellectual figures,’ it also provides a framework for examining how the larger cultural and social surroundings effected these ‘intellectuals,’ and vice versa. Susman concludes by evaluating the view of the past contemporary to his own writing: “Thus our own age retreats from history or derives what is
often called ‘history’ in its most brilliant mythic or theological forms...Here ideology is specifically rejected. Here we find a history which offers a reinforcement of current moral values and no effective challenge to decision makers within the social order who do most frequently operate in terms of some view of history, some ideology” (36). With such a recognition, a full blown assault on the Myth and Symbol work done within this current view of history seems almost inevitable, and the ushering in of an overtly self-reflexive American Studies a necessity. [Unfortunately, such work will often be removed from the larger qualities of, and signifigances surrounding Susman’s observations…]  

**Skinner, Quentin. “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas.” History and Theory, v. 8 [1969]. 3-53.**

Skinner, in a vein similar to that of Rush Welter in “The History of Ideas in America: An Essay in Redefinition,” characterizes two major trends in the history of ideas: one in which text are treated as ‘autonomous’ and another in which a text’s context is considered to be of critical explanatory significance. Skinner gives extensive treatment to each position, most often in light of political philosophy, and identifies fundamental weaknesses in both which make them unacceptable as methods for the history of ideas. He concludes that it must be the historian’s aim “to recover [the] complex intention on the part of the author… [and] to delineate the whole range of communication which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance of the given utterance, and, next, to trace the relations between given utterances and this wider linguistic context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer” (49). In addition, he refutes the maxim that the history of ideas either pose timeless questions or offer answers to contemporary problems, summarizing, “[m]ost crudely: we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves” (52). Skinner’s work gives insight into the complex philosophical problematics underlying the methodological debate emerging in American Studies, and offers a clear-sighted and well-formulated explanation and argument regarding a possible solution [to a far greater extent, and in a more enduring form, than the previously compared Welter article].

In a generalized account of the method and intent informing his *Machine in the Garden*, Marx attempts to define an “humanistic” method of American Studies in comparison with the more quantitative, scientific operatives of content analysis. While commenting multiple times as to the possibility for “commerce” between the two schools in “collaborative efforts,” his arguments rests most definitely in the opinion of his title; he argues that American Studies can be understood as embracing some sort of an *unmethod*, where a scholar “defines his purpose without reference to any methodological restriction, but rather in relation to a vast, apparently limitless subject matter… to select topics which involve decisive relationships… points of intersection between existential reality, the collective consciousness, and the individual products of mind; [more simply] between historical fact, culture, and particular works” (77-78). Marx’s critique of his own work in the Myth and Symbol tradition enlighten many of the assumptions and ideologies related thereto, yet he also demonstrates the aging inadequacies of the tradition’s epistemological authority: his defense for the use of “high” literature as best defining an age rests in claims that “[a] large part of the meaning [sic] resides in the inherent emotional power of the work;” that “the inherent capacity of a work to generate the emotional and intellectual response of its readers” creates “its capacity to provide a coherent organization of thought and feeling… its compelling truth value” (81; 80, note 9; 89) – statements all made without definitive explanation beyond generalized example. Marx also reveals some of the basic assumptions that seemingly underlay American Studies’ genesis, including the relationships between “high” and “low” art, and there place in “culture,” both past and present (89).


“American Studies, as an intellectual discipline, is in crisis”: the times have been rapidly changing, and American Studies, in its methodology and content, has not (597). Robert Sklar provides a brief overview of the history of American Studies, and argues that the discipline “has defined itself by what it does rather than by what it claims to represent” (597); in other words, by conforming to traditional origins rather than embracing new problems from new perspectives, and thus neglecting the “changing social concerns bring[ing] forth new scholarly interests – Black Studies, the American Indian, the status of women, communal movements, the lives of workers and the poor” (602). In order to address these concerns, to enliven and preserve the discipline, Sklar suggests that “[w]hat is needed is not a belief that one culture exists in America, and one approach will find a complete view of it, but rather a redefinition that a variety of cultures exist in America, each one creating its separate institutions and forms, its alternative vision of reality” (601). Additionally, American Studies must depart from its [retrospectively] myopic focus on “culture,” particularly of the “high” variety, and work towards “a deeper and broader
conception of social structure,” an in turn understandings of “cultural conflict” and “diversified cultural pattern[s]” (601). Another, and perhaps more academically enduring aspect of the crisis stems from a fundamental disciplinary problem of scholarly stasis: “If we define ourselves existentially by what we do rather than by what we say, what is it that we do that the traditional departments now cannot do quite as well” (602)? Yet as with the politics of the late sixties, the trying questions for American Studies were many, and effective, clear-[historically]-sighted responses few.


Many historical generalizations exist regarding the social and political climate of the nineteen thirties in American, often including academic-intellectual characterizations that serve as a “beginning” for analysis of the American Studies tradition – particularly in the form of “what was being reacted against.” Susman offers a critical review of many of these statements, giving particular examples that problematize the popularly accepted views of the period, and thus complicating many works that rely on such an opinion in their arguments. Touching on the “major” themes of progressivism, Communism, the ex-patriot literary tradition, economic depression and the New Deal, mass communication through radio and high circulation photographic print media, etc., as well as many “minor” and often neglected contradictions, Susman argues that an appropriate frame of analysis for the thirties would focus on the developing ideas of “culture” and “commitment.” “First, there was in the discovery of the idea of culture and its wide-scale application a critical tool that could shape a critical ideal, especially as is was directed repeatedly against the failures and meaninglessness of an urban-industrial civilization. Yet often in was developed in such ways as to provide significant devices for conserving much of the existing structure” (235). Commitment, as generalized by Susman, “suggest[s] a basic truth about the decade: the need to feel oneself a part of some larger body, some larger sense of purpose” (246). Yet, “[t]he idea of commitment frequently led, when combined with the idea of culture, not to revolution but to acquiescence” (255). [It is interesting to compare Susman’s treatment of culture as an influential force in the 1930’s to Robert F. Berkhofer Jr.’s “Clio and the Culture Concept: Some Impressions of A Changing Relationship in American Historiography,” noting their treatments of Progressive scholarship’s decline (Susman 231).] In addition to his enlightening historical argument regarding the thirties, Susman’s article also gives an excellent example of integrative scholarship in his use of literary, historical, popular, intellectual, and philosophical evidence – and the references within his article also shed light on the changing project of American Studies at the dynamic juncture of the 1960’s and 70’s.
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Focussing the arguments of Quentin Skinner’s “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” to the classic works of the Myth and Symbol school of American Studies, Kuklick offers a philosophical criticism exposing many logical and empirical inconsistencies that render the tradition’s work “suspect.” Many of the particular problems, Kuklick argues, stem from a “crude Cartesian” dualism that ends in a circular logic of “myth” and “symbols” self-verification and self-signification: “Facts and images both become states of consciousness… [yet] they have no immediate way of determining which states of consciousness are ‘imaginative,’ or ‘fantastic’ or ‘distorted’ or even ‘value laden’ for there is no standard to which the varying states of consciousness may be referred” (74). In the later portion of his essay, he gives a focussed criticism of Leo Marx’s “American Studies: Defense of an Unscientific Method,” identifying Marx’s terms of defense as further extensions of unsubstantiated claims regarding the ability to define a literary work’s “inherent” value as well as to identify a periods “consciousness” as universally evident in all its people(s). Although some of Kuklick’s presentations of Myth and Symbol scholarship to not clearly represent the whole of the movement’s specific aims or larger disciplinary-historical consequence [I would argue he misrepresents even the brief explanation’s given in the paragraph at the top of [Madox] p. 72], he nonetheless identifies important flaws in the tradition, giving the (American Studies) canonical explication of them.


Mechling, Merideth, and Wilson, all member of the UC Davis American Studies faculty, offer their appraisal of the current state of the discipline in a three part article, arguing in the first section for the establishment of “the culture concept [as] the center of an American Studies disciplinary matrix” (368), and addresses the nature of American Studies’ curriculums and resources generally, and the program at Davis specifically, in the second and last sections. Their formulations of culture as a key concept in American Studies serves as an useful indicator for the direction of the discipline in the early 1970’s, and stands as an important [frequently referenced as “brilliant,” the *AQ* article of the year] description and justification for culture studies with regards to the larger academic discourse on the subject. Their discussion of curriculum, while laboriously detailed at times, gives insight into the meaning and intent of American Studies, and raises and re-asks many of the pedagogical questions that were first posed by the originators of the tradition.

Spiller’s brief article gives an important evaluation of the traditions informing American Studies, past and present, and for the first time specifically articulates an observation of direct consequence for all methodological and disciplinary historical explication: “[that] in order to understand and evaluate [‘the history of the American Studies movement in the United States’], we must see it in relationship to the awakening of a self-conscious cultural nationalism which had roots in the early years of this century” (611). He suggests that the origins of American Studies, in both the “synthetic” and “holistic” approaches, can be regarded as answering a question arising around the time of World War I, c. 1915-1925: “Has the time come when the people of the United States can accept as a fact the maturity of a total and autonomous American culture, distinct, as Greek or Germanic culture might be thought distinct, from the cultures of other peoples in other parts of the world, and suitable for higher study and research in its own terms” (611-12)? And although the nationalistic fervor was positive, Spiller notes that the movement towards American Studies was itself “negative,” “a revolt against the way [academic] things were rather than a positive movement for reform” (612).

Spiller laboriously formulates and then ‘traces’ two general trends in the history of the discipline the “synthetic” tradition that studies America through compilations of existing discipline’s methods, and the “holistic” that “attempts to define a method of dealing with this culture which is distinguishable from the methods of other humanistic and scientific disciplines” (617). Spiller also offers something of an apologetic explanation for American Studies’ adoption of the culture concept, which was inextricably entangled with many nationalistic ideologies. Yet, his explanation is actually a contradiction: he first states, “[these] qualifications of the concept of total culture do not invalidate it where the gestalt is clearly enough defined to overcome the problems of inner diversity and conflict” (613), and then later argues that the holistic approach to American Studies itself “leads in a way toward a satisfactory gestalt for the definition of any culture, and can therefore be applied to a new field of American culture with a degree of integration unattainable by the synthetic approach” (617); in other words, the concept of total culture is as much a product of the social forces impelling its study as the methods contrived for ‘recognizing’ it – a point that remains unchallenged. Regardless, this brief article represents a complex artifact in the history of American Studies, with regards to how and what it both says and doesn’t say. [I think the use of the term “diversity” presents enough irony in and of itself to make the article worth while.]


The criticism of American Studies’ Myth and Symbol tradition classically focuses on “the tendency of post-war historians to play down or avoid conspicuous moral partisanship in recounting the ideas and actions of past Americans and therefore seemingly to accept the outcomes of past struggles, regardless of who won, as all for the best” (76). While admitting that post-war ideologies helped
construct the “consensus” based historiography of the period, Berkhofer argues that of much greater significance are the intellectual and methodological influences effected upon history by other disciplines through the concept of culture. In turn, he analyses the origins of the culture concept and its migration to the historical profession, offering well-constructed explanations and apt criticisms of the concepts failings, historians’ and Americanists’ misapplications and misuses, and some of the fundamental contradictions raised by various theories. While his premise for excluding the influence of political events is logically flawed [even if the concept of culture effectively generated consensus scholarship, it remains to be explained why such methodologies were adapted, became so popular and remained unchallenged for so long], his anti-reactionary treatment of the movement lends itself to a more detailed and specific analysis of both Myth and Symbol scholarship’s, and “culture’s” failings, as well as showing often neglected links between, and similarities to, the Progressive historical scholarship that proceeded the American Studies movement.


The non-exclusive study of literature and history formed the earliest corpus of American Studies scholarship, yet the often problematic relationships between the two, particularly their respective theoretical frameworks, were left mostly unexplored. Kelly takes this problem to task, exposing the weaknesses of previous scholarship, specifically New Criticism in literature and the Myth and Symbol tradition in history. Using anthropological notions of culture as defined by Geertz, and theories in the sociological construction of knowledge and reality, he argues that “the presumed autonomy of literary works [makes] the study of literature appear to be free from political and ideological influences,” and thus presents falsely objective reasoning as to a works significance for historical study. Additionally, through logical regression, the autonomy of literature contradicts the claim that it somehow embodies an historical “mind” or “consciousness,” as the previous claim gave significance to the work because of significance as an absolute aesthetic accomplishment. With regards to the placement of literature in culture and the use of literature as cultural exemplar, “[i]t seems a better tactic,” Kelly argues, “to begin with a concept of culture, one that promises to contribute to the historians task… rather than to begin with a commitment to great literature, and then to explore the implications of the concept for the use of literary documents as historical evidence. [Anthropological and sociological definitions] of culture… undermines any easy assumption that great literature, as it is usually defined, necessarily constitutes a superior source of historical knowledge” (96). In an example of the potential embodied in using this method, Kelly examines the role of late 19th century children’s literature in reinforcing the social and cultural expectations for behavior, and by extension connecting those values to the contemporary historical situation. Many of the ideas and basic questions posed by Kelly identify perennial problems in American studies, notably the use of theories of culture, the resolution of literary theoretical and historical
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explanation, and synchronic and diachronic forms of analysis. Further, while many of his arguments and ideas may seem common-sensical to the present-day reader [a comment on the standing quality of his scholarship], his insight and method were pioneering and innovative in relation to contemporary scholarship, offering a clear-sighted contribution to a stagnant and suffering American Studies


Arguing that “the ad hoc use of different disciplines has led American Studies to the point of incoherence” (202), Bailis attempts to establish the basic premises underlying all social scientific disciplines. With an “integrative conception” properly focused through holistic model that “refer[s] to the processes and relationships that obtain for every level, aspect, dimension and function of human adaptive behavior” (212), scholars will be able to develop a “metalanguage, a single language designed specifically to facilitate speaking” about the various concepts important to the social sciences (207). Bailis explains three models [diagrams included] that work towards satisfying his criteria, concluding that “the interactive model brings the previous two [models] to a focus on the continuous links between socialization and social participation, the large process though which persons are shaped to the needs of society and society is used for the needs of persons” (220).

Influential at the time of its publication, Bailis’ article characterizes an aspect of the integrative trend (reaction?) in mid-seventies American Studies scholarship, which, with the distance afforded by hindsight, seems well intentioned at best but fundamentally misguided at worst. The generalizations extend ad nauseum so that [positively remarked]: “It does not matter what kinds of people are involved nor whether they are being regarded individually or as aggregates. Nor does it matter whether the interactions under study are political, familial, academic, occupational, therapeutic, past or present, contiguous or remote, peaceful or hostile, cooperative or competitive, generous or selfish. Nor, finally does it matter whether the valued items to be exchanged are material or spiritual, aesthetic or intellectual, public or private, real or imagined” (212). One can only wonder what is left besides the model, and if the explanations it generates are free of those above mentioned ‘problems,’ or if somehow datum fall back into those slots after spewing out the other end; the article represents a classic example of an American Studies scholar attempting to make up a methodology by turning a something-that-is into a nothing-that-doesn’t.


Sklar’s article gives a brief overview of American Studies’ disciplinary history, with the purpose of informing his larger task of reviewing the current state of “The Philosophy of American Studies.” This includes a balanced and critical portrait of the varying trends in the studies of popular culture, minorities, women, folk traditions, oral history, and the use of intellectual history, quantification, literary criticism, and theories of culture deviating from “traditional Arnoldian definitions” (252). Sklar argues
that “[w]hile some may be content with the present state of theoretical and ‘philosophical’ vacuity,” or that “an anti-philosophy of ‘hanging loose’ best represents their ethos and tactics,” “it should be remembered that the absence of theoretical rigor, no less than its practice, has consequences” (258; 255; 258). This seemingly innocuous “bibliography” offers a clear-sighted examination of American Studies in the mid-seventies, highlights many of its positive steps, critically examines current scholarship while inelegantly treating its myth and symbol forebears, and gives well-heeded [noticed from hindsight] advice for philosophical and theoretical sources.


Jay Mechling calls Wise’s article “quietly radical” in his commentary in the Maddox volume, and his observation well characterizes “Paradigm Dramas’” double edged significance for American Studies. Recounting four “acts” in the “drama” of American studies, Wise presents “a different mode of explanation” for disciplinary history, citing “representative” movements that explain the “inherent possibilities in a cultural situation… [movements] which spotlight changing boundaries of what is possible for a person or group at a particular time and in a particular place and in a particular milieu” (169). In doing so, Wise hopes to present a history of American Studies that can constructively inform current members of the tradition with an understanding of the social and cultural forces acting upon the originators of their tradition, so as to perform a self-reflexive cultural criticism asking: “‘What imperatives are there in the larger American culture and social structure, and in the culture and social structure of academe, which have made possible the quest for an integrating “American Studies”’? and ‘How have these imperatives changed over time’” (167-68)?

Through these questions, Wise gives an eloquent articulation to many of the challenges facing American Studies since the demise of the “Golden Age” of Myth and Symbol unity, and gives an history-as-answer that contains as much of an argument for where the discipline should be headed as it does an account of how and why the discipline came to be. As an article that defies simple characterization, “Paradigm Dramas” can be read as a history itself, a methodological tract, or an historical artifact in American Studies – but its significance comes from anticipating all of these readings, and creating an argument that speaks fluently and continuously between them, in a conversation that only becomes more intense with increased knowledge of each. This is most definitely not to claim that the article is unbiased or presents some remarkable truisms: one might find enlightenment in pairing it with Warren Susman’s “History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past.”


Increased social awareness in Academia, generated by the political and cultural transformation of the 1960’s and 70’s, led to large numbers of specialized programs focussing on women and minorities, the economically disadvantaged, etc. The shock to American Studies came in the relative autonomy of these programs with regards to its established Myth and Symbol tradition, and the idea of studying American culture “as a whole,” Wise comments in this article: “The field has virtually no principle of exclusion anymore; anything labeled ‘American’ may be seen as ‘American Studies’” (519).

Commenting on this phenomenon of specialization, Wise argues that many individual scholars, as well as disciplines, continue to participate in academic endeavors unaware of their retention of previous “contribution to knowledge models”; further, the problem is compounded by a non-reflexive cycle of disciplinary justification and divisions of labor perpetuated by “information overload.” In an attempt to answer the question “Where does American Studies begin,” Wise presents 10 axioms for the discipline, in an attempt “not to suggest a totally new departure for culture studies,” but rather to give “visibility, pattern, and cumulative development” to existing ideas “by bringing them together into a single cluster… [to] offer us a fresh way to think about our activities” (529). Four of these axioms focus on culture, four on methodology, and two represent “strategies of scholarship” (539); together they argue for a self-recognized approach to American Studies by “thinking about what we are doing, in more or less
systematic fashion” (543). Overall, it is an attempt to invigorate a scholarly community with aspirations of individually creative and exploratory techniques, which would come together as a re-assembled, post-fragmented tradition.

In this magisterially conceived and cogently argued essay, Lenz gives critical review to the numerous debates surrounding “method,” “theory,” and “philosophy” in American Studies. Through an examination of the supposedly historically-aware discourse informing the re-evaluative “crisis” in American Studies, including representative monographic evidence, he develops a critique of the tradition genuinely informed by “the recent discussion on knowledge and interest, hermeneutics, and criticism of ideology in the social sciences and humanities” (61). He is careful to note that “we must not forget that these philosophical debates have a ‘transcendental’ status: They try to define the inherent potential and limitations of the humanities and the social sciences, but they do not offer a ‘theory’ or ‘philosophy’ of individual disciplines or scholarly programs like American Studies” (61-62). Rather, “a theoretical exposition of American Studies will have to incorporate somehow its historical reconstruction,” (64), but in a well-informed manner not represented by previous generalizing, homogenizing sketches that “[do] not do justice to the complexity and contradictory evolution within the disciplines themselves” (65). Lenz feels that the basis for this “historical reconstruction” can come from a more constructive understanding of the Myth and Symbol school, which truly represented an unique and identifiable theory – however ‘flawed’ it might have been; a dismissive understanding, “a more or less superficial synthesis,” (68) drawn from simply reading introductions and ‘methodological’ articles will not suffice. He also includes the lucid recognition that almost every attempt at reformation, by starting with an uninformed condemnation of the Myth and Symbol tradition, unknowingly adopts many aspects of its underlying epistemology, or versions “turned upside down or replaced by its opposite” (69) – but nonetheless inextricably defined by that tradition. Thus, the theories are misunderstood even by their originators. Within this extensive analysis, the article examines trends such as interdisciplinary approaches, and the specialized studies of minorities, women, subcultures, etc. Additionally, the current attempts understanding an uniquely American Studies hermeneutic receive extensive treatment.

The intelligence of this article should place it at the top of one’s reading list for understanding the American Studies tradition and recognizing the nature and significance of its methodological commitments. Ideally, a knowledge of texts treated by Lenz would accompany the article’s review; his extensive and excellent notes provide a comprehensive prescription. Regretfully absent from the article are treatments of the material focussed upon by the Myth and Symbol school and its possible consequence upon their method, as well as the disciplinary-historical importance of pedagogy and education. While the dense prose characteristic of an author of German linguistic extraction makes the article challenging, it is nonetheless worthy of a careful and detailed reading - one that will be duly rewarded.

The dynamic and often-times radical questioning of basic social, culture, political, and economic normalcies in the 1960’s and 70’s produced a parallel, if slightly delayed, reaction in American Studies scholarship. Cohen and Ratner use the changes in the concept of culture to frame their introduction to a new cultural-historical collection of essay; they note that the idea of culture “differs more than generally is realized from what is usually considered the original anthropological definition [of Tylor],” so as to now “increasingly regard culture as an abstraction defying exact definition, a largely un-verbalized and implicit pattern used by individuals who must synchronize their behavior despite their disparate point of view… a system that makes possible to a high degree of both uniformity and diversity among individuals in a society” (4). Their essay offers a brief survey of the idea of culture informing early 1980’s scholarship, and gives insight into adaptation made in reaction to the 60’s and 70’s. The essays in the volume, “explore periods during which important aspects of American culture became significant – or at least obvious – concentrating usually on the groups most involved in these changes,” and offers a diverse treatment of American history using the editors idea of culture and history.


Wise comments that tremendous expansion of Academia, particularly American Studies programs, has led to distinctly different relationships between the younger and older generations of scholars compared to that which existed at the foundation of the tradition. Today’s young Americanists “were not actually taught by the scholars they discuss; they are connected not personally but through the medium of the published word” (2). Wise expands on this difference, and using his analysis to introduce the proceeding essays, pays tribute to the uniquely American Studies tradition and its accomplishments. Specifically, Wise comments on the need to examine the Myth and Symbol school from a post-reactionary perspective, drawing from their work in order to understand the current state of the discipline, particularly the nature of theory imported from other fields and its current application: “because so many competing cultural theories (from the social sciences as well as the humanities) are available to us now, it is necessary to do considerable reflexive work in culture theory in advance of, beside, above, underneath, and behind research in one’s primary cultural materials” (6). Further, he gives light to the internal transition taking place among
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The justification for American Studies, beyond the debate of there being something identifiably “American” that can be considered worthy of study, stands in the notion that the discipline represents a *unique and profitably distinctive* analytical lens, an angle of vision not found in any other field or combinations thereof. Without explicitly acknowledging the this, Mechling attempts to offer a synthetic resolution of some competing responses in a way that provides and even more powerful justification. In doing so, he borrows from the wide ranging scholarship of Gregory Bateson, identifying his recognition of “the birth of cybernetics and communication sciences [as] the greatest revolution in Western epistemology since Plato” (15). Using Bateson’s vastly inter-disciplinary work (from Anthropology to Marine Biology to Psychology with many stops in-between) as a model of thought representing the power of the new epistemology as meta-interdisciplinary extreme, Mechling argues that “the same revolution occurred with the creation of interdisciplinary American Studies… *The subject matter of American Studies is not object and not events but relationships*” (16). He concludes that “[s]cholars and teachers in American Studies need to know that the semiotic revolution is theirs. A science of signs breathes new life into myth-symbol-image interests of the old American Studies but in a way compatible with the interest and requirements of the social sciences” (24). Further, Mechling offers predictions of a new Wise-type paradigm that will focus on “the materialism-idealism debate, the meiotic revolution, the sociobiology debate, comparative culture studies, and the application of American Studies research to public policy” (22-23). His argument has irreconcilable problems in its essence and in its form, yet the number of fundamental question raised by this brief article merits close attention and contemplation; it just seems that Mechling wasn’t aware of [or irresponsibly avoided] the majority of them.


Of the seemingly endless mantra of theoretical cultural scholarship, none has been as constructively engaged and universally influential as that of Clifford Geertz. In her summary aimed at the ‘needs’ of American Studies, Lystra identifies and explicates the tenets of Geertz theoretic framework, primarily drawing from his *Interpretation of Cultures*. Her article is a combination of explanation and respectful homage, and while she gives several pointed criticisms of Geertz’s work, they stand regretfully underdeveloped in light of her evidently wide-ranging knowledge of his theories. In general, the article gives a good representation of
how and why Geertz’s theories are so attractive to American Studies, and highlights their potentials for success as well as certain potential pitfalls.


Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman’s *The Social Construction of Reality* had a major influence upon American Studies scholarship from its publication, and Kelly offers a commentary on the nature of their arguments and the potential for future theoretical and methodological scholarship still embodied by them. Kelly’s summary is brief, although he gives well-informed insight into the SCR’s influence upon scholarship, paying close attention to its areas of weakness and offering descriptions of otherwise implicit arguments. He generally concluding that “[a]lthough Berger and Luckmann nowhere say it so baldly, their argument appears to lead ineluctably to this conclusion: If reality is socially constructed, men can restructure it – on the basis of an understanding of the process in and through which the reality of everyday life is maintained” (53). From this, Kelly points to admittedly personal reasons as to why SCR’s arguments were and remain so popular. He argues that “it is the theoretical position they espouse… an ‘emerging sensibility that… is leading to a restructuring of social and political theory,’ it is the insight that human worlds are essentially webs of significance, structure of meaning imposed on the bloom and buzz of experience” (55).


After the Great Depression, World War II is perhaps the single largest “event” surrounding the early development of American Studies, and according to Gleason, it, “as an episode in the national experience,” presents a “a prima facie case for assuming that it had some impact on the efforts to understand and interpret American life and culture” (344). Working from this assumption, Gleason looks for scholarship that “powerfully reinforced existing tendencies toward cultural nationalism, gave great prominence to the ideological dimensions of American identity, and forged a link between the democratic ideology and the idea of culture that became central to the American Studies approach” (344). In doing so, he touches upon scholarly work reacting to totalitarianism and Nazism through defenses of freedom and liberty, the rise in popular political tracts regarding American exceptionalism and the responsibility of a democratic power, and combined with the concept of culture, the ways in which people came to understand the origins and promulgation of “civilizations” and “ways of life” [particularly those of the democratic American variety through ethnographic observation]. While Gleason’s article does not explore any one topic with depth or precision, the breadth of his survey, and its sensitivity to otherwise innocuous points, gives merit to his conclusion that “Word War II exerted a profound though sometimes
unrecognized influence on [American Scholar’s] work by giving new visibility and respectability to
national character studies, and even more decisively by causing American scholars to appreciate more
deeply the positive values embodied in the nation’s social, political, and cultural traditions” (358).

Trachtenberg, Alan. “American Studies as a Cultural Program.” *Ideology and Classic American
172-187.

The “culture concept” has been identified as not only a critical force in both the formation and
continuation of American Studies, but also as an idea to which many of the earliest ideological stances of
American Studies can be attributed. The development of the culture concept in a larger intellectual and
social historical context, however, was largely neglected, and Tranchtenberg takes the problem to task. He
begins with the “remarkable coincidence of voices” in the earliest years of “culture”: statements by Walt
Whitman, Mathew Arnold, and Edward Tylor. By closely examining the relationships and differences of
these writers, particularly Whitman and Arnold – in places that would otherwise seem inconsequential –
he formulates the general argument that “following from the uneasy and frequently unacknowledged
relations between the politically charged [Arnold and Whitman] and the apparently neutral or merely
heuristic[Tylor] uses of the term ” (176), ideas of nationalism, political economy, and ideological
philosophies of history remain as unrecognized inhabitants in current theoretical basis for “culture
studies.” Within this discussion, Trachtenberg highlights the differing conceptualizations of conflict and
change in competing ideas of culture – a traditionally synchronic idea that relieved its need for diachronic
on “society” or the “social.” In doing so, he recognizes the effects of diverse and varied intellectual
traditions upon American Studies, notably Anglican traditionalism, German Romanticism, and French
Enlightenment rationalism. The detail of thought, and the intelligent treatment of the values enladened
both implicitly and explicitly in the concept of culture during its origin make this a critical article in the
theoretical as well as disciplinary-historical conception of American Studies.


Using the primarily anthropological theories of boundaries, marginality, centers and peripheries,
the sacred and profane, purity and danger, and inversion and liminality, Cowan gives a perspectival,
current “state of the discipline” address as an introduction to the then cliché historical argument that “the
growing influence of the rhetoric of cultural pluralism in recent years reflects the continuing power of the
notion of boundary in the application of the center-boundary discourse in the nation’s internal affairs…
[and] as the complex product of this society… American Studies too, has been deeply effected by the
dominant boundary-center discourse and by the cultural and ideological assumption that underlie it” (3-4).
Addressing four perennial questions in the history of American Studies – subject matter, theories and
methods, canonical or representative texts, and the scholarly distinction of practitioner – Cowan does
raise some very interesting issues regarding the development of the discipline in terms of its relation to,
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and differentiation from other traditions, and American Studies’ often paradoxical drive for a distinctive, romantic production of an Americanly self-reliant scholarship. A focal aspect of this argument is drawn from a critical and elucidating review of Gene Wise’s “Paradigm Drama’s,” and the nature of his rhetorical strategies in his complex (and unrevealed) self-embodiment of the tradition (and paradoxes) he was attempting to show historically evident in the. He comes very close to, but unfortunately neglects the depth of, American Studies academic relationship to American culture – production, selection, and manipulation vs. observation, analysis, and documentation. He also entirely avoids the specific ramifications of American Studies’ pedagogical focus as an almost omnipresent operative force. Nevertheless, his article sheds interesting light on the romantic and often contradictory generation of the American Studies tradition, and his lucidly written piece offers an argumentative disciplinary-historical review.


“One reason for the precarious relationship between ‘history’ and ‘theory’ in American Studies today,” argues Lenz, is “[t]he confusion about the origin, the objectives, the political implications, and the ‘legacy’ of the early period of American Studies, from the 1930’s to the 1960s, and the development and changes in literary and cultural criticism and in historiography during these decades” (21). He characterizes this period in terms of a “radical tradition” developed primarily by F. O. Matthiessen in a theory of “the complex interrelationship among social structure, culture and consciousness [that] necessarily contains a dialectic of the affirmation of the potential and of the criticism of the failure in American history and raises the very question of the possibility of fundamental change” (28). It is Lenz’s contention, as elucidated in a revealing history of Matthiessen’s life and scholarship, that the social, political, and academic climate compounded a general scholarly misunderstanding and lack of appreciation for the complexity of this theoretical framework, resulting in a quasi-denial of mis-recognized intentions in the tradition of American Studies. In his argument, the work of Caroline Ware also presents an example of this posthumously bastardized tradition – that only had its most profitable remnants come to fruition in the Myth and Symbol scholarship of Leo Marx – work also dismissed through reactionary misunderstanding. Lenz’s argument develops a complex, if at some points unanchored, representation of the American Studies hermeneutic, though he explains and traces many of the trends contemporary to his article through a tradition that would otherwise be dismissed as antithetical to their own germination – a demonstration of the consequences embodied in the discipline’s non-historical awareness as presented in his earlier article, “Beyond Crisis.”


The 1988 American Studies Association conference was titled, “The Intersection of Race, Class, Gender, and Ethnicity in the Study of American Culture,” and this piece was offered by Kerber as her
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Presidential address, the keynote speech. She composes an historical overview of the discipline through a retrospective awareness of her place as a young, female scholar in the 1950’s. While contending that there have been many misdirected and irresponsible movements within the American Studies tradition, Kerber argues that American Studies has generally been open minded with regards to diversity, and readily hospitable to cultural challenges to the established order. Her brief synopsis of the discipline’s many strong points, tempered with the awareness of their failures, strives to project an hopeful historical perspective that will motivate future scholars and invigorate commitments to diversity, rather than forcing them to wallow in an abyss of unforgivable historical misdeeds. Her argument is particularly interesting, especially given extreme criticisms of American Studies and the Academy in general with relation to issues of diversity, and her rather cursory engagement of those complex and serious allegations.


A fundamental question in the origin of American Studies came in the relationship of literature and history: the context that history provided for literature, and the explanation of history embodied in literature. Berkhofer argues that the problem of context remains the primary “problematic” of American Studies, although the question has been altered in an absolute way by the jarring arrival of postmodernism and the linguistic turn. He identifies two principle opinions informed by the new theorizing; first, a “textualist” approach that can be separated into two identifiable ideas, labeled context₁ and context₂ but both based primarily in a linguistic approach, and second, context₃, a “properly contextualist” approach that’s “fundamental premise… rests upon a form of realism that posits the conceptually coercive structure of the extratextualized world” (288-89). Berkhofer expands upon the epistemological foundations for both of these ideas, exploring what he feels is the irreconcilable contradiction between the two, and their problematic implications for both past scholarship, and the future of academic endeavors – problems he would seem to argue are mis- or under-recognized, resulting in often confused or illogically conceived arguments. While much of his argument does expose and explore new problematics for American Studies, and in the words of the article’s commentator, “acknowledge[s] that there is no longer an a priori context that establishes the boundaries and legitimates the interpretations of the textual analyses and historiographical arguments produced within the new American studies” (309), the arduous task of trudging through his awkwardly constructed prose leaves one more mystified by this article than the most extreme ‘post-ism.’ Further, his reliance upon once removed treatments of ‘postmodernism’ s’ primary theorists and philosophers makes his questioning conclusion all the most suspect in its relevance to the related scholarly discourse.

“A specter is haunting American Studies, the specter of European cultural theory,” and “[a]t one extreme, [scholars] have seen a resistance to theory, an anti-intellectual dismissal of new methods and approaches (especially of deconstruction and post structuralism). At the other extreme, they have seen the reification of theory into a ‘magic bullet’” (311, 315-316). With a brief description of the diverse range of new social, cultural, linguistic, historical, and literary theory and philosophy [anthropology is noticeably absent], Lipsitz argue that American Studies scholars need to focus on the diverse resources of American popular culture, as a field for productive application of new theories, as well as for understandings of why such theory has been so readily accepted by many Americanists. He argues that American Studies was more engaged with popular culture and the social and political concerns at its inception, and that however negative some of these connections may be in hindsight, they represent an important aspect of the sensitivity and innovation that drives the best work in the discipline. According to Kaplan, a connection to pop culture “innovatively turns the hierarchy of theory and practice on its head, ultimately to dismantle the dichotomy between them” (332). His intellectual critique of the development of the discipline presents some interesting ideas regarding the expectations embodied in the questions asked by scholars in different periods – particularly the Myth and Symbolists – although the method of his analysis deserves critical scrutiny at certain junctures: “American Studies itself anticipated” many theoretical innovations, and certain ideas, “had they been fully understood,” would have helped the discipline remain more radical in its work (317, 320). Embracing the need for healthy theoretical debate, and the critical evaluation of “European cultural theory,” Lipsitz concludes that in accordance with the best moments of American Studies, which occurred during periods of heightened social awareness, scholars must realize that the Toni Morison-esque “sounds capable of ‘breaking the back of words’… cannot be summoned up by theoretical expertise alone. They cannot be constructed out of idealized subject positions emanating from reforms in discursive practices. They are to be found within the concrete contests of everyday life” (328). His extensive critique of the trials and tribulations of the humanities and social sciences in higher education also stand as an interesting artifact for disciplinary-historical understanding.
Accused of Idiocy, Defended with Density: Maddox’s Neglected “Evolution.”


In this rhetorically amusing and pejorative argued essay, Watts critically examines the tenants and application of postmodern theory and philosophy, particularly that embodied by the “linguistic left.” In his “contentious piece of social criticism” that “is bound to be misinterpreted” (627), he reviews the application of popular cultural theory in a selection of recent scholarship, exposing how their “method seem[s] to defeat [their] intention” by presenting a mantra of jargon heavy, content light analysis (636). More important than the specific deficiencies caused by such an approach, Watts contends, is the hypocritical political agenda which the “pure” theory presents, and its delusive regard for social and political realities. Rather than motivating a revolutionary restructuring of the “bourgeois,” “male WASP” power structure, he finds the “bargain-basement ‘promise of multiple meanings’” as symptomatic of the “therapeutic dimension of poststructuralist radicalism;” he argues that their “capacity for choice is so superficial and personalized as to be nearly meaningless in terms of larger public commitment” (655).

While the polemical tone of Watts argument distracts from some of the more serious points he attempts to make, the essay nonetheless communicates an extremely informed picture of recent trends in some American Studies scholarship: that the over-reliance on misunderstood theory, with authors often conjoining explicitly contradictory frameworks, has placed otherwise original ideas into a homogenate of untethered abstractions. Further, by exploring the often neglected ramifications of post-modernism’s epistemology, Watts reveals specific problems in its interpretive paradigm, and offers helpful and clear-sighted direction for future theoretical, methodological, and empirical research. His profoundly clear-sighted exposition of postmodernism’s often contradictory engagement gives a clear example of Clifford Geertz’s parallel maxim regarding the crisis of objectivity: just because absolute sterility is impossible, it doesn’t mean you want to have surgery in the gutter.


The scathing language of Steven Watt’s article presents challenges to so many scholars on so many fronts, that critical reply necessarily becomes part of its significance. Shank’s response takes the stance that Watt’s argument is a “territorial defense” for those against the use of literary theory in reconciling the dualism between history and literature neglected by Myth and Symbolists, as exposed by Bruce Kuklick in 1972. Shank’s defense is correct in pointing to the inappropriately stereotyped characterization of a tremendous body
of complex scholarship invoked and then dismissed by Watts, but he errs to the point of density on certain fundamental points. First, he seems to miss the implications of a “social criticism,” misunderstanding [what I assume to be Watt’s own awareness of] the irony presented by the complex, apostrophized, satiric, and often metaphoric use of language. Second, he is simply wrong in saying that “it does not present a serious new perspective on the very real issues that arise when the practice of history confront the epistemological conundrum of literary theory” (439); the article does, and does so in a way that integrates enough “controversial” history surrounding that debate’s inception so as to evidently loose Shank in his reading. Finally, Shank’s complaint that Watt’s does not appreciate the American Studies debate regarding theory and method by neglecting the important “progress” (446) and “interpretive developments” (447) made therein simply affirms the point that the majority of the discourse on discourses exists out side of reality that necessitated its social criticism.


Steven Watt’s article relied heavily on the rhetorical strategy of containing the opposed within a stereotyped, condensed framework so as to make criticism easier and more immediately apparent – a maneuver that served him well in some regards, but left him open to valid criticism regarding his non-recognition of aspect of linguistic criticism that are actually helpful in resolving some of the problems he presents. Isenberg’s criticism engages Watt’s argument by making the point “that discourse theory does not necessarily lead to a reification of language,” and that while there are many problems with current theories and their uses, the debates surrounding them produces helpful intellectual stimulation for the critical examination of scholarly work as well as that work’s larger social context [she speaks extensively on feminism]. Her constructively reasoned explication of the tenets of various “post-ism” philosophies neglected by Watts well defends her position regarding their relevance; the only failing of her argument is a pejorative jab regarding latent racism and sexism implicated by Watt’s use of the term idiocy – although the style seems defendable in light of Watt’s own verbiage.


Noting the large influence that Anthropology had on American Studies’ original adoption of the concept of culture, Lenz offers an extensive review of recent trends in postmodern anthropology and their usefulness for American cultural scholars. Given anthropologists ethnographic attempt at “representing” a “reality,” Lenz argues that their strategies for addressing the “implications and consequences of
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postmodern[ism]” serve as a valuable resource for those attempting to document anything in writing.

Another theoretical task undertaken by anthropologists has been their integration of historical data, whether it be that presented in subjects’ personal narratives, traditions, and cultural / ritualistic ‘symbols,’ or in Anthropology’s disciplinary-historical legacy of colonialism, post-colonialism, and even a particular author’s experiences and motivations. While feminist anthropology has often dissented from postmodern anthropology, Lenz contends that their ideas are useful but should still be treated within a more comprehensive examination and exploration of the latter. Generally, he argues that “the new understanding of ‘culture’ in postmodern anthropology can help us reformulate the old critical problem of ‘text’ and ‘contextualization’ and suggest ways in American Culture Studies to grasp and conceptualize the heterogeneity, the multiplicity, and the dynamic of ‘American culture’ beyond a pure pluralism, without falling for temptations of a new ‘synthesis’ or moving ‘beyond’ ethnicity” (22). As an example, he examines a selection of texts written from divergent perspectives but all generally dealing with ‘African-American culture,’ demonstrating how the ethnographic lens helps provide a comprehensive way to examine multiple types of work, including but also transcending each works ‘conventional’ set of explanatory theory, be it linguistic, literary, historical, political, geographic, etc. One should “not set[ting] out to ‘blur genres’ in the sense of overcoming differences and achieving a perspective that unifies literary and cultural criticism and anthropology, but [rather one that] explores and sustains their confrontation, interactions, and difference in common projects of cultural critique” (34).


The rise of American Studies during the beginning of the Cold War has led many scholars to note “how the general ‘climate of opinion’ influences the appearance of new educational ideas and procedures,” but their conclusions “seem to be written on a rather high level of generalization” (42). By studying a series of documents from the Yale archives, Diamond proposes to offer specific examples that “would enable us to get at least a little closer to understanding the process by which an idea became an action” (42); in this case, how the conservative opinion of prospective donors influenced college officials in the development of the American Studies program and formulation of ideas of academic freedom more generally. The specific cases reviewed by Diamond show how Presidents of Yale and members of the faculty actively attempted to accommodate and capitalize upon the ideological positions of their donors. In the case of one donor, it involved reassuring him of the colleges commitment to this donor’s stated goal for the new and expanded American Studies program: “A program based on the conviction that the best safe-guards against the totalitarian developments in our economy are an understanding of our cultural heritage and an affirmative belief in the validity of our institutions of free enterprise and individual liberty” (47). Diamond argues that these “episodes are suggestive,” and “they show that, in the search for money, principles can be sold” – and that the origins of American Studies were directly implicated with such “principles” (54).

With a commentary by Cathy Davidson, 349-352.

The debate over multiculturalism – from public school classrooms to higher education to government supported arts programs – has inescapable resonance for American Studies: the notion of American culture, whether it be a unity of ideals or a heritage of conflict and turmoil, is the discipline’s raison d’être. In her 1992 presidential address, Kessler-Harris examines the debate surrounding the issues and controversies of multiculturalism, including an evaluation of the conservative position that by replacing the bedrocks of the western intellectual tradition with the portrayal of controversy and dissent one “‘opens the way for the kind of ethnic strife that has divided… nations where there is no consent on common culture’” (339). Disagreeing with this conservative extreme but avoiding the acceptance of absolute pluralism, Kessler-Harris argues for examining the question of “how do we preserve cultural unity an still do justice to the multiplicity of American Culture” (339)? Further, she states that the debate surrounding these issues in the larger public sphere directly implicates American Studies scholars because it “calls on myths about a past that we, in the field of American Studies have helped to create and interpret, and then popularize among an unsuspecting public” (339). In a move towards resolving the current rifts, she calls for a reconceptualization of “identity,” so as to create an understanding of our culture as a “continuing an unending process,” a developing and continually reformulatable understanding rather than an entrenched and sacred narrative (343). This essay exposes the continued process of American Studies’ reconceptualization of “America,” and in turn of itself – including its various roles in the creation, challenge, and defense general cultural and political opinions, particularly in the form of education and pedagogy.


The quest to define a unique ‘America,’ or set of American things or ideas, argues Kaplan, has neglected “the multiple histories of continental and overseas expansion, conquest, conflict, and resistance which have shaped the cultures of the United States and the cultures of those it has dominated within and beyond its geopolitical boundaries” (4). She introduces her idea by arguing that the formulation of an American past as universalized narrative stems from the reliance upon a foreign repository, “a foil or shadow” for the non-universal and “that such a distancing may conceal a more profound and unsettling intimacy” with the contentious origins deposited therein (5). This idea is developed through a somewhat presentist reading of Perry Miller’s 1956 introduction to his Errand into the Wilderness that suggestively imbues modern political significance to his self-confessed, artistically conceived “epiphany” of the story of an American past. Aside from this perhaps flawed deconstruction, Kaplan’s introduction does raise many interesting points regarding ‘neglected’ aspects of American history and culture, including the
historiographical division of “the spiritual and intellectual origins of America from its imperial and economic roots” and the separation of American westward expansion from larger themes of U.S. imperialist expansionism and European colonialism – as well as observing the irony that “the new pluralistic model of diversity runs the risk of being bound by the old paradigm of unity if it concentrates its gaze only narrowly in the internal lineaments of American culture and leaves national borders intact instead of interrogating them” (13, 15). Beyond her specific thesis that “the apparently remote, exterior setting [through “a distancing of Africanism” or otherness] produces inner meaning and gives coherence to the central narratives” informing American Studies, the essay demonstrates the influence of Post-Colonialism and new theories of historical geography on American historiography.
About This Bibliography

My charge in compiling this bibliography was to research the American Studies tradition, with the goal of citing and annotating methodological and disciplinary-historical articles that have either come to be considered “famous,” or that give clear-sighted exposition of a trend or transition in scholarship. I began with a copy of Jackie Dirks’ brief history of the discipline, exploring the articles listed in her footnotes, and in turn the articles cited in them. As a general rule, I have only included articles that were frequently cited by other scholars in their work: my selections were made first from a “scattered” reading, and then from a more extensive chronological one – in the hope of catching as many significant works as possible. I have also included a few articles that, in my humble reading of them, have been improperly “neglected.” My aim in writing each annotation was not so much to summarize or document an article’s general argument (they should not substitute for a complete reading), but to give it perspective in light of both contemporary and preceding scholarship. I have tried to note the significance of authors’ statements where it would otherwise be unidentifiable without the luxury of a review of many other works. In general, I worked with the intention that the bibliography would be used as a reference for selecting articles that correspond to one’s interests, as an aid in locating an article in the larger context of American Studies. Additionally, I hope it might be useful as a resource for elucidating some of the more obsequious scholarly minutia motivating certain studies, and in general as an introductory program for exploring the question of “what American Studies is,” as well as Henry Nash Smith’s perennial inquiry: “Can [and, perhaps at this point, should] ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method?”

This bibliography is in no way free of editorializing: either in the larger process of selecting articles, or in the individual annotations. I developed a few general interests regarding the American Studies tradition, and they are reflected in my comments and selections. So as to make them as explicit as possible, I list them briefly: first, as I argued above, I feel that the connections between the American Romanticism and the method employed by American Studies’ founders have been unduly, if not irresponsibly, neglected. This also speaks to a general criticism I would level against the tradition: its methodological and theoretical writing have often been haphazard and do not usually recognize the larger context surrounding their arguments, or the extensive ramifications implied by many of their statements. Specifically, many of the epistemological conundrums incurred by trying to reconcile the study of literature and its critical heritage with history and its historiographical and philosophical traditions have neither been fully exposed nor addressed directly as such. Additionally, many of the attempts at developing an American Studies methodology have existed on an island – without reference to larger debates in the academy, or to the extensive work done on similar topics in philosophy and hermeneutics. It is almost ironic, in a sense, that this bibliography takes these articles as its main sources, when the American Studies tradition itself has so frequently looked to “representative” monographs and scholar’s specific research for theories. There are notable exceptions, though: articles that not only give meaning to American Studies, but that raise intriguing questions and provide intelligent argument for all literary, historical, and social-scientific scholars.

Second, and as an extension of the above, I am intrigued by the work of the Myth and Symbol scholars of the first part of the American Studies tradition. Not only do I find both the flaws and
accomplishments of their work fascinating, but also the rapid criticism and condemnation of their work, and the possible consequences that this had for later work within the tradition. (My curiosity was further peaked and given focus in Guenter Lenz’s brilliant article, “American Studies – Beyond the Crisis?: Recent Redefinitions and the Meaning of Theory, History, and Practical Criticism”). As a result, there are perhaps more entries relating to their work than would be present in a selection representative of today’s popular interest.

Finally, I became very interested in the pedagogical ideas underlying many of the earliest works within the tradition, and its continued (if however secondary) focus in many methodological tracts. “What is American” often corresponds to “How American history and literature should be taught,” and numerous scholars – from those who didn’t even remark about their objectivity to those of an exceptionally self-reflexive vein – seemed extremely concerned with how what they would teach represented, and the effect it would have on, the future of, America.

In conclusion, I would like to raise, and to offer an answer to the question implicit in this entire project: why does American Studies, or any discipline or scholar for that matter, need to be concerned with a method before it is concerned with its material: “Thus the quarrels among academicians about method, which at first glance must seem to many of our students dry academic cavils, can be and often are highly significant because the way in which we approach a subject has a profound effect on our entire posture towards life… Of all American writers, Thoreau, perhaps, has been most aware that method is an extension of man, that the way a man approaches a problem defines the man, whether it is a problem of economy or planting beans or raising a chimney or making a book.”54

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Sources and Resources:

The majority of the articles cited in this bibliography come from the journal of the American Studies Association – the *American Quarterly* – and *Prospects*, an annual of American Cultural Studies. Many of the articles from the *American Quarterly* have been reproduced in Lucy Madox, ed., *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), which also contains commentaries on each article; all citations reference an article’s inclusion in this volume.

Many of the articles in this Bibliography contain rich and helpful citations for further inquiry, and can easily serve as an entry point for more extensive or focussed research. For additional resources, I would suggest the following:

- Recent volumes of the *American Quarterly* [the last issue for a given year] contain listings of dissertation topics which give an indication of current interests and trends.
- In 1986 and 1987, *Prospects* printed bibliographic supplements to its volumes, indexed in the Reed Library as volumes 10:2 and 11 biblio, respectively. They both contain over 300 pages of annotated references sorted under major topic headings.
- The largest reference work for American Studies is *American Studies: An Annotated Bibliography*, which is made up of over 6,500 entries in a series of three volumes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986)
- In the mid-eighties, the *American Quarterly* published bibliographic issues reviewing recent and “important” scholarship: the easiest way to locate these is to look in the 1970-present journal stacks for the bound volumes which contain five issues.
- Throughout the sixties and seventies, the *American Quarterly* published compilations of recent scholarship under the heading of “Writings on the Theory and Teaching of American Studies.”

American Studies recent reliance upon other disciplines for theory, method, and philosophy make a knowledge of the different aspects of this extremely diverse corpus of writing a basic necessity. While the material is complex and often participating in focussed debates between scholars and traditions, both past and present, a sampling of collections representing current trends include, but is in no way limited to, the following:


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55 *Prospects* is not indexed as a periodical in the Reed Library; it can be found in the stacks, E 169. 1 .P898, and is indexed as volumes, with each year being a new volume: 1976 = v. 1.

