

American Studies in an Age of Globalization

There seems to be an increasing gap between the traditional concept of the university as a place of independent intellectual pursuit and the demand that it respond more adequately and more immediately to the needs of its social, economic and technological environment. It is most of all the structural unwieldiness of our universities that has called their usefulness into doubt. Might not the much-needed chemists, engineers, computer specialists be educated faster and more efficiently elsewhere? Should not these clumsy institutions of public education function at least as efficiently as a business enterprise since they seem to be exposed to the same forces that presently accelerate the restructuring of economic, financial or political formations on a global scale? In Europe, where the universities are caught between nineteenth-century ideals and the realities of the twenty-first century, and where nationally divergent university traditions are under pressure to develop transnational (that is: European) structures, the American university appears to offer the only convenient model for implementing this otherwise hopeless project. In his book, *The University in Ruins*, William Reading has called this model with some irony “the university of excellence.” Such a university, he argues, will become the locus of a predominantly technological training and will not be in the service of the nation any longer but in that of transnational corporations.

Whether this will indeed be the future of European academia may be doubted: The inflexibility of its long-existing structures would seem to speak against it. But one can well see why, in an academic context changing along these lines, the humanities – and especially literary studies – have been steadily de-emphasized since they come under increasing pressure to prove their usefulness. “What good is literary study now in this new university without idea?” J. Hillis Miller publicly moaned not too long ago. “Can literary study still be defended as a socially useful part of college and university research and teaching, or is it just a vestigial remnant that will vanish as other media become more and more dominant in the new global society that is rapidly taking shape?” This loss of confidence in the legitimacy of literary study may well have contributed to what Miller calls “the self-destruction of the traditional literature departments as they shift to cultural studies” since it invited university bureaucracies to “gradually cut off the money in the name of financial stringency” (“Literary and Cultural Studies” 45-46, 53-54). Another aspect of the fundamental changes (and very likely connected with them) is the radical questioning of the field’s national foundation and the pressure to redefine English literature in global terms. “Departments of English like my own,” Giles Gunn wrote in his

introduction to *PMLA*'s special number on "Globalizing Literary Studies," "have routinely redefined their responsibility as all the literatures written in English, forcing themselves to teach the writing of regions from Southeast Asia to Sub-Saharan Africa, from Canada to the Caribbean" (18).

If this is the effect of globalization, then – at least in the eyes of some – it spells disaster for the traditional concept of the discipline as well as for its institutional organization. However, for others, like Stephen Greenblatt, the prospect of such reinvention and reorganization in the sign of the global is less depressing and, in addition to being an intellectual challenge, also evidence of the vitality of the field. "We can always imagine alternative ways of practicing our profession; indeed, we are continually called on to explore such alternatives," write Greenblatt and Gunn in *Redrawing the Boundaries*. "The very concept of the literary is itself continually renegotiated" and "continual refashioning is at the center of the profession of literary study: it is both a characteristic of the texts we study and a crucial means to keep those texts and our own critical practices from exhaustion and sterility" (7, 5).

Whether the conceptual and institutional changes that now affect English almost as much as American studies are desperate attempts to keep a sinking ship afloat or evidence of a "profession in the process of renewing itself" (Greenblatt and Gunn 1) may be a matter of different generational perspectives, or of individual temperament and/or political conviction. These changes have, in any case, affected especially those disciplines that derive their *raison d'être* from a concept of national identity and cultural coherence. How to study a national literature and culture transnationally, how to reconcile a national perspective with a global view is a burning issue for all disciplines similarly founded on the concept of nation. This is the first question I would like to deal with. My second question concerns itself with the study of literature after the "cultural turn": How can it be pursued within the context of a cultural study that increasingly defines itself in global terms? American studies lends itself to a discussion of such questions particularly well since, being a relative late addition to academia, it has been most vulnerable because least traditional and least self-assured and yet, precisely for that reason, also most open to a continual "refashioning" of its professional self-conception.

American studies has indeed always felt apprehensive about its rather shaky theoretical and methodological foundation as an academic discipline. The only answer to Henry Nash Smith's long-ago question whether American studies can develop a method of its own has been the resounding lack of a convincing answer. The discipline has, however, made a virtue of this seeming weakness and conceived of itself as still and always in a process of

self-discovery and becoming. In fact, this openness may well be taken as proof of its ability to map new areas of research, to generate new questions and to stimulate new interests and intellectual energies in a younger generation of scholars.

In this seeming ability to re-invent itself, American studies, from its beginnings, seems strangely tied to the object of its inquiries: By putting itself on the academic map, it has also created an academic discourse of (and on) America. Sacvan Bercovitch's interesting observation that the rhetoric of the founding fathers of American studies in the 1930s and 40s picks up, or even duplicates, the rhetoric of the founding fathers of American culture one hundred years earlier, also points in this direction. For better or for worse, American studies not only studies America but creates, or rather: reconstructs (and now deconstructs) "America" in its own discourse.

J. Hillis Miller suspects that "the rise of [...] American studies" was part of an attempt "to create the unified national culture we do not in fact have" (59). This may be a hindsight truth. For the first generation of American studies scholars (mostly literary critics and historians) it was important to believe that there was enough of a genuinely American, i.e., non-European, culture to put its matters on the map of American academia against the colonial tradition and the overbearing vested interests of English or History departments. Since American studies emphasized the cultural reading of its primarily literary material, it anticipated by more than thirty years what Miller later called a sudden and "almost universal" shift in literary study from language "toward history, culture, society, institutions" ("Presidential Address" 283). But if American studies has thus been the vanguard of developments that are now changing even the syllabi of tradition-minded English departments, it has also illustrated the diffusive dynamics of this shift. On the one hand, there is the permanent theoretical and methodological challenge of how to define and how to relate literary text and cultural context; and on the other, there is the problem not only of how to define "culture" but how to define American culture specifically. These questions have persisted and the various answers they have provoked have greatly changed the field. During the last thirty or so years the aggressive professional self-projection as much as the intellectual brilliance of a new generation of Americanists has submitted the foundation of American studies to relentless critical scrutiny.

That the American studies movement and the formalist movement of the New Criticism developed more or less at the same time is surely no coincidence: They are appositional as well as oppositional phenomena. Therefore, the first and second generation of American studies scholars, although ideologically at odds with the formalism of the New Critics, nevertheless used its strategies to either practice the close reading of the literary text as a form of cultural analysis or to recognize the text's cultural meaning in the

analysis of its mythic structure. Looking back on this early phase of American studies, Leo Marx took a rather moderate stance on this much-maligned alliance between American studies and the methods of the New Criticism: “[T]here was no reason, logical or pedagogical, to assume that such a formalist method was irreconcilable with the study of the interplay between literary works and their societal and cultural contexts [...]. F. O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, and Henry [Nash] Smith were gifted close-reading critics” (40-41). So was Leo Marx himself, of course, as was Alan Trachtenberg – all scholars whose by now ‘classic’ texts demonstrate the brilliance of this first and second generation of the American studies movement.

Although this so-called “myth and symbol” school did not in fact glorify American myths (as some of its present detractors maintain) but analyzed their hegemonic power, it came under heavy critical fire by a younger generation of American studies scholars who suspected that even a critical focusing on mythic structures implied ideological complicity. That the deeper life of American culture as embodied in its classical texts had been defined in terms of dominant myths made the “New Americanists” later relocate the canonical texts of American literature in the very concrete world of American politics and social conflict. Yet even more severe seemed the shortcomings of an assumed correlation between textual and cultural unity which not only took the organic wholeness of the text for granted but also an essential homogeneity of American culture that excluded everything outside the horizon of a predominantly white and male perspective. After the shattering experience of the Vietnam War, after decades of race conflict and the concomitant weakening of the dominant culture, this old holistic paradigm had become ‘inoperative’ and was replaced by a cultural model that embraced heterogeneity. From then on American studies was marked by what Robyn Wiegman has called the conscious “struggle to break apart the coherency of the field’s object of study” (5).

But were the founders of the American studies movement really chauvinists? Yes and no. This ambivalence surely describes the dilemma of American studies, yet has also provided critical energy to its further development. “No,” because, as convinced leftists and democrats, their scholarship was directed against existing institutional structures within and outside academia. And “yes,” because they applied their discovery and critical reading of American literature to the creation of a ‘true,’ an essentially democratic, America. Their method, the cultural reading of literary texts, went hand in hand with their claim that the neglected American masterwork expressed the essence of American culture, that “America,” as Bercovitch put it, “was a literary canon that embodied the national promise” (*The Rites of Assent* 363). The structure of each work was

organized around a set of thematic dualisms that dramatized the tragic conflicts of the democratic self as the mythic substance of American culture. This cultural substance was seen as a force at once removed from and subversive of society, resistant and “antagonist” but also somehow “representative”: a ‘world elsewhere’ that was nevertheless a permanent resource of democratic consciousness.

This redefinition of “America” in terms of cultural de-hierarchization reasserted the ‘progressive’ political claims that had been part of American studies from the start. “The heart of American Studies is the pursuit of what constitutes democratic culture,” said Alice Kessler-Harris (310) in what I think is the most precise definition of the radical heritage of an American studies movement that had always aimed at having *more* than a purely academic agenda and that had always wanted to be *more* than just another professional organization since it was committed, as Günter Lenz argues, “to reunite the ‘scholar’ and the ‘citizen’ in a truly democratic society” (“Periodization” 293). That the “pursuit of what constitutes democratic culture” has to be seen as an ongoing process is self-evident. It must question again and again dominant notions of representativeness (including its own). It thus worked as a powerful dialectic that has moved American studies away from a concept of unified culture toward a “pluralization of cultural worlds” (cp. Fluck, “American Studies”) and to an increasing diversification of the field. French theories (and their feminist and postcolonial variants) may have sharpened the tools of this process but its drive comes from this logic of subversive democracy that lies at the heart of American studies itself.

The result has been a Babel of rivaling voices, or, as others have argued, a Pentecostal democratization of academic speech. It was, in any case, a “triumph of theory”¹ marked by a sequence of short-lived booms of a variety of competing theories – from reader-response criticism to the Marxism of the Frankfurt School, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis or cultural anthropology – which frequently served to underpin the claims to “difference” of groups marked by a history of racial, ethnic or sexual discrimination. That the fierceness of the struggle can also be explained by the very particular conditions of American academia, that “to become important in literary-critical circles in this country is to be perceived as being on the avant-garde edge of certain movements”² is a matter that need not concern us here. But since American studies continued to be understood as a cultural reading of mostly literary texts, the question of what such a reading implied in view of the new paradigm of cultural heterogeneity became of central importance.

¹ See Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent* 355; J. Hillis Miller, “Presidential Address.”

² Frank Lentricchia, qtd. in Lodge, *After Bakhtin* 181. See also Fluck, “The Americanization of Literary Studies.”

Bercovitch saw the various strands of the New American Studies characterized by assumptions that show a heightened awareness of the centrality of text and text analysis. If anything, the new paradigm had increased the sense of textual complexity since the categories of cultural or historical analysis themselves had become textualized: "The text," he wrote, "has been invested with all the subtleties of historical process so that history may be understood through the subtleties of literary criticism" (*Rites* 361) – even though, in this new 'close reading' of the cultural and social texture of the text, its specific literariness was no longer of any concern. The assumption "that race and gender are formal principles of art, and therefore integral to textual analysis" (357) became the basis of a multicultural approach to literature that has shaken the theoretical foundations of the old American studies perhaps more than anything else. It has, in any case, led one of its proponents to assert that it was time "to stop teaching 'American' literature" (Jay, "The End"). Not only were there many literatures expressive of, or addressed to, the needs of different groups of readers, there was also so much cultural diversity that the claim not only of a coherent national culture but also of one national literature appeared to be unfounded.

The "pluralization and heterogeneity, even the polyvocality" of American literature (or literatures) became fully apparent in Marc Shell and Werner Sollors's *Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (2000) which contains texts that were published in the U.S., yet never became part of a collective memory or tradition.³ The more reason for American studies as a cultural reading of literature to become comparative on all levels in order to adequately fulfill its new responsibilities. The comparative approach, for critics like John Carlos Rowe, José Saldívar, Carolyn Porter and many others on both sides of the Atlantic, seemed to provide a way of finally transcending the much too narrow conceptual frame of an earlier American studies.⁴ Accordingly, they developed models of a postnational American studies that stress "'comparative American cultures' within the multicultural of the United States" and situate "domestic 'multiculturalism' within international, transnational, and potentially postnational contexts."

This determination to transcend the national even beyond its multicultural redefinition has been a crucial point in all recent debates. Behind the eagerness to get away from a predominantly national perspective, one can easily detect the fear of continuing, in the name of the multicultural, the notion of an American "exceptionalism" one had hoped to overcome. As

³ Also see Sollors's *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and Languages of American Literature* (1998).

⁴ See Rowe, "A Future" and "Post-Nationalism"; Saldívar, *The Dialectics of Our America and Border Matters*; Porter, "What We Know"; Lenz, "Transnational American Studies" and "Toward a Dialogics"; Giles, "Virtual Americas."

Gayatri Spivak observed, not only were the multicultural debates within the United States quite “parochial” (qtd. in Ramakrishna 79) – even a multicultural America could still be seen as a model city upon a hill. In addition, the insistence on difference and dissent as the true dynamics of American culture issues from the awareness that any conceptualization of cultural coherence might reintroduce elements of dominance and hierarchy. Although most proponents of a multicultural approach to American studies do not define “difference” in terms of origin or essence but see it as a result of dialogue and cultural interaction, they conceive of it nevertheless as primarily rooted in cultural resistance and dissent.

As an outside observer one might argue that the study of a culture (even if it sees itself as grounded in internal difference and fragmentation) cannot be based on a study of dissent alone – as much as one cannot recognize “otherness” without also recognizing elements of “sameness.” After all, cultural diversity may well be the chief characteristic of a particular national culture, with Canada as a prime example. In addition, one could argue that the “different” or particular, whether on the local, national or transnational level, is part and parcel of any comparative approach, and that the idea of a particularly American difference has been a cultural reality, a creative resource and powerful incentive to innovation in American culture from Walt Whitman to William Carlos Williams and Langston Hughes, from Jackson Pollock to Gene Kelly. It is of course possible that this resource has exhausted itself and is now being replaced by a drive toward ethnic self-assertion. Yet even then I wonder whether this new sense of ethnic difference might not still be based on, or carried by, an encompassing sense of American distinctness.⁵ Many of my American colleagues will suspect here the continuing pull of traditional ideological assumptions. Indeed, they might point to the logic of Janice Radway’s playful and provocative suggestion of several years ago that American studies may have outlived its name since its dynamics have consistently pushed beyond the boundaries of discipline as well as of nation. Since the question of difference cannot be discussed any longer in terms of biological, geographical or cultural essentialisms, she argued, the focus of analysis should now be on the complex ways in which human beings are wrapped up in multiple, often conflicting discourses, practices and institutions.

This position, it seems to me, is much to the point – although not completely: As Michael Kammen has remarked, “[t]he creation of compiled identities has been a highly significant aspect of Americanization as a social process” (195). Many proponents of the new American studies see human beings, on the one hand, as locally or metaphorically defined in

⁵ The latter may be latent, however, and emerge only in moments generally experienced as a ‘national’ crisis – as became apparent in the wake of September 11, 2001.

terms of borderlines (i.e., formed by overlapping or conflicting cultures or discourses) and, on the other, as being part of transnational areas where cultures have clashed and interacted in a shared if antagonistic history. Although such an assumption certainly opens new perspectives and new areas of study, it yet ignores that between the local and the global there is still the national as a category requiring continuous analysis. To abandon the concept of the nation together with that of "America" in order to extricate the discipline from its ideological foundations eliminates a middle ground on which the United States must be studied as a distinctive collective entity (however heterogeneous or divided it may perceive itself to be) within a network of global or transnational interrelatedness.

In view of the constant push toward decentralization that has marked the field during the last thirty years, it comes as no surprise that, institutionally speaking, American studies, in a strict sense, has almost disappeared in the U.S.: Like the legendary pelican it has sacrificed itself (in many cases quite consciously) for the benefit of its numerous offspring. With some polemical exaggeration one might say that it regains visible existence only once a year when participants in the convention of the American studies Association shed their identities as members of English, History, Ethnic studies, African-American studies, Chicano studies, Native-American studies, Popular Culture studies, Women's studies, Queer studies, Film studies or Performance studies departments or programs and out themselves as Americanists. Parallel to this interior diversification and subdivision of the field, there has been the continuous effort of transcending the national also by placing it within larger organizational frames. In the year 2000, the attempt to find an Archimedean point outside the position and perspective of the national has logically led to the foundation of an International Association of American Studies which aims at studying the United States in its relation to Latin America or its global interrelatedness to other cultures. Inside the European Association for American Studies, or rather parallel with it, we have CAAR and, more recently, MESEA which internationalizes what used to be (multi-)ethnic American studies in its organizational structure as well as in its subject matter.

Will these diverse organizational initiatives eventually exhaust themselves and their overlapping membership by a duplication of fees and functions? Are we witnessing the self-deconstruction of a field or its conceptual and institutional "refashioning" under new global conditions? We are, indeed, in a rather paradoxical situation: The interest in American studies has been on the rise as is apparent in the steadily increasing membership of American studies organizations all over the world. At the same time, the sense of what American studies is or represents has become increasingly uncertain and diffuse. And, on the basis of the dynamics that have been at

work during the last thirty years, there seems to be no logical end to its further diversification – short of a running out of funds, positions or ideas.

To illustrate, let me briefly sketch Carolyn Porter's attempt to expand "the 'American' field" and thus to "fundamentally destabilize not only its boundaries but its norms." Porter is very much aware of what she calls the "extraordinary difficulty entailed in resisting the virtually gravitational force of 'America' as a foundational assumption" (478) and therefore in need of a new conceptual frame for remapping a field that to her is "clearly no longer mappable" by any traditional paradigm. Therefore she turns to Chicano and Caribbean literary scholars like José Saldívar or Roberto Retamar whose "'America' is both plural and contestatory in its reference." What she seems to have in mind is what Saldívar calls "a place of hybridity and betweenness [...] composed of historically connected postcolonial spaces" (*The Dialectics* 153) – borderlands "that reveal and renew cultural networks linking the Caribbean and Latin America to the North" (Porter 468). Thus it would be possible to conceive of a "pan-American literary history" whose focus would not be the United States but the Cuban José Martí's "Our America" which offers "the promise of approaching America's literatures as the very opposite of the parochial or insulated or exceptional, without thereby assuming a global or imperialist perspective." The common ground of such a new discipline of comparative studies would be the shared history of a colonial past.

American studies would confront (at the least) a quadruple set of relations between (1) Europe and Latin America; (2) Latin America and North America; (3) North America and Europe; and (4) Africa and both Americas. The aim here would not be to expand American studies so as to incorporate the larger territory of the hemisphere, but rather to grasp how the cultural, political, and economic relations between and within the Americas might work to reconstellate the field itself, reinflecting its questions in accord with a larger frame. (510)

Porter knows quite well that her brave attempt to model a new comparative American studies, even if it were desirable, is difficult to realize given the present distribution of academic territory; especially since her model would have to be complemented by at least one other of similar scope focusing on U.S.-Asian relations. John Carlos Rowe therefore pleads for a "new intellectual regionalism" that would allow for considerable difference of emphasis according to specific local conditions, communal needs or preferences. Yet since he is also aware that this might well lead to a new provincialism, he wants each local variant to be embedded in a "larger understanding of the United States in the comparative contexts of Western hemispheric and, finally, global study" ("Post-Nationalism" 21) – and we are back at what I believe is an impossible redefinition of American studies as an at once locally decentralized and globally comprehensive field.

I know of course that such visions and revisions do not only issue from the methodological problems of a specific academic discipline. As Homi Bhabha and many others have pointed out, they may well be part of an ongoing global reorganization of knowledge. Yet apart from the fact that the inflexibility of academic institutions everywhere makes such a drastic revisioning of academic borderlines unlikely, there is also the very real danger of overextending the boundaries of the field – even if one admits that it would be as futile as it would be foolish trying to ascribe to American studies a clearly defined and compartmentalized territory of academic inquiry. The house of American studies, like James's house of fiction, has many windows – among them several, I am sure, that are still hidden or unopened. I admit, however, that the diversification of the field and its diminishing disciplinary foundation worries me in view of the increasing pressure for proof of academic relevance and the inevitable fight for a decreasing number of positions foreseeable in the near future.

Therefore, I argue that if the ongoing redefinition of American studies implies a transgression of traditional boundaries, it also demands a redrawing of boundaries. The cultural and literary analysis of such vast and culturally diversified areas as Porter and others have in mind runs the risk of promoting academic dilettantism, however well-intended and progressive it may be. Gayatri Spivak, although herself a proponent of transnational culture studies, calls such overextension “sanctioned ignorance”, “now sanctioned more than ever by an invocation of ‘globality’ [...] or ‘hybridity’” (164). She sees the danger that studies of such global scope “become so diluted that all linguistic specificity or scholarly depth in the study of culture is [...] ignored” (170). In a slightly different context, Greenblatt and Gunn, too, remind us that

each branch of literary studies is inherently ambitious, eager to extend its sphere of influence. But this ambition has its limits – due either to some inherent restraint (for example, some limit to the resources of energy, intelligence, and time) or to some feature in the larger organization of knowledge that presents an insurmountable resistance. (6)

I would insist, therefore, that American studies should accept its name as its limitation and its boundary – that it cannot be a global and postcolonial, not even an international American studies in the sense of inter-American or intra-continental investigation, although these fields will increasingly become areas of fruitful cooperative research between individual scholars or groups of different fields and disciplines. What seems more immediately available (although this may purely be a matter of my own local positioning as a member of an institute for North American studies) is to do American studies as a comparative study of the U.S. and Canada – not in the spirit of quasi-colonial appropriation but with the expectation that the

mutual mirroring of U.S. American and Canadian national experience and self-expression would be illuminating for an understanding of both.

Was Rob Kroes thus right when he asked some time ago (not without irony, to be sure) whether we would have in the future “transnational American Studies in America” and “national American Studies in Europe”? In the special number of *Cultural Critique* that she edited in the fall of 1998, Robyn Wiegman spoke of “The Futures of American Studies” with reference to its present de-centralized status that she fervently embraces. One could shift perspectives and argue that it is indeed entirely possible that American studies will have different faces all over the world, depending on diverse local or national interests, traditions or historical experiences. If this sounds very much like another version of Rowe’s “intellectual regionalism” one should keep in mind that the positioning of European – or, more generally, non-American – scholars of American studies differs from that of their American colleagues: They can look at the United States as an object of political, social and cultural analysis without running the risk of being considered chauvinistic or parochial. Therefore they can and should make greater use of their outside position by asking questions that their American colleagues could not, would not (or would no longer) ask – questions concerning American particularities, continuities and coherences, but also questions concerning transatlantic relations, the flow of cultural exchange, the creative appropriation and transformation of American culture. Or they might make use of the American discussion of such issues as gender or inter-cultural relations and apply them critically to as yet unquestioned essentialisms of their own culture. Some time ago, Paul Giles pleaded for the “radical aesthetization” or “virtualization” of American democratic values in order to use them deconstructively.

America is valuable not for what it might be in itself, but for the interference it creates in others. [...] American studies might work as a virtual discipline, a means of disrupting the self-enclosing boundaries of other areas, whether academic disciplines or geographic territories, by its projections of dislocation and difference. (544-45)

American studies has indeed always had that function – whether on essentialist or virtual grounds – of being a ferment of cultural change wherever it took roots: in post-war Germany as well as in post-wall Eastern Europe. Yet here, too, I perceive limits. Although the study of multiculturalism in Europe can profit immensely from a comparative approach and the expertise acquired in American studies, such studies as applied to one’s own country cannot be done *as* American studies but require interdisciplinary cooperation.

Another way of making use of the new paradigm of the global, the transnational or postcolonial would be to raise the questions that it has

generated without leaving the territory of American studies behind – that is, to do national American studies with a transnational consciousness: Postcolonial studies may in this case not expand the borders of our discipline but the horizon of our questioning. Thus the ‘mirror of the other’ should prevent us from taking our own position as absolute – as much as it should remind us of the questions we did *not* ask. It should make us keep in mind that the study of American culture can have a national focus *and* a transnational perspective since cultural identities are the result of complex cultural exchanges embedded in histories that extend beyond national borderlines. Being aware of this should not let us forget, however, that the categories of postcolonial studies ought to be put under scrutiny before they are applied to American studies: To what extent can minorities in the U.S. be considered victims of an interior colonialism or imperialism? Does it make sense to conceive of them as postcolonial? Are they really part of what Bhabha calls “a growing transnational culture” (174)? (Note his rather striking use of the singular here!) To what extent does the term “diaspora” really apply – even if we apply it only in a metaphorical sense? Isn’t the “subaltern” in most cases also a willing participant? At the same time, it may be worthwhile to find out whether the temporality of “unsynchronic Nows” or the “temporal difference of the colonial space” (244-45) has any relevance when we discuss the processes of modernization, for instance, or the rise of literary modernism in the U.S. and Canada. I shall come back to that in a moment.

But before, I shall briefly address my second question concerning the pursuit of literary studies in a field whose emphasis has shifted from literature to culture. In his “Reflections on American Studies” (1999), Leo Marx noted with some surprise “what a diminished role literary study now has in American studies – and in the humanities generally” in comparison to when he started teaching it at Minnesota some fifty years ago (40). But although the cultural dimension of a literary text has become more important than its literariness (its aesthetic function or constitution having become background murmur at best), the literary text has nevertheless kept a privileged status. In the eyes of Rowe it is a “liminal region or ‘borderzone’ in which different cultures meet and negotiate their ‘neighborhood’” (“A Future” 271); or, as Saldívar argues, where global history and local knowledge overlap and interact. For Spivak and Bhabha the postcolonial text acts as a mirror to the colonial tradition and its liberal interpreters – as a locus where identities are deconstructed and postcolonial subjectivity is tentatively acted out. “The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness’,” says Bhabha (12); and Spivak insists that literature “remains singu-

lar and unverifiable” (174). But *why* literature should be thus privileged is not reflected by either one of them.

Bercovitch does this in an essay appropriately called “The Function of the Literary in a Time of Cultural Studies.” He places literary study in a territory between disciplines – and yet not in a field of inter- but of “counter-disciplinarity” because it draws for its analysis on disciplines whose abstractions and certainties add to our understanding of the literary text, although they are at the same time undermined by the text’s concrete particularities. The “as if” of fiction allows for its projecting a world that exists of its own right and on its own conditions. Referring to the famous lynching scene in Faulkner’s *Light in August* Bercovitch argues:

To explicate the scene without reference to issues of sex, race, gender, and American violence would be to drain the passage of its *aesthetic* force (ambiguity, complexity, defamiliarization, chiasmus, etc.). Formalist explication itself requires us here to draw on disciplines called history, sociology, etc. But we need not *authorize* these as textual explanations. Instead we can see them in the as-if light of the text. They are abstractions whose meaning depends on the facts of *this* fiction. (77)

He then confronts what he calls the troubling issue for all literary critics engaged in cultural studies: “what can we say about matters that concern (say) sociology that sociologists can’t say as well, or better?” And he answers:

a literary-cultural perspective can open up sociology as a cognitive system by investing its abstractions with the malleability, the ungroundedness of literary evidence. For this analytic occasion, suspending sociology’s beliefs, we take the fictive for our measure of truth. The insights we gain thereby about race, sexuality, class, and national rituals function as a mode of inquiry. (77)

The as-if truth of fiction is a truth not of rule, norm, abstraction but of uncertainty and “not-knowing”: a truth that is embedded in the text’s many layers of meaning (often contradictory, resisting hierarchy), a truth, in any case, beyond discipline but within culture. Literary study, thus conceived as “counterdisciplinarity,” can

contribute to the overall project of cultural studies by insisting *through* negation that we are always already more than our culture tells us we are, just as language is more than a discipline and just as a literary text is more than the sum of the explanations, solutions, probabilities, and abstractions that it accumulates as it travels across time and space. (82)

Bercovitch sees the aesthetic as given with the ontological status of fiction and its power as consisting in the richness of the conflicting cultural implications it contains in layer upon layer. One could take the matter of the aes-

thetic still further, however. I want to argue for the reinstatement of the aesthetic as a discourse not *separate* from or *against* American studies as cultural studies but very much *within* it.⁶ Such redefinition would have to give account of a fundamental plurality of aesthetic production and reception, of different and rivaling aesthetics, i.e., of aesthetics different in purpose, use and function at different historical moments or for different social groups. It would have to be highly inclusive as well as highly inconclusive since it could never provide more than preliminary answers, and whatever ‘certainties’ it propagated would have to be constantly questioned and renegotiated.

In conclusion, let me try to bring the different elements of my argument together and make it more particular. I come back to Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “temporal difference of the colonial space” and apply it to the rise of American literary modernism. Whether such application makes sense is, of course, debatable. After all, the United States conceived of itself, economically and technologically, as the vanguard of modernization. By the turn of the century, it had colonized its West and, in foreign policy, had joined the league of imperialist powers. Culturally, however, it still saw itself as colonially dependent on European, especially on English, culture. Writers like William Carlos Williams or Hart Crane and painters like Charles Sheeler or Charles Demuth were engaged in what one might call a postcolonial search for a genuine national expression – an expression that would have to be called “modern” since, as Gertrude Stein argued, America had entered the twentieth century earlier than any other nation. Whatever these artists learned from the artistic revolution of the European avant-gardes they translated and absorbed into an intellectual tradition of Emersonian new beginnings. In the eyes of European critics their innovations seemed provincial, if not imitative – homemade or self-made (“not in Greek and Latin but with bare hands” as Williams wrote). Williams and others attempted to uncover a buried original culture beyond the colonial mind-set of the Anglo-Saxon – the original “newness” of the continent, its lost Indian heritage, the democratic dignity of everyday objects and of common people.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and after explored possibilities of giving aesthetic expression to black experience in a black idiom – against, but also within, the “white frame” of modernism. If the Europeans tended to look down on the provincialism of American modernists, the American avant-garde did the same with respect to their black colleagues and their “Negro stuff” (as Waldo Frank termed Jean Toomer’s work at one point). But they also longed for what they considered the expressive power of an

⁶ See also Winfried Fluck’s incisive essay on the problematic relation between “Aesthetics and Cultural Studies.”

original, a 'primitive' vitality. Modernism's discovery of the 'primitive' – so conveniently made evident in Picasso's use of African masks in his "Les Femmes d'Alger" of 1907 – gained special poignancy in the U.S. where it had different implications than in Europe since a long national history of racism had established a cultural tradition of racial stereotype and mimicry. The attempt of American modernists to help create a culture that went beyond the cultural tradition of the Anglo-Saxon thus made confusions between the fantasized image of 'primitive' life and the actually existing Other inevitable. At the same time, it was precisely the modernists' fascination with the 'primitive' that opened a historic window for creating an African-American literature that we have by now learned to understand as a genuine contribution to American modernist culture.⁷ That this 'window' was a treacherous gift, since it provided a frame of predominantly white expectations of what black writing should be, many artists of the Harlem Renaissance became painfully aware of. It nevertheless led to an artistic reinvention and a translation into writing of the rich inheritance of black oral culture.

Both modernisms, white and black, are curiously linked in their similarity of purpose as well as in their difference. Since the postcolonial self-assertion of black art *vis-à-vis* a dominant white art must itself be seen as placed within the larger frame of American modernism's postcolonial self-assertion *vis-à-vis* Europe's cultural dominance, they both share the search for a medium that would be artistically innovative as well as democratic and home-grown. Although they are each rooted in fundamentally different social experiences and cultural traditions, they nevertheless mark, in their antagonistic yet complementary doubleness, a distinctly different American modernism.

We can make this question of belatedness even more interesting if we attempt to think of it in terms of a North American modernism and add a Canadian dimension to it. Robert Kroetsch once proposed the idea that Canadian literature skipped modernism altogether and moved, in the 1960s and 1970s, directly from Victorianism to postmodernism. I would argue, however, that what he took for postmodernism *was*, at least in its early phase, a specifically Canadian mode of modernism, and that the moderately modernist experimentalism of writers like Robertson Davies, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood or Rudy Wiebe went hand in hand with the short foundational period of a national Canadian literature that could in fact be called a "Canadian Renaissance." It turned out to be a very brief period of transition since the emphasis on the modern and the national almost immediately gave way to a de-centralizing impulse that foregrounded the regional, the post-modern, the multicultural and postcolonial. A case in

⁷ On the relation of American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance see, among many others, North; Gubar; Lemke.

point is the urban cultural space of Montreal where the traditional bi-cultural opposition between Anglos and Quebecois came to include the literature of different ethnic groups (recent immigrants from the Caribbean, Pakistan and India or Latin America), written, in most cases, either in English or in French. The writers of these texts not only define themselves and their cultures as postcolonial but press for a definition of Canadian literature in terms of the national *and* – perhaps even *as* – the postcolonial. How these different ethnic literatures relate to and interact with those across the US-Canadian border regionally as well as nationally are questions interesting precisely because they force us to combine a conceptual frame of transnational interconnectedness with a knowledge of regional and national divergences.