

Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies



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American Quarterly, Volume 42, Issue 4 (Dec., 1990), 615-636.

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American Quarterly
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ESSAY

Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen:
Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and
American Studies

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ACCORDING TO A STORY OFTEN TOLD AMONG JAZZ MUSICIANS, WHEN trumpet player Clark Terry first joined the Duke Ellington Orchestra in 1951, he rehearsed in his mind every complicated technical maneuver that might be expected of him. The young musician waited anxiously for instructions from the legendary band leader, but all his new boss asked him to do was “to listen.” When Terry complained that anyone could just sit and listen, the ever enigmatic Ellington informed him that “there’s listening, and then there’s listening, but what I want from you is to *listen*.”

Eventually, Terry came to understand what Ellington wanted. Terry had been so preoccupied with what he might contribute to the orchestra as an individual, that he had not taken time to hear what the other musicians needed. He had not yet learned to hear the voices around him nor to understand the spaces and silences surrounding them. Ellington knew that his young trumpeter had talent as a virtuoso, but he felt that Terry had to learn how to bring his virtuosity in harmony (literally and figuratively) with the rest of the orchestra.

Ellington’s admonition might serve as a useful way of conceptualizing the present moment for scholarly research in American Studies. In this period of creative ferment and critical fragmentation, virtuosity entails

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American Quarterly, Vol. 42, No. 4 (December 1990) © 1990 American Studies Association

listening as well as speaking; it requires patient exploration into spaces and silences as much as it demands bold and forthright articulation. As a field, American Studies always has been at its best when engaged in dialogue with the complex and conflicted realities of American life and culture. Yet too often its dominant paradigms have suffered from an over-emphasis on what has been articulated from within the profession, and a consequent underemphasis on the voices, power struggles, and ideological conflicts outside it. The complicated relationship between scholarly methods and the popular cultures, political economies, and ideologies of America demand a scholarship capable of adopting Duke Ellington's advice and learning how to do careful and comprehensive listening.

It is my view that we are facing a crisis in American Studies scholarship as we enter the 1990s. Now that Henry Luce's "American Century" has turned into something like the "American half-century," analyses of "American Exceptionalism" are less credible than ever.¹ The ever-increasing reach and scope of commercialized leisure has eclipsed both "high culture" art and "folk culture" artifacts, replacing them with cultural products resistant to traditional methods of criticism. In addition, the cultural politics of neo-conservatism and the political economy of higher education in this age of deindustrialization undermine the constituencies historically associated with critical examination of the myths and realities of American culture—women, ethnic minorities, and the working class. To say that the field faces a crisis is not necessarily to say something negative or pessimistic. American Studies as a field emerged out of the historical crises of the 1930s and 1940s, and its most creative turning points have come in response to subsequent social, cultural, and political problems. We are not facing the "end of American Studies," but rather only the latest in a long series of cultural problems and possibilities.

Cultural Theory and American Studies

A specter is haunting American Studies, the specter of European cultural theory. During the past two decades, European critics from a variety of perspectives have theorized a "crisis of representation" that has called into question basic assumptions within the disciplines central to the American Studies project—literary studies, art history, anthropology, geography, history, and legal studies.² From the structuralist-Marxism of Louis Althusser to the psychoanalytic interventions of Jacques Lacan, from Foucauldian post-structuralism to the French feminism of Luce Irigaray and

Hélène Cixous, from Derridean deconstruction to the dialogic criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin, European theory has revolutionized the study of culture.

The frequently confusing and often acrimonious debates engendered by the rise of European cultural theory within academic disciplines have important ramifications for all scholars of culture, but they are especially important for those in American Studies because they challenge so many of the theoretical assumptions and methodological practices of this field. Their challenges to the project of the Enlightenment involve a radical skepticism about the utility and wisdom of reason, language, and history as tools for understanding the world. At their best, they offer radical interrogation of concepts too often undertheorized within American Studies: the utility of national boundaries as fitting limits for the study of culture, the reliability of categories that establish canons of great works or that divide “high” and “low” culture, the ability of art and literature to mirror a unified culture uniting the intentions and subjectivities of artists and audiences. As Michael Ryan explains with elegant precision, much of contemporary European cultural criticism revolves around one central dialectical premise—that cultural texts are inescapably part of social processes and that social processes are themselves always textualized in some form.³ The current “crisis of representation” stems from the inevitability of representation and from an attendant recognition of the necessity for understanding how the mechanisms of representation contain covert as well as overt ideological messages.⁴

Like most specters, the threat posed to American Studies by contemporary European cultural theory is more apparent than real, more a product of our own fears than of any concrete social reality. Indeed, far from representing the end of American Studies, European cultural theory offers an opportunity to reconnect with some of the important aims and intentions of our field in new and exciting ways. Here I want to describe some of the central premises and preoccupations of contemporary European cultural theory and then locate them within the traditions of American Studies scholarship. In addition, I want to explore the relationship between the rise of contemporary European cultural theory and the crisis of deindustrialization in the United States.

Contemporary European Cultural Theory: Its Aims and Intentions

When confronted with radically new information, the women in Toni Morrison’s wonderful novel *Beloved* “fell into three groups: those that

believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through."⁵ American Studies scholars have confronted European cultural theory in much the same way. The translation of European cultural theory into an American Studies context poses some serious problems, but whatever the past practice in the discipline has been, it seems most desirable for us neither to accept nor to reject theory out of hand but, like Morrison's Ella, to think it through.

Over the past twenty years, European cultural theory has reproblematised and reframed essential categories about communication and culture. For example, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian structuralist-Marxism enabled British film critics in the 1970s to begin challenging the "naturalness" of film narrative conventions and cinematic subject positions, identifying them as social and historical constructs, rather than as essential and inevitable properties of storytelling or filmmaking. The sophisticated work of Laura Mulvey and Stephen Heath drew upon Althusser for theories of the subject as socially constructed by "ideological state apparatuses" and upon Lacan for explanations about how individual subjects are "hailed" by visual, verbal, and social forms of address.⁶ British Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall tempered the structuralist and essentialist implications of Lacanian and Althusserian criticism by blending them with the concept of hegemony advanced by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci.⁷ This combination enabled Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie, and Iain Chambers (among others) to produce studies of British subcultural practices that treat popular culture as a crucial site for the construction of social identity, but also as a key terrain for ideological conflict.

These inquiries into the nature of subjectivity and the relationship between culture and power helped prepare many American readers for French deconstruction, post-structuralism, and post-modernism. Deconstruction, as articulated by Jacques Derrida, has challenged the very fiber of criticism and interpretation by revealing the metaphysical priority given to language within Western thought. This "logocentrism" presumes that careful naming can uncover fixed meanings about the world, but deconstruction's interrogation of language reveals the provisional, contingent, and unstable nature of naming. Derrida finds Western thinkers to be uncritical about their "standpoint," about their insistence on unifocal and univocal investigations outward from a privileged center that deny opportunities for reciprocal perspectives and multivocal dialogues. Uncritical acceptance of language as an unmediated vehicle for understanding experience underlies much of the arrogance of Western thought for Derrida—its privileging of

written texts over other forms of discourse, its dangerous instrumentality, its crude dismissal of competing systems of thought as “primitive” and “barbaric.” In short, the logocentrism of Western culture undergirds the “humanism” which presents the experiences of modern Europeans and North Americans as “human,” while dismissing much of the rest of the world as some kind of undifferentiated “other.” Logocentrism establishes a symbolic order which naturalizes oppression and injustice.⁸ Deconstruction has helped cultural critics to break with logocentrism, to be self-reflexive about the tools they wield, and to investigate the ways in which language positions the subjects and objects of knowledge.

Similarly, the post-structuralism advanced in the work of Michel Foucault has challenged radically the traditional premises of cultural investigation and interpretation. Foucault has demonstrated how discursive categories constitute sites of oppression—for example, how the medicalization of sexuality or the criminalization of “antisocial” behavior has constructed the body as a locus of domination and power. Thus for Foucault, centralized economic and political power rest not so much on direct authority, force, or manipulation, but more on the capacity to disperse power to localized sites where the symbolic order constrains, contains, silences, and suppresses potential opposition. This approach calls attention to marginal social positions, to diffuse sites of oppression and resistance, and to practices capable of resisting or at least interrupting domination.⁹

The concept of post-modernism as developed in the work of Jean-François Lyotard helps locate the work of Derrida and Foucault within the contemporary cultural crisis of representation. Although Lyotard insists that post-modernism is more of a sensibility than a time period, he does acknowledge that the delight in difference, self-reflexivity, detached irony, and “incredulity toward metanarratives” that define the post-modern “condition” stem from the modern sense of living in a “post” period characterized by the exhaustion of modernism and Marxism as ways of understanding and interpreting experience.¹⁰ Thus the rejection among deconstructionists and post-structuralists of the “grand master narratives” emanating from the Enlightenment represents more than methodological or theoretical novelty in culture studies. Rather, the fragmented, decentered, and divided world uncovered by cultural theory reflects a recognition of contemporary social and economic crises including deindustrialization in the West, de-Stalinization in the East, and imperatives imposed on the Third World by First and Second World imperialisms—austerity, hunger, debt, and dependency.

Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian structuralist-Marxism, British Cultural Studies, deconstruction, post-structuralism, and post-modernism represent the most important strains of European cultural theory influencing cultural studies in America, but this list is hardly an exhaustive one. Explorations into taste cultures by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the rediscovery of the body and the insistence on gender as an independent frame of inquiry by Luce Irigaray and other French feminists, the theories of communicative rationality advanced by the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, and the scholarly exhumation of Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's "dialogic criticism" have each played an important role in re-defining cultural studies in America.¹¹

Yet scholars should not regard European cultural theory uncritically, as if it were a panacea. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has demonstrated how post-structuralists, in their ignorance of the Third World and their unwillingness to search out other voices, often share the Eurocentric biases they presume to challenge.¹² Those who privilege "marginality" as an abstraction may forget that what is marginal from one perspective may be central to another. In a wickedly clever and perceptive article, Michelle Lamont has shown how the emergence of Jacques Derrida as a "dominant" philosopher owes a great deal to his ability to benefit from the "cultural capital" institutionalized in the power structures of academic discourse.¹³

Similarly, Judith Lowder Newton notes the disturbing unwillingness among many European cultural theorists to acknowledge their debt to feminism and to the women's movement which initially raised the issues of subjectivity and representation that now serve as the basis for the more generalized critique of power raised within cultural theory.¹⁴ Indeed, feminists have legitimate reasons to be suspicious of theories that proclaim the "death of the subject" at a time when women are finally beginning to emerge within cultural discourse as speaking subjects that celebrate the "end of history" at the precise moment when cultural criticism is beginning to deal more fully with the consequences of historically grounded oppressions. Beyond the problem of internal contradictions within European cultural theory lie larger questions about its reification as a method and its application to the American context.

Few scholars engaged in any form of cultural studies over the past decade have been able to avoid the acrimonious debates provoked by the rise of European cultural theory. At one extreme, they 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 a reification of theory into a “magic bullet” that can by itself position scholars outside the oppressions and exploitations of history.¹⁵ The tragedy of this debate—as is often the case in such moments of antagonism—is that each side often misses what the other has to offer. Sometimes what seems like anti-intellectualism on the part of critics of theory is really a justifiable critique of theorists who become (in the words of one of my colleagues) “spiritless automatons designing ever more elaborate theoretical machines.”¹⁶ On the other hand, what sometimes seems like self-serving jargon and “intellectual-speak” to non-theorists is in reality an important effort to create a language capable of interrupting and opposing the dominant ideologies of the past. In my view, American Studies would be served best by a theory that refuses hypostatization into a method, that grounds itself in the study of concrete cultural practices, that extends the definition of culture to the broadest possible contexts of cultural production and reception, that recognizes the role played by national histories and traditions in cultural contestation, and that understands that struggles over meaning are inevitably struggles over resources.

One of cultural theory’s great contributions has been to challenge the division between texts and experience. Literary critic Terry Eagleton especially has taken pains to affirm that the construction of texts is a social process, while at the same time insisting that no social experience exists outside of ideology and textualization. However, Eagleton’s healthy warning sometimes has led to an unhealthy result—the fetishizing of texts through the interpretation of reality as simply one more text. It is one thing to say that discourse, ideology, and textualization are inevitable and necessary parts of social experience, but it is quite another thing to say that they are the totality of social experience. As a quip reported by Jon Wiener phrases it, “Tell that to the veterans of foreign texts.”¹⁷ Stuart Hall describes the goal of cultural criticism as the reproduction of the concrete in thought—“not to generate another good theory, but to give a better theorized account of concrete historical reality.”¹⁸ Hall’s formulation combines “high” theory and “low” common sense and is an essential corrective to uses of theory that lose touch with particular historical and social experiences. It prevents the self-reflexivity of contemporary theory from degenerating into solipsism, seeing theoretical work itself as a part of larger social processes. Finally, it enables cultural critiques to evolve into cultural interventions by engaging dominant ideology at the specific sites where it may be articulated and disarticulated.¹⁹

Innovations within European cultural theory over the past twenty years

have raised issues and concerns that seem to threaten the traditional practices of American Studies. They bring a specialized language to bear on key questions about the creation and reception of culture in modern societies, and their methodological sophistication seems to render obsolete traditional American Studies questions about “what is American?” On closer inspection, however, contemporary European cultural theory resonates with the categories and questions of American Studies traditions; indeed, it is fair to say that the development of American Studies itself anticipated many of the cross-disciplinary epistemological and hermeneutic concerns at the heart of contemporary European cultural theory.

As Michael Denning has argued, “American Studies emerged as both a continuation of and a response to the popular ‘discovery’ and ‘invention’ of ‘American culture’ in the 1930s.”²⁰ Ethnography and folklore studies by New Deal–supported scholars, the “cult of the common man” pushed by Popular Front Marxism, and the use of “American Exceptionalism” to stem the country’s drift toward involvement in World War II, all combined to focus scholarly attention upon the contours and dimensions of American culture. Anti-communism and uncritical nationalism during the early years of the Cold War transformed the study of American culture in significant ways, imposing a mythical cultural “consensus” on what previously had been recognized as a history of struggle between insiders and outsiders.²¹ While the hegemony of the consensus myth in the 1950s and 1960s served conservative political ends, it did not prevent American Studies scholars from asking critical questions about the relationship between the social construction of cultural categories and power relations in American society. As Giles Gunn so convincingly demonstrates, scholars of the myth-and-symbol school consciously sought to “overcome the split between fact and value” by explaining how value-laden images influence social life. He points out that the principal project of these scholars revolved around increasing “comprehension of the historical potentialities and liabilities of different ways of construing the relationship between consciousness and society.”²² Most important, Gunn reminds us that their project was both diagnostic and corrective because they recognized the interpenetration of symbolism and semiotics with power and privilege.²³

In their sensitivity to language as a metaphorical construct with ideological implications, the myth-and-symbol scholars anticipated many of the concerns of contemporary cultural theory. In his introduction to the 1970 edition of *Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith claimed that “our perceptions of objects and events are no less a part of consciousness than are

our fantasies,” and he described myths and symbols as “collective representations rather than the work of a single mind.”²⁴ Similarly, in his 1965 study of the Brooklyn Bridge, Alan Trachtenberg insisted that “surely the conventions of language themselves suggest predispositions among Americans to react in certain ways at certain times.”²⁵ Yet for all their attention to the role of language in shaping and reflecting social practice, the myth-and-symbol scholars still tended to make sweeping generalizations about society based upon images in relatively few elite literary texts, and they never adequately theorized the relationship between cultural texts and social action.

Bruce Kuklick’s devastating 1972 critique of the myth-and-symbol school provided the focal point for an emerging anthropological approach within American Studies which advanced the field’s reach and sophistication in significant ways. Yet without an adequate interrogation of the ways in which all communication is metaphorical and by which all language inscribes a sedimented subjectivity in researchers, these efforts did not do enough to show how Americans made meaning for themselves out of cultural practices. Moreover, they tended to stress the uses and effects of cultural artifacts at the expense of their ideological and historical meanings.²⁶ Reviewing the field in 1979, Gene Wise argued for a new American Studies, one that would be self-reflexive, pluralistic, and focused on the particular and concrete practices of American everyday life, while at the same time remaining comparative and cross-cultural.²⁷

Contemporary European cultural theory goes a long way toward meeting Wise’s goals. While most directly relevant to the “new historicism” within literary criticism, contemporary cultural theory’s location of language within larger social and discursive contexts inevitably leads it toward cultural practices beyond literature, especially to popular culture. In recent years, many of the most effective applications of European cultural theory within American Studies have been presented within analyses of popular culture. This affinity between “high” theory and “low” culture may seem surprising at first, but each category contains elements of great importance to the other. Cultural theorists trained to see literary texts as “multivocal” and “dialogic” find rich objects of study within the vernacular forms and generic recombinations collectively authored within commercial culture. The fragmented consciousness, decentered perspective, and resistance to narrative closure that post-modernists labor so diligently to produce within “high” cultural forms are routine and everyday practices within popular music and television. On the other hand, investigators of popular culture

find their objects of study so implicated in commercial and practical activities, that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the text from its conditions of creation, distribution, and reception. For those engaged in research about commercialized leisure and electronic mass media, the approaches advanced within European cultural theory may provide the only adequate frameworks for exploring and theorizing the full implications of their objects of study.

For scholars working in the American Studies tradition, the affinity between European cultural theory and American popular culture offers an opportunity to do the kind of listening that Duke Ellington recommended to Clark Terry, a listening that promises to reconnect American Studies to its original purpose and potential. Writing in *The Negro Quarterly* in 1943, Ralph Ellison suggested that “perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great political power.”²⁸ Two years later, Chester Himes incorporated Ellison’s sense of the specific in his novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. In that book, Himes’s characters negotiate identities of race, gender, and class in dialogue with the icons and images of popular music, film, folklore, and fashion.²⁹ Less than a decade after Ellison’s article, the great jazz musician Charlie Parker argued for a necessary connection between his art and his experience, explaining “if you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn.”³⁰

In the decade that proved crucial to the development of scholarly research in American Studies, Ellison, Himes, and Parker all understood something important about their historical moment—the way that popular culture, political economy, and cultural theory defined new possibilities for studying and understanding American culture. Provoked by the social and cultural changes of the 1940s, Ellison, Himes, and Parker fashioned works of art and criticism that pointed to the obsolescence of old boundaries dividing popular culture from “high” culture. By focusing on the contexts and processes of cultural creation, rather than just on validated texts, they recognized that the generation and circulation of ideas and images pervades all forms of social life. They conceived of art and culture as a part of everyone’s everyday life, not just as the domain of artists and critics. The zoot suit, the Lindy-hop, and bop music constituted commodities within commercial culture, but they also served as cultural practices, as critiques of dominant values. They disclosed what Albert Murray, rebuking white supremacist assumptions, later would call “the inescapably mulatto nature of American culture.”³¹ These African-Americans revealed the importance

of popular cultural texts and practices in the construction of individual and group identity, challenging a reductionism that concentrated solely on social and economic categories as crucibles of interests and ideas. They exposed an interaction between art and life that refuted formalist assumptions about the autonomy of art.

Perhaps most important, in their understanding of the ways in which the zoot suit, bop music, and the Lindy-hop manifested a new kind of “prestige from below” made possible by the migrations and shop floor interactions of the war years, these artists illustrated the ways in which changes in political economy necessitated new forms of cultural practice and new theories of cultural studies. The immediate, emotional, and participatory aspects of this new popular culture privileged coded, indirect, and allegorical propensities deeply embedded within the art, music, dance, and speech of aggrieved populations. The expanded reach and scope of electronic mass media called into being a fundamentally new audience, one that was unified and diverse at the same time. Describing the post-war world and its culture, Ellison wrote prophetically:

there is not stability anywhere and there will not be for many years to come, and progress now insistently asserts its tragic side; the evil now stares out of the bright sunlight. New groups will ceaselessly emerge, class lines will continue to waver and break and re-form.³²

Some of the best early work in American Studies addressed topics of cultural production in broad-minded and sophisticated fashion. The first issues of the *American Quarterly* featured important discussions by David Riesman and Charles Seeger on popular music, by Parker Tyler about film, and by Gene Balesley on subcultural practice.³³ Yet despite this early impetus within American Studies to investigate popular culture, the field—like the rest of the scholarly community—became isolated from the social bases and oppositional ideologies necessary for a break with the past. Consequently, despite significant accomplishments over the years, American Studies scholars too often have been accomplices in an unjust representation of American culture, depicting it as more monolithic and less plural than the realities of American life and history warrant.

The positions advanced by Ellison, Himes, and Parker during the decade that gave birth to the discipline of American Studies call attention to a lost opportunity for scholarship and criticism. Had they been fully understood by American Studies scholars, these provocations by Afro-American artists and critics might have helped to shape the field along radically

different lines. They might have led to an American cultural criticism that did more to resist the idea of a unified and static American identity, one that more thoroughly explored the complicated relationship between social processes and cultural texts, one that inquired more effectively into the sedimented subjectivities of language and thought that lay beneath the surface appearances of texts or social processes. What might have been a watershed for scholarship and criticism turned out to be merely a detour — one of those many “turning points” in history that failed to turn.

For many years, American Studies has needed more explorations into popular culture grounded in political economy and guided by theoretical critique. Despite the field’s recurrent preoccupations with myths and symbols (even with the eclipse of the myth-and-symbol school), as well as with the sociology of cultural production and reception, most scholarly work still focuses on validated literary and historical texts, and one can understand why. How, for example, can we begin to fathom Rupert Murdoch’s directive as the new publisher of *TV Guide* that he wanted the editors to make that publication “less cerebral and more popular”?³⁴ Exactly what can scholars add toward understanding a popular song such as the Angry Samoans’ “My Father is a Fatso”? Yet our inquiries into literary and historical texts take place within a society where people like Rupert Murdoch and the Angry Samoans have extraordinary influence, and we neglect them only at our peril.

Even if popular culture contained only debased and banal images it would be necessary for us to understand and explain them; but we know that popular culture also reflects the extraordinary creativity and ingenuity of grass roots artists and intellectuals. American Studies scholars read Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* but still know too little about the Lindy-hop. We identify Chester Himes as the author of popular detective novels, but not as the important theorist of race and culture that he was. The 1988 motion picture *Bird* (directed by Clint Eastwood) revived the importance of Charlie Parker, but it did so in a manner so oblivious to the specific historical and social contexts essential to the development of bop music that the film just as well might have been titled *Amadeus and Andy* or *Every Which Way But Black*.

Recent trends make the present moment seem similar to the 1940s: once again the work of artists from seemingly marginal communities calls attention to unprecedented opportunities for serious study of popular culture, for explorations into politics and economics, and for renewed theoretical inquiry. Fourteen-year-olds with digital samplers may not know Jacques

Lacan from Chaka Khan, but they can access the entire inventory of recorded world music with the flick of a switch. The musics of Laurie Anderson and David Byrne presume that artifacts of popular culture circulate within the same universe as artifacts of “high” culture, and they build their dramatic force from the juxtaposition of these seemingly incompatible discourses. Motion pictures such as David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* anticipate viewer competence in the codes of popular culture as well as in the concerns of contemporary cultural criticism.

As Horace Newcomb observes, the industrial mode of television production in the United States favors serial narratives, resisting ideological closures in a manner that has profound influence on the nature of narrative itself in our culture.³⁵ At the same time, post-modernism in literature and the visual arts follows some of the sensibilities of electronic mass media, especially through forms of inter-textuality and inter-referentiality that call attention to the entire field of cultural practices surrounding any given cultural utterance. Indeed, one might argue that the most sophisticated cultural theorists in America are neither critics nor scholars, but rather artists—writers Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, Rudolfo Anaya, and Maxine Hong Kingston or musicians Laurie Anderson, Prince, David Byrne, and Tracy Chapman. Their work revolves around the multiple perspectives, surprising juxtapositions, subversions of language, and self-reflexivities explored within cultural theory. It comes from and speaks to contemporary cultural crises about subjectivity and nationality. Issues that critics discuss abstractly and idealistically seem to flow effortlessly and relentlessly from the texts of popular literature and popular culture.

For example, Toni Morrison’s radical interrogation of commodities and collective memory along with her relentless critique of the role of language and textuality in maintaining social hierarchies in *Beloved* provides readers with a work of art that fundamentally resists traditional methods of criticism. Morrison’s book provides a particularly vivid illustration of the necessary connection between the basic categories of European cultural theory and the basic concerns of American cultural discourse. The entire novel revolves around the core issues evident in European cultural theory—desire, fragmentation, subjectivity, power, and language. One of Morrison’s villains is a schoolteacher who beats a slave “to show him that definition belonged to the definers—not the defined” (190). The schoolteacher also silences those whom he oppresses—“the information they offered he called backtalk and developed a variety of corrections (which he recorded in his notebook) to reeducate them” (220).

This “power to define” that Morrison reflects on constructs subjectivity from the white perspective, leaving Afro-Americans as the objects of the white gaze. Whites possess “the righteous Look every Negro learned to recognize along with his ma’am’s tit,” while blacks know that when their pictures appear in the newspaper it means trouble because those pictures are always constructed from within white subjectivity (157). Consequently, black subjectivity is problematized and fragmented. In a Derridean moment, one character ruminates on his identity — “When he looks at himself through Garner’s eyes, he sees one thing. Through Sixo’s another. One makes him feel righteous. One makes him feel ashamed” (267). At times in the novel, desire and selfishness define individual subjectivity, but in the end it is recognition of a collective subjectivity and a collective project that resolves the dilemmas posed by power and language. Perhaps most significantly, the resolution of *Beloved* comes through song and sound — “the sound that broke the back of words” (261).

The issues that inform Morrison’s *Beloved* pervade European cultural theory. They focus on diversity, difference, and fragmentation but find that centralized and localized sources of oppressive power also have created an extraordinary oppositional unity in diversity. Her work, like so much else in contemporary culture, underscores the necessity of theoretically informed criticism capable of examining the processes and contexts of cultural creation as well as its products.

The dynamism of contemporary popular culture has been especially important in sparking an attendant sensitivity among scholars to the importance of cultural studies. Six significant anthologies about American popular culture have appeared since 1987, and these anthologies ride the crest of a wave of fine monographs and articles about popular literature by Janice Radway, Michael Denning, and Elizabeth Long; on television by Lynn Spigel, John Fiske, and David Marc; about film by Dana Polan, Michael Ryan, and Rosa Linda Fregoso; on music by Lisa Lewis, Herman Gray, and Leslie Roman; and about sports by Jeff Sammons, Steve Hardy, and Elliott Gorn.³⁶ In addition, investigations presently underway by graduate students in programs all across the country promise to open up new and exciting areas of research, such as Brenda Bright’s study of Chicano low-riders, Barry Shank’s exploration into local music communities, Joe Austin’s work on graffiti artists, Tricia Rose’s explorations into rap music, and Henry Jenkins’s examination of commercial network television.³⁷ This work is not confined solely to cultural criticism; it also takes the form of cultural intervention. Reebee Garofalo’s involvement with “Rock Against

Racism” in Boston, Doug Kellner’s activism with “Alternative Views” on public access television, and Ed Hugetz’s efforts on behalf of independent filmmakers with the Southwest Alternate Media Project in Houston all combine important cultural criticism with creative cultural practice.

Cultural Studies and the Crises of Representation

Much of what is new in contemporary cultural criticism comes from self-conscious recognition of the “crisis of representation.”³⁸ The inevitable gap between cultural accounts and cultural experiences has honed an extraordinary sensitivity among researchers to the ways in which scholarly conventions of representation are not complete, objective, or impartial, but rather partial, perspectival, and interested. Problematizing representation has been especially important to scholars in feminist and ethnic studies as they challenge the unconscious sexism and racism sedimented within presumably neutral scholarly methods and perspectives. Indeed, one can argue that the friendly reception accorded European cultural theory in the United States largely stems from the political and cultural struggles waged by women and ethnic minorities inside and outside of universities over the past two decades.

These struggles call attention to a crisis of representation in a different sense of the word, not as artistic representation through characters and symbols, but rather as political representation through action and speech on behalf of particular groups. Scholarly commitments to the agenda raised by European cultural theory often are belittled as “trendy,” “careerist,” and “arcane,” but their emergence in America is tied directly to real crises confronting key constituencies, including women, people of color, blue-collar workers, state employees, and scholars themselves. The emergence of European cultural criticism on this continent has been less the product of internal debates within American Studies and related disciplines than of a recognition of changing conditions in American society brought on by the crises of deindustrialization and the rise of neo-conservatism.

Just as the African-American art and criticism of the 1940s both reflected and shaped a concrete historical moment, contemporary cultural creation and criticism take place within a cultural and social matrix made possible by social change. In the 1980s, the transition to a “high tech” service and sales economy has deindustrialized America, fundamentally disrupting the social arrangements fashioned in the 1950s. Structural unemployment, migration to the Sunbelt, and the radical reconstitution of the family all

have worked to detach individuals from the traditional authority of work, community, and family, while the individualistic ethic of upward mobility encourages a concomitant sense of fragmentation and isolation. As the economy focuses less on production and more on consumption, cable television, video recorders, digital samplers, and compact discs expand both the reach and scope of media images. Popular culture intervenes in the construction of individual and group identity more than ever before as Presidents win popularity by quoting from Hollywood films (“make my day,” “read my lips”), while serious political issues such as homelessness and hunger seem to enter public consciousness most fully when acknowledged by popular musicians or in made-for-television movies.

It should not be surprising then that radical changes in society and culture in the 1980s once again have provoked an emphasis on popular culture within American Studies. However, the current moment of academic cultural studies differs sharply from that of the 1950s. Part of the revived interest in popular culture stems from victories by women and racial minorities in winning access to university positions and their consequent interest in those voices silenced in “high” culture but predominant within some realms of popular culture.

Defeats for the democratization of society also have played a major role in shaping contemporary scholarly concerns. In the decades after World War II, the university could be seen as part of an ascendent social formation. As educators of a new class of technicians and administrators, scholars in the 1950s could see themselves as a plausible part of an expanding elite and as beneficiaries of dominant ideology. Six times as many students attended college in 1970 than had done so in 1930, and the numbers of faculty rose from 48,000 in 1920 to 600,000 by 1972. Between 1965 and 1970 alone, the numbers of college faculty grew by 138,000.³⁹ These years also witnessed a dramatic growth in student enrollments, especially among women and ethnic minorities. Yet the economic recessions of the 1970s and the attendant fiscal crisis of the state curtailed this growth. Neo-conservative ideologues launched an attack on public sector employment, arguing that such jobs drained capital from the private sector and functioned to subsidize what neo-conservatives described as the “adversary culture” (a phrase borrowed from Lionel Trilling and F. O. Matthiessen in the early days of American Studies).⁴⁰ Budget cuts served to undermine the economic base of public education, while reversals of hard-won commitments to equal opportunity for women and ethnic minorities undermined some of the constituencies bringing new voices and concerns to academic life. In

addition, while raising payroll and sales taxes, neo-conservative policies for the cutting of income and capital gains taxes have left the United States with the most regressive tax structure of any western nation. This economic situation pits educators against low- and middle-income taxpayers and allows wealthy individuals and large corporations to reap most of the benefits of higher education, while paying ever smaller proportions of its costs.⁴¹

In the 1980s, it has become clear that most academics are tied to a declining social formation, to the residues of commitments to equal opportunity and to increased access to education that characterized some aspects of the politics of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite lavish salaries paid to a few scholars with international reputations and despite increasing total budgets for higher education, the social power of most scholars involved in cultural studies has declined drastically over the past twenty years. Since the economic crises of the 1970s, a radical reallocation of capital has voided unilaterally the social bargain made in the post-war years, marginalizing almost all but the most technical and vocational forms of education. Between 1975 and 1986 the percentage of current-fund revenue for higher education coming from federal, state, and local governments dropped from 51.3 percent to 44.9 percent. This decline led to serious increases in student tuition which further skewed the class base of student populations. As shown in a recent survey by the American Council on Education, there have been severe declines in the numbers of minority and poor students enrolled in college since 1976, and there seems to be little concrete action being taken to reverse that trend.⁴²

Of course, private sector donations to education increased during the 1980s but in such a way as to put the resources of the university at the disposal of the highest bidders. Distinguished universities have eliminated entire geography, linguistics, and sociology departments, not because of declining enrollments, but to finance the ever-increasing costs of scientific research which might lead to lucrative licensing and selling of patent rights.⁴³ Military and business research thrives, while other areas face severe budget shortages. This is not just a problem for the humanities; funding for social science research from the National Science Foundation fell 75 percent in the early 1980s; and between 1975 and 1982 the number of social science graduate students receiving federal support at leading research universities fell 53 percent, while federal support for students in other scientific fields rose by 15 percent.⁴⁴ Like industrial workers and inner city dwellers, scholars in cultural fields not only confront a power

structure hostile to their ideological interests, they face as well a political and economic apparatus determined to undermine public education, cultural diversity, and mechanisms for equal opportunity—in short the entire social base necessary for their survival.

Neo-conservatives know full well that academics suffering from the transformations in culture and economics during the 1970s and 1980s pose a threat to the emerging hegemony of neo-conservatism. From the attacks on critical scholarship by William Bennett and Lynne Cheney at their posts as heads of the National Endowment for the Humanities to corporate funding for neo-conservative scholarship (The Olin Foundation's backing of Allan Bloom and the Exxon Foundation's support for E. D. Hirsch) to Senator Jesse Helms's disgraceful efforts to cut off federal funding for controversial works of art, neo-conservatives have demonstrated their understanding of how struggles over meaning are also struggles over resources.⁴⁵ As Michael Denning observes, "The post-World War Two university is a part of 'mass culture,' of the 'culture industry,' a central economic and ideological apparatus of American capitalism."⁴⁶ As such, its battles resonate with the struggles over resources operative in society at large.

Under these conditions, struggles over meaning are also struggles over resources. They arbitrate what is permitted and what is forbidden; they help determine who will be included and who will be excluded; they influence who gets to speak and who gets silenced. Investigations into popular culture are not merely good-hearted efforts to expand the knowledge base of our field, they are also inevitably a part of the political process by which groups—including scholars—seek to reposition themselves in the present by reconstituting knowledge about culture and society in the past.

Traditional American Studies inquiries about "What is an American?" have insufficiently problematized the ways in which scholars perceive culture being produced and received in any given circumstance. These questions have imposed premature closures on open questions and have presumed a more unified American experience than the evidence can support. Yet questions of national identity are crucial to culture, and American Studies has an important role to play by applying the categories raised within European cultural theory to the American context, as well as by raising new questions that emerge from the particular complexities and contradictions within American culture.⁴⁷

Most important, a theoretically informed American Studies would begin by listening for the sounds that Toni Morrison describes, the sounds capable of "breaking the back of words." These sounds 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. Accessible by listening to what is already being said (and sung and shouted) by ordinary Americans, these sounds hold the key toward understanding the zoot suit and the Lindy-hop, and so much more. To paraphrase Ellison's narrator in *The Invisible Man*: who knows; perhaps they speak for you.

NOTES

1. See Thomas J. McCormick, *America's Half Century* (Baltimore, 1989).
2. See esp. the challenges raised within geography by Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* (London, 1988); and in legal studies by Kimberle Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law," *Harvard Law Review* 101 (May 1988): 1331-87; and Mari Matsuda, "Affirmative Action and Legal Knowledge: Planting Seeds in Plowed-Up Ground," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 11 (Spring 1988): 1-17.
3. Michael Ryan, "The Politics of Film: Discourse, Psychoanalysis, Ideology," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Chicago, 1988), 478.
4. George Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago, 1986).
5. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York, 1987), 255; hereafter, cited in the text.
6. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975): 6-18.
7. Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (London, 1981).
8. See Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism Among the Theorists," in Grossberg and Nelson, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 35-73; as well as George Lipsitz, "The Struggle for Hegemony," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 146-50.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, 1976).
10. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Harmondsworth, England, 1976); Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice* (Ithaca, 1980). For an extraordinary application of Foucault's work to American culture, see Thomas L. Dumm, *Democracy and Punishment* (Madison, Wis., 1987).
11. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis, 1984), 71-82.
12. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture," *Media, Culture, and Society* 2 (1980): 225-54; Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London, 1985); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre Femme* (Paris, 1974); Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston, 1975); Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

(Bloomington, Ind., 1984). Bourdieu's great contributions have been in bringing a convincing sociological frame to aesthetic questions, as well as his discovery that cultural categories bear a fundamental relationship to the circulation and distribution of capital. Lawrence Levine's fine work in *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989) on the changing reputation of Shakespeare in America reflects one manifestation of Bourdieu's influence. Irigiray and Hélène Cixous have been most important in raising questions about the body and subjectivity in feminist psychoanalytic film criticism. See Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984); and Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much* (New York, 1988) for important discussions of their methods in relation to film criticism. Also see de Lauretis's *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987) for a critique of post-structuralists' neglect of feminist theory. Habermas's *Legitimation Crisis* provides an important perspective on ideological legitimation and historical change that has exerted great influence on Fredric Jameson's exemplary essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (1979): 130-48; as well as on my own *Time Passages* (Minneapolis, 1990). Bakhtin is perhaps the European cultural theorist most influential on American scholars today; see Horace Newcomb's "Dialogic Aspects of Mass Communication," in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1 (1984): 34-50; and Dana Polan's *Power and Paranoia* (New York, 1986).

12. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Grossberg and Nelson, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 271-313; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1987).

13. Michelle Lamont, "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida," *American Journal of Sociology* 93 (1987): 584-622. I cite Lamont's critique because it effectively explains Derrida's reception within scholarly communities in Europe and America, but I do not intend to use it to belittle Derrida's contributions or to call into question his own historical knowledge of marginality as an Algerian in France.

14. Judith Lowder Newton, "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism'" in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York, 1989), 153-54.

15. See Lynne Cheney's incoherent references to post-structuralism in "Report to the President, the Congress, and the American People," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 35 (21 Sept. 1988): 18-23, esp. 18, 19, for an example of anti-intellectualism; and Sande Cohen's *Historical Culture* (Berkeley, 1986) for an example of the reification of theory. The exchange among members of the Syracuse University English Department in the *Syracuse Scholar* (Spring, 1987) demonstrates just how acrimonious this debate can become.

16. I thank Reda Bensmaïa for this turn of phrase although he should bear no responsibility for its meaning here.

17. Jon Wiener, "The De Man Affair," *The Nation* 246 (9 Jan. 1988): 22.

18. Hall, "The Toad in the Garden," 69-70.

19. In British Cultural Studies, "articulation" has two meanings. One sense of the word refers to speech acts of enunciation. The other refers to a state of connection or jointedness. Thus ideology can be seen as the product of utterances, as well as a device for connecting individuals and groups.

20. Michael Denning, "The Special American Conditions: Marxism and American Studies," *American Quarterly* 38, Bibliography Issue (1986): 357; Giles Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York, 1987), 147-72.

21. See David W. Noble, *The End of American History* (Minneapolis, 1985).
22. Gunn, *The Culture of Criticism*, 161.
23. *Ibid.*, 160, 172.
24. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), ix, ii.
25. Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge* (New York, 1965), 117.
26. Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 24 (Oct. 1972): 435–50.
27. Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly* 31, Bibliography Issue (1979): 293–337.
28. Ralph Ellison, "Editorial Comment," *The Negro Quarterly* (Winter-Spring 1943): 301.
29. Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (New York, 1945).
30. Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York, 1971), 18.
31. Albert Murray, *The Omni Americans* (New York, 1983), 22.
32. Ellison, "Society, Morality, and the Novel," in *The Living Novel: A Symposium*, ed. Granville Hicks (New York, 1962), 66. I am indebted to John S. Wright for calling this quote to my attention.
33. See especially David Riesman, "Listening to Popular Music," *American Quarterly* 2 (Winter 1950): 359–71; Russell Roth, "The Ragtime Revival: A Critique," *American Quarterly* 2 (Winter 1950): 329–39; Charles Seeger, "Music and Class Structure in the United States," *American Quarterly* 9 (Fall 1957): 281–94; Parker Tyler, "Hollywood as a Universal Church," *American Quarterly* 2 (Summer 1950): 165–76; Gene Balsley, "Hot Rod Culture," *American Quarterly* 2 (Winter 1950): 353–58.
34. Mark Schwed, "Don't Mind Murdoch," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 21 Dec. 1988, A2.
35. Horace Newcomb, "Untold Stories," presentation at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 30 Nov. 1989. Quoted from author's notes.
36. Ian Angus and Sut Jhally, eds., *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America* (New York, 1988); Paul Buhle, ed., *Popular Culture in America* (Minneapolis, 1987); Richard Butsch, ed., *For Fun and Profit* (Philadelphia, 1990); Donald Lazere, ed., *American Media and Mass Culture* (Los Angeles, 1987); Lary May, ed., *Recasting Postwar America* (Chicago, 1989); Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987). See Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents* (London, 1988); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill, 1984); Elizabeth Long, *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (London, 1985); Lynn Spigel, "Television and the Home Theater," *Camera Obscura* 16 (1988): 11–46; John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London, 1987); David Marc, *Comic Visions* (Boston, 1989); Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia* (New York, 1986); Michael Ryan and Doug Kellner, *Camera Politica* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988); Rosa Linda Fregoso, "Born in East L.A. and the Politics of Representation," *Cultural Studies* 4 (Oct. 1990); Lisa Lewis, "Form and Female Authorship in Music Videos," *Communication* 9 (1987): 355–77; Herman Gray, *Producing Jazz* (Philadelphia, 1989); Jeff Sammons, *Outside the Ring* (Urbana, 1987); Elliott Gorn, *Boxing in America* (Chicago, 1986).
37. Bright, Rice Univ.; Shank, Univ. of Pennsylvania; Austin, Univ. of Minnesota; Rose, Brown Univ.; and Jenkins, Univ. of Wisconsin.
38. Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 7.
39. Peter Steinfels, *The Neo-Conservatives* (New York, 1979), 51.

40. *Ibid.*, 56.

41. See Jodie T. Allen, "Moynihan Pushes Administration to 'Fess Up' to Social Security Tax Scam," *Washington Post*, 10 Jan. 1990, B3.

42. The study by the American Council on Education revealed that the percentage of low-income black high school graduates going to college fell from 40% to 30% and that the percentage of low-income Latinos fell from 50% to 35%. In addition, the study showed that even among middle-income blacks the rate of college participation fell from 53% to 36% in 1988 and for middle-income Latinos the rate of college participation fell from 53% to 46%.

43. See Leonard Minsky and David Noble, "Corporate Takeover on Campus," *The Nation* 249 (30 Oct. 1989): 494–96.

44. National Center for Education Statistics, *1988 Digest of Educational Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, 1988), 258; Chris Raymond, "Social Scientists, Used To Drastic Reagan-Era Fund Cuts, Hope Worst Is Over," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 17 May 1989, A20. I am grateful to Charles Betz for calling these statistics to my attention in his undergraduate honors thesis "Reconstructing the Academy: The Political Economy of Higher Education" (University of Minnesota, 1989).

45. I do not wish to assert that all of these people have exactly the same agenda, but Bennett's attacks on student loans, Cheney's condemnations of critical theory and non-traditional curricula, and Helms's fulminations against decisions by the National Endowment for the Arts all have functioned to limit access to already scarce public resources by what they view as the "adversary culture." On the other hand, intervention by tax-exempt, neo-conservative foundations has been important in funneling private funds (no doubt, tax deductible) to ideologically acceptable academics. The John M. Olin Foundation has channeled \$3.6 million to Allan Bloom to run the John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy at the Univ. of Chicago, \$1.4 million to Samuel Huntington for the Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard Univ. (and a \$100,000 research fellowship for Huntington himself), \$1 million to J. Clayburn LaForce and James Wilson to set up the Olin Center for Policy at U.C.L.A.'s Graduate School of Management, \$376,000 to Irving Kristol, \$200,000 to Walter Williams, and \$5.8 million for law schools to establish programs in "Law and Economics" that apply "free market principles" to legal studies, according to Jon Wiener, "Dollars for Neocon Scholars," *The Nation* 250 (1 Jan. 1990): 12–13.

46. Denning, "The Special American Conditions," 356–80.

47. The structuralist and post-structuralist emphases of European cultural theory might seem to eclipse the nation as a unit of study. Yet while cultural practices like the social construction of gendered subjects, the medicalization of sexuality, and the tyranny of univocal narratives transcend national boundaries, they are inflected differently in each national context. Part of the attraction of European cultural theory in the U.S. stems from its bold skepticism about the cherished American ideal of "progress." Conversely, America's complex social and cultural formations often seem "postmodern" to Europeans unaccustomed to the ethnic diversity and physical mobility common in the United States. As Todd Gitlin quips, "Postmodernism is born in the USA because juxtaposition is one of the things that we do best" (Gitlin, "Postmodernism: Roots and Politics," in Angus and Jhally, *Cultural Politics*, 355).