FIELD WORK


It remains to say something of the public women, which the Incas permitted to avoid worse consequences. They lived in the fields, in poor cabins, each by herself and not together. They were forbidden to enter the towns lest they communicate with other women. They were called pampa runa, a word that indicates their dwelling-place and trade, composed of pampa, “open place” or “field” (it has both meanings), and runa, which in the singular means “person” (man or woman) and in the plural means “people.” Putting the two words together, if the sense of “open field” is taken, pampa runa means “people who live in the field, because of their wretched trade”; if the sense of “marketplace” is taken, it means “a person or woman of the marketplace,” implying that as the place is public and receives all those who go to it, so do they. In short, it means “public woman.”

Are We Post-American Studies?

Lawrence Buell

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The one-word answer to the question posed by the title would have to be “no.” As one fellow Americanist has written, “Cancellation-by-prefix more often than not preserves as connection what it pretends to erase as sign.” I doubt that we shall ever truly become post-American studies, however earnest our resolves, until or unless the United States ceases to be a unit of jurisdictional and curricular organization, and neither is likely to happen soon. But this much at least is certain: what for the last half-century or more has called itself American studies surely will change and indeed is changing fast.

The challenge for us who work in this area is to define what will follow the current age of revisionist awakening. That’s more or less where we have been since circa 1970, when the first and perhaps the only “school” ever to dominate American studies—the so-called myth-symbol approach—began to come under serious attack both methodologically (for liberties taken in selection and interpretation of historical evidence) and theoretically (for its consensus approach to American history, its tendency to posit a “main-
stream” of American thought). Academic research then began to assimilate what had been overlooked by the classic consensus narratives of American culture’s internal teleology generated during the previous several decades. They were too male, too high-canonical, Eurocentric, exceptionalist, perhaps even imperialist in their framing of American culture. Or so that earlier dispensation today increasingly called “Cold War criticism” has come to seem.2 Never mind that the contemporary critique, in order to make its own countermove, is bound to oversimplify the internal complexity and intellectual range of that formative epoch of American studies. It is incontestable that around 1970, just as the coordinates of American culture seemed mapped, the project started to come undone, never to be reassembled as it was before the rise of feminist and African-American revisionism. “Conflict” or “dissensus” replaced consensus as the preferred metaphors.

Even after a quarter-century, Americanists are still processing the results, because the various revisions in American culture studies have not come all at once but in waves, and because they have come symbiotically with such developments as the increasing percentage of important contemporary writing in the United States produced by non-WASPS, and the movement within academic theory to question whether literary texts should remain the main objects of literary study. A quarter-century of ferment and fission has left practitioners of American studies feeling that the field needs remapping but that their basic cartographical instruments will no longer serve the purpose. In particular, the most fundamental category, “American,” seems more problematic than ever before. Not only must our research and teaching reflect the awareness that “America” is pluralistic, not monolithic; it must be equally attentive to the parochialism of American studies’ traditional equation of “America” with “United States.” If we continue to disregard that our two master terms—the cultural entity and the political unit—are not the synonyms that American studies (as practiced in the United States, anyhow) has traditionally taken them to be, we risk lapsing into what increasingly looks like an uncritical nationalism, or at least being thought to have so lapsed.3 For most Americanists in the United States, this contemporary problematization of “America” requires a conceptual shift as fundamentally significant as feminist theory’s critique of the generic male pronoun a generation ago.

How must we then reformulate American studies, given the directions that history, literature, and academic discourse are taking? In particular, how should we conceive American studies in the light of the hemispheric and indeed global character of “America,” taking into account its full range of origins, interdependencies, and effects?

1. Our theories about American culture must adjust themselves to a theory of nationhood something like this: that nations are utopian social fictions4 that are at once epistemologically suspect, economically obsolete, politically potent (since world order continues to recognize the sovereign nation as primary unit), territorially determinate (except in wartime), and culturally porous. In short, nation and culture aren’t coextensive, but neither are they disjoint.

2. Given that national interdependence is increasing in the main if not uniformly, American studies will preoccupy itself increasingly with boundary-crossing phenomena of all sorts, such as: (a) diaspora studies that trace patterns of “dissemi-nation” (as Homi Bhabha wittily calls it);6 (b) so-called border studies that reimagine the culture (or cultures) of the United States as hemispherically interlinked;6 and (c) the placement of the United States within (trans)hemispheric circulation of cultural formations, whether generated from within the United States or circulating through the United States from some external point of origin.7 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Doris Sommer have done distinguished work in areas (a) and (b).8 My own interest lies especially in area (c): for example, in how “(post)colonial” formations like pastoral nationalism have influenced cultural self-definition in the United States.9

3. I have already suggested that the focus on national borders and border erasure follows logically from the multiculturalist thrust that was in good part responsible for the displacement of the older-style consensualism of the classic myth-symbol school. African diaspora studies, Asian-American studies, and especially Latino studies have been the bridge. This refocus will quicken the shift we are already seeing away from now-familiar debates about national identity vs. cultural particularism, toward the issue of whether a model of cultural identity at any level can hold its ground against a model of cultural hybridization or syncretism. If the increasingly complicated ethnic composition of the student body at major universities today is a fair litmus test, the answer is certainly no.

4. Insofar as self-identified American Studies projects continue to center on the United States (and most undertaken within this country probably will), practitioners must guard against reinstating versions of older-style totalization. New historicist analysis of American ideological formations, like much recent work on the culture of United States imperialism, too easily rigifies into the mirror of the consensualism it rejects. Indeed, Americanists (i.e., United States-ists) of all persuasions—I certainly plead guilty to this myself—seem chronically tempted to define the meaning of America, which always gets us in hot water. In this we repeat ancient traditions of Americanist discourse, such as essentialism, didac-
ticism, and utopianism—ringing moralistic *procuñiamentos* whose
cogency depends more on rhetorical will than on evidentiary base to call
what we described into being. (The foregoing sentence, of course,
demonstrates my own irrevocable colonization by that genre.)

5. Though contemporary transnationalism and cultural theory require us to
forsake older myths of national distinctiveness and question the solidity
of nation as category, that does not bar us from adopting motifs
distinctive to United States history as central reference points. On the contrary,
it might be a healthy thing if the American studies faculties of every uni-
versity where such programs exist held periodic retreats where they
collectively drew up and pondered lists of historical/cultural traits that
are arguably distinctive to the United States: the percentage of residents
who claim they believe in God and hell, the institution of the liberal arts
college, the United States's status as the first modern ex-colony to win
independence, the hyperspecificity of its race law (in certain states, par-
icularly), the national homicide rate compared to the rates of other
industrialized nations, the percentage of autobiographical writing in both
the traditional and the expanded literary canons, or the size of this coun-
try's land mass that lies within the temperate zone. On the basis of such
empirically specifiable traits as these, perhaps we might be able to arrive
at a more faithful set of generalizations about the culture of the United
States than have been formulated. In short, I still see a place for projects
like the quite good 1990 multidisciplinary Oxford conference published
under the title of *Is America Different?: A New Look at American
Exceptionalism*. Provided, that is, that the section of libraries devoted to
Americanist symposia with interrogative titles also includes such works
as *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature*?—an equally merito-
rious compendium of contrary thrust, emphasizing intrahemispheric
circulation rather than national distinctiveness.10

6. Americanists whose field is literature may stand especially to benefit
from my hypotheti cal motif inventory, for two reasons. One is literary
study's skittishness about empirical procedure. At the fall 1994 meet-
ing of the *PMI.* A Editorial Board, I was struck (though not surprised)
to find that the call for papers for a special issue on the use of evidence in
literary studies had been unusually slow in generating contributions that
were even close to passing muster. From conversations since, and such
desultory reading on the subject as I have managed, I am convinced that
the editors of *Questions of Evidence*, a compendium of *Critical Inquiry*
symposia, are quite right—at least with respect to literary studies—in
asserting that "it is extraordinary how little direct attention [the topic
of evidence] has received."11 To the extent this bespeaks tribal disinterest

in empiricism as a dimension and calibrator of theory, studies of the lit-
Reynolds, and the literary history of the United States need to take on more ballast. This
need is especially compelling in light of a second consideration: that the
argument for literary distinctiveness on the basis of language is largely
denied us, since U.S. literature is so overwhelmingly Anglophone—

The case for American literature's autonomy has therefore always rested
much more on claims about subject matter than about aesthetic form: on
broad sociohistorical claims about the impact on the creative imagination of
the ideology of individualism, the frontier experience, etc. The more decen-
tered so-called American literary studies becomes, the more suspect the categ-

1. Carolyn Porter, "What We Know That We Don't Know: Remapping American

2. Americanist Cold War criticism was first significantly characterized as such in
several of the contributions to Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease, eds.,
*The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
University Press, 1985), particularly Pease's essay, "Mob-Dick and the Cold
War," as well as Jonathan Arac, "E.O. Mathiessen: Authorizing the American
Renaissance." Mathiessen and Perry Miller, the most seminal figures in pre-
modern American literary studies, have understandably been singled out for
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3. Hence, for example, Sauvian Bercovitch's introduction to *The Cambridge
History of American Literature (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) is careful to emphasize the contributors' engagement with "nationality as a problem" and their awareness that "America" in these volumes designates [geographically] the United States, or the territories that were to become part of the United States. "America" from this standpoint conceptually refers to "a declaration of community, a people constituted and sustained by verbal fiat," and hence "a semiotics of exclusion, closing out not only the Old World but all other countries of the Americas" (1: 3).

4. Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (London: Verso, 1983), is the seminal text from which recent, more nuanced discussions of nation as fiction have sprung.

5. Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in Bhabha, ed., Nation and Narration (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291–322. Several other essays in this post-Anderson collection are also exemplary. See also the journals Diaspora, Callaloo, and Transition.


7. The variety of conceptual frameworks is rich. For example, Kaplan and Pease (note 2 above) operates from a U.S. hegemony approach; Frederick Buell, National Culture and the New Global System (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), operates from a more decentered global culture approach; Jean-Philippe Mathy, Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), updates a more traditional "European Invention of America" approach; Richard Slatta, Cowboys of the Americas (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), takes an infrahemispheric/comparatist approach.


