Introduction: America and Its Studies

DJELAL KADIR

IN A RECENT MEETING AMONG INTELLECTUALS FROM COUNtries whose governments are on less-than-amicable terms, an American professor was greeted with the quip "Welcome to the axis of evil. How is it to live in the belly of the beast?" Moments of collective paroxysm are not always conducive to conversation. It should be obvious to anyone who cares about historical experience, however, that such moments are precisely when dialogue is imperative. The quality of conversation may well be one of the most significant measures of civilization, and when people converse, the interlocutors inevitably realize that civilizations do not clash, contrary to some academic reductionists, the media, and politicians (see Huntington). What clash are the barbarities that inhere in all civilizations, as Walter Benjamin reminded us from another time of global paroxysms. Perennially lucid, and too often unheard, writers from America's intellectual history have clamored to instruct us in the necessity of deferring inalterable conviction and postponing the crystallization of visceral intuitions into universal truths. Sherwood Anderson, writing in 1919, sought to teach America as much in his introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio*, when he noted "that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (25).

Writing a decade and a half after Anderson, at a moment when convictions would harden into unassailable truths that found their test in war and unprecedented destruction, R. P. Blackmur diagnosed the double agency of American culture and the "ulterior purposes" of American civilization in a seminal book, *The Double Agent: Essays in Elucidation and Craft* (1935). Blackmur, an embodiment of what one could call America's organic cosmopolitan,[1] set out not to disambiguate the history of his

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culture but to point up the dangers of zealous disambiguation. He called one of the essays in his book "A Critic's Job of Work," and his imaginative skepticism targeted the barbarity that inheres as civilization's inextricable "ulteriority":

> The worse evil of fanatic falsification—of arrogant irrationality and barbarism in all its forms—arises when a body of criticism is governed by an *idée fixe*, a really exaggerated heresy, when a notion of genuine but small scope is taken literally as of universal application. [. . .] Ulterior is not in itself a pejorative, but only when applied to an enemy. (888)

In more recent critical parlance, what these Americans describe are "regimes of truth" (Foucault 112–13). Such regimes are not unique to America or to the West for which it stands; they obtain just as forcefully in civilizations and cultures that America's regime at this historical juncture has deemed inimical to its culture, though presenting a boon to its politicians. Invariably, when such regimes confront each other, civilization is preempted by its ulterior twin, barbarism, whose rebarbative self-assertiveness subsumes its mirror counterpart as its resonant echo.

In a 1994 narrative, Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan writer and sociology professor at the University of Mohammed V, in Rabat, diagnosed as pervasive what has indeed turned out to be an echoic counterpart to the current American regimental idée fixe, a lexical prescience on Mernissi's part that is sure to open a file on her at the United States Justice Department and the Office of Homeland Security, if there is not one on her already. She wrote:

> Wherever there are human beings, there is a *qaʿida*, or invisible rule. If you stick to the *qaʿida*, nothing bad can happen to you. [. . .] In Arabic, she reminded me, *qaʿida* meant many different things, all of which shared the same basic premise. A mathematical law or a legal system was a *qaʿida*, and so was the foundation of a building. *Qaʿida* was also a custom, or a behavioral code. *Qaʿida* was everywhere. (62)[2]

Anderson's "grotesque," Blackmur's "idée fixe," Foucault's "regimes of truth," Mernissi's and now our own *al-qaʿida* share the self-conviction of tautology as epistemic common ground, a mode of knowing that is redundant in and as self-knowing. The explanatory power of such knowledge constitutes its object even while claiming to seek knowledge of it. And the self-clenching fortification of such redundancy inexorably renders the knowing subject part of what it seeks to know. Thus, the knower is inevitably in the shadow of his or her object of knowledge. In what follows, I shall examine how this is also true of America in its studies, particularly American American studies—that is, American studies as pursued by those scholars who are, tautologically, inevitable objects of their sought-after knowledge. I shall be examining, then, a series of isomorphisms (at times counterintuitive, just as often denied) between the practice of American studies and the field in which such practices are deployed—namely, American culture and history, especially when those practitioners are also Americans, actually or through mimetic professional practices.

American culture has labored mightily since the inception of its history to differentiate itself as unique and exceptional. In so doing, it conforms to every other national culture in history. It is only in the creative imagination of Americanists and the robotic iterations of political rant that such exceptionalism is an exception, a delusion that is symbiotically reinforced by America's political and academic discourses and sustained by dint of military might and economic power, thereby tautologically vindicating academic and public discourse alike. As an academic field that came by its institutional status in a time of ideological Manichaeanism, American studies is a product of this symbiosis and, as such, congenitally fated to be a symptom of its history. As recent national history demonstrates, the myth-image-symbol archetype of American studies discourse that some would deem transcended has merely metamorphosed in syn-

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chrony with a changed world. The articulation of myths like the imperial frontier of manifest destiny has shifted, the images have been permuted, and the symbols have been updated to suit historical and global expediency and the efficacy of periodic nationalist recidivism. The best hope for American studies as an area of knowledge, I argue, is for it to cease to be American and an instrument of official state policy and become, instead, an independent, international field of inquiry and teaching. The centrifuge of history and the entitlement cadre of specialists, domestic and international, that the officially instituted field has engendered resist mightily any movement toward an exogenous discourse on America. The result is the reiteration of national discourse as self-generated formation, a self-possession in epistemic paradox and ethical obtuseness that goes on reinforcing and naturalizing the symptomatic Americanness of American studies—the history of malaprops, self-contradictions, and ironies notwithstanding, starting with the term *America*.[3] An inquiry into American culture might do well to start here.

While *America* has come to be identified with a single country—the United States—America is a bicontinental hemisphere between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans that extends on a north-south axis from the Arctic to Antarctica. The identification of this territorial expanse with the name of a single country inside it is a historical curiosity, with all the national(ist) symptoms that obtain in that peculiar history. The study of America in a discipline referred to as American studies has been likewise marked by this singular national denotation through a curious series of historical and ideological reductions that are at once evidence of and conducive to a perennial nationalism.

Rethinking, like all revisionary endeavors, emerges from a necessity to deal with what is unsettled. And to rethink America risks the implosion of the enterprise into the history of what it would reconsider, inasmuch as American history is the history of chronic instability, pushed to a critical state by the volatile circumstances at the start of the present century. Founded on a myth of perpetual project-in-the-making, America has never been marked by steadiness, certainly not to a degree commensurate to the steadfastness with which we, its mythographers and scholars, have labored on its behalf. Such tenacity, in fact, may be in proportion to the felt absence of constancy and stability in America, whether as reckoned reality or as object of scholarly investigation. Thus, America's volatility has been internalized into its mythological project as a defining construct.

Assertiveness generally masks uncertainty, and America's discourse, most obviously at critical times such as the historical present, emerges simultaneously as blustery assertion and as uncertain question. This has been so from the hemisphere's earliest European mapping, when America came by its name and its historical consciousness at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries. For the scholar of literary culture and Greco-Latin philology, and certainly for the historian, America is founded in a quizzical fusion of self-affirmation that ends as an interrogatory as much as an assertion. We know this to be true, lexically, rhetorically, and politically, starting with the philologically punned neologism *America*.[4] Similar equivocations are to be found in the heterogeneous demographics, ideologies, and political underpinnings of a manifold America and of American history down to the present.

Today the equivocations between self-assertion and perplexity emerge with critical acuteness. This urgency arises in good part from an imbalance since the last decade of the twentieth century, when the counterweight that gave America its ideological and epistemic equilibrium disappeared into the dustbin of history. Having reveled in triumphalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, American self-definition, along with the discipline of American studies, discovered the complexities that accompany the disappearance of a Manichaean reduction, for which a

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substitute was anxiously sought and inexorably found in the New World Order, decreed in predictable succession to the crumbling of the Soviet Union and the opportune advent of the 1990–91 Gulf War. During the binary that drove the blessed simplicity of ideological antithesis for over three quarters of the twentieth century, the time of the so-called cold war (see Kadir, "Spatial Logic"), American studies as an academic and scholarly field found its institutional consolidation in the United States of America and its political satellites around the world. In the Manichaeanism of the new New World Order willed by Bush I to Bush II, the New American Studies simultaneously comes into its own. That Bush inheritance is now being played out as a global campaign through the atrocious events of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. The "war on terrorism" in this New World Order is being waged with the same political expediency and obsessive reductions of an idée fixe in a deadly clasp with what Mernissi identified in 1994 as *al-qaʿida*. In the present death dance, the dramatis personae of the true shadow government, not the ostensible one, derive from the same cast, with the same doctrinal pathologies that powered the cold war of the twentieth century.

The equivocal self-assertiveness, now righteous, now dubious, that accompanied America's founding and most recent foundering also comprises the foundational discourse on which American studies was built, in the United States and for its political satellites, as part of the Marshall Plan after World War II. Under the aegis of the United States Information Service, now openly a part of the State Department, the current command cohort of American studies has been formed with the patronage of the United States government since 1947 (see Michael Bérubé's essay, in this issue, on the role of the CIA and the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the propagation of "the American way"). The regimes of truth instituted by official policy have served as defining instruments that continue unproblematically, though more critically of late, to perpetuate the illusion of the United States of America as self-identical to its national and nationalist myths, symbols, and images. In the critical heterogeneity that now renders such identities problematic, myths, symbols, and images have morphed in academic discourse into epistemes, paradigms, and simulacra. Looked at in a historical context, however, the critical formations remain coterminous with a hegemonic, nation-based discourse groping for its ideological and cultural parameters through borders and diversities, internal and peripheral. The shudder of heterodoxy that more recent transformations in cultural assessment have caused in those hegemonic regimes of truth, now more assertive than ever, has certainly not gone unnoticed. And such perils have found eloquent diagnoses in timely treatises like George Lipsitz's informative *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* and John Carlos Rowe's *The New American Studies*.

Historically, the field of American studies has served as the ideological and discursive locus of national mythographies, and its constructs were reiteratively consolidated by a number of stentorian voices during the twentieth century. While American Americanists finely parse and subtly differentiate these enunciations, for those engaged in an assessment of these pronouncements from outside the regimes of the guild, such programmatic claims, in their persistent ideological and periodic regularity, become obvious serial symptoms of the continuity of America's ongoing national and nationalist project. These are the touchstones of United States Americanness in the founding of American studies throughout the recently concluded century. The trinity most commonly invoked in this disciplinary pantheon of United States Americanism consists of Vernon Parrington and his 1927–30 *Main Currents in American Thought*, where American national culture is viewed as a teleological stream of continuous emancipation from the Old World European structures of decadent aristocracy and sectarian ideologies; F. O. Matthiessen and his 1941 *American Re-*

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naissance, which consolidated a national canon based on the five-year focal point (1850–55) of America's individualist nonconformity, or "double agency," as Blackmur would say; and Lionel Trilling with his 1950 *The Liberal Imagination*, which, at a point of America's headlong careening into the ideological battles of the cold war, sought to delineate a divide between ideology and imagination, once again seeking to exorcise ideological sectarianism from the Americanness of American culture, literary culture especially, thereby dissociating liberality and imagination from the fray of ideological commitments that might compromise national imagination, the myth of consensus, and the capacity of America to continue on its perennial course of self-engenderment as the unique and unitary conception of its own mythogony.

Viewed from outside American American studies, and now, in the last decade, even from within, these touchstones emerge as continuous, not across or against the current but along with it, as coterminous way stations on the course of America's national and nationalist project. This project comes under interrogation at the end of the twentieth century, when the concept of nation comes into question and nationalist discourse is subjected to critical scrutiny.[5]

Not until the last decade of the twentieth century, then, did certain voices from the periphery of this project finally find some resonance in it. It is not that such voices did not exist before. Certainly Sherwood Anderson and R. P. Blackmur are signal instances of their existence, but American American studies was, and in many quarters still remains, deaf to those voices. Two years after Parrington's death and the year after the posthumous publication of the third volume of his seminal oeuvre in 1930, the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, who knew something about the relation of imagination to ideology and about the connection between liberalism and the public sphere, summed up what still has trouble being heard in America and among many practitioners of American studies: "When you say 'America,' " he noted, "you refer to the territory stretching between the ice-caps of the two poles" (qtd. in Davis, epigraph). More recently, in a somewhat polemical piece, Gregory Jay announced: "It is time to stop teaching 'American' literature so that American studies can be reconfigured as 'Writing in the United States' " (264). And Bell Chevigny and Gari Laguardia speak of the "rhetorical malpractice" of using *America* to refer to life and culture in the United States (viii). The resonant echoes of this clamoring at the frontiers and within the borders of the nation has periodically jolted the epistemic self-assuredness that has always underwritten the American national project and the instrumentality of its intellectual discipline. We are, once again, at such a historical juncture.

In a recent article entitled "Reworlding America: The Globalization of American Studies," John Muthyala, a young American scholar representing a nascent generation of Americanists, reiterates a number of key questions, historically more significant than are the particular responses to them he rehearses:

> How can we develop critical vocabularies that would foreground and address the multivalent complexity of transcontinental patterns of social and cultural interaction and the transborder geopolitical determinations that engender global disjunctions and local sedimentations in the flow of power, capital, commodities, ideas, peoples, and symbols within, between, and across the Americas? How can we effectively contest the nationalist, linguistic, religious, geopolitical, and ethnocentric biases that have, historically, informed the construction of a Eurocentric America? (98)

Few things exacerbate epistemic crisis as much as polyphonic disruption and heterogeneity. In the United States of America, this has meant many voices contending at once and a simultaneous multiplicity of identities remonstrating for political and socioeconomic recognition. The hardening of this myriad plurality into distinct positions of advocacy, a plurality that was

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to have melted and melded into singular containment dubbed a "melting pot," called the bluff of our *E pluribus unum* and, in the process, unveiled the unassimilability of difference. As José David Saldívar diagnosed, such national peripety discloses, now critically, now symptomatically, the indissoluble claims of identity and identity formations that belie two centuries' worth of glossing over the irreducible plurality with the myth of unity, a gloss that immunized the "liberal imagination" against the tenuousness of its myth of consensus. The political slippage and thrashing that ensued reached their rhetorical sedimentation in the multiculturalist discourse of diversity and the meliorist program of neoliberalism, first with and then without the redemptive illusions of the welfare state.

A lexical paradox betrays the contradictions of multiculturalism for any student of literature and philology. We know from Aristotle's reckoning that his taxonomic *diaphora*, which came to us as *difference* through the Latin translation of the Greek as *differentia*, signified incommensurate categories and unassimilable species. Diversity, for its part, was not a synonym for difference but its opposite. Philologically—and, as it turns out, politically in the cultural logic of belated liberalism, which continues to be the dominant ideology of our American American studies—difference points to identity, which we normally think of as the opposite of difference.

Difference, tautologically enough, operates as identity formation; it confers identity on the differentiated. *Diversity* labors to foster divergence; it deconstructs identity and the identical and thereby foregrounds plurality and alterity, internal and external. Post-melting-pot United States culture and cultural discourse live by difference, even as they proclaim a rhetoric of diversity, hence the contradiction in the cultural logic and resultant epistemic paradox that bedevil American American studies as disciplinary institution, as diagnostic instrument of culture, and as representational device serving pedagogy in and on America. As a result, a dissonant rhetorical reality has taken on the ideological weight of a disciplinary unconscious, whose discursive density has become the virtual but hegemonic truth of a defining cultural dominant.

In this process, predictably, the contradictions become elided, and the contestatory dissonance is tamed into a metamorphosis that would displace the myth of consensus into the reiteratively and often nostalgically valorized myths of difference and dissensus. The dissensual again becomes the common cause, as scripted most overtly in the work of contemporary intellectual historians like Sacvan Bercovitch ("America" and *Reconstructing*).

Looked at against the grain (in accordance with a venerable American cultural practice), this discursive shift appears imperturbably continuous with Parrington's self-differentiating currents, with Matthiessen's nonconformist canonicity, and with Trilling's liberal imagination. Dissensus, then, emerges as an expedient sublimation of difference into unitary myth, a reconstructed consensus for the recuperation of cultural and national unity.[6]

In cultural formations, logical contradiction and epistemic paradox may appear disheveled, incoherent, and confounding. But one can wrest a virtue from these conundrums of experiential day-to-day living and their cultural materiality. For this reason, we might consider, after Anderson and Blackmur, postponing disambiguation in our pedagogical explanations for as long as possible, careful not to frustrate or discourage our students in the process. There may be something redemptive in the squalor of epistemic crisis that could immunize those inclined to manageable reductions, inoculating them against undue hygienic scruples and against the intolerance of expedient simplification in conformity with regimes of truth and the myth of national consensus. As Americanists in the United States, we are beginning to appreciate the virtue of this untidiness and the potential of its self-contradictions for epistemic yield. In this respect, American studies may have begun to catch up with its ob-

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ject of study. That is, American Americanists are beginning to realize the equivocal valences of American culture and the heterodoxy, the hybridity, the irreducible complexity of what America has been, not just what it means as unilateralist congeries and self-sufficient heterocosm in the neohistoricist or pragmatist mirror of self-contemplation. We have had, in other words, an incipient awakening to the mythographic reductions by which the phenomenon of America and the discourses about it, whether consensual or dissensual, have been wrought to measure, often for the sake of political expediency (*political expediency* being a pleonasm, since the political is inevitably the expedient).

Most important, and within the sphere of such pleonasms as American Americanists in the last decade, we have begun to notice the epistemic redundancies in what it might mean to be an American Americanist. We are becoming alert to the tautological nature of the discourses that have emanated from this self-reflection since the inception of American studies in America as self-defined cultural formation that has been grounded on a hegemonically acquired, and likewise imperially named, continental geography. Thus, we read in Robyn Wiegman's "The Futures of American Studies," the guest editor's introduction for the 1998 special issue of *Cultural Critique*:

> [T]he prevailing relation between historical time and national entity has begun to fracture, confounding our earlier assurance that time and place could define, without question, the legitimacy of our objects of study. For American studies, as for many other institutional sites with a strong tradition in the humanities, it is the differential between historical time and national place that has rapidly and radically changed our field composition and critical conversations. (5)

The awakening to such differentials evinces a belated alertness to the broader realizations of what discourse means and does, particularly within the discursive orbit of identity formations and state-sponsored national narratives. The theoretical turn in scholarly and pedagogical discourses of the last third of the twentieth century sensitized us to the constructed nature of national myths and to the repercussively and expediently performative nature of individual and collective cultural identities. The movement generated by this insight has been away from the ontological and toward the functional and epistemic—that is, from what things and cultures are to how they behave and to what ends, as sites of knowledge and regimes of truth. This change, in the United States of America, has amounted to a turn from the broadly consensual to a metamorphosed consensus absorbed in the ostensibly irresolvable rhetoric of the political and, as already noted, of the culturally dissensual.

As with all change, whether actual or ostensive, this cultural escape valve has itself engendered dissent, especially from those who feel they have something to lose in the process and who, in their lament, overlook the past and historical memory that indicate that America and we, as Americans, continue to be consistent. Such a response may simply be yet another way station of America's foundational myths: inasmuch as America is founded by sectarian dissenters, dissent is integral to its constitutive mythology. Hence, the dominant imaginary is a collective self-perception that would have the United States be a perpetually unique and unprecedented historical phenomenon in disconformity (usually righteous) not only from the rest of the world but also from itself.

The most blatant and, often, parodic symptom of this perennial form of dissensual uniqueness is the unilateralism that defines the current policy of the United States government vis-à-vis the rest of the world where international treaties and conventions are concerned. This unilateralism may have been momentarily shaken, but was by no means shattered, by the tragic events of 11 September 2001. If anything, the horror has reinforced and intensified the unilateralist sense of self that drives the American ethos, an unmasking of a nationalist form of autism that has been especially revealing in "coalition build-

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ing," a procedure more reminiscent of raising a posse by a town sheriff in pursuit of an outlaw "wanted dead or alive" than a process of international diplomacy and international law. In an open letter to our current President Bush following his address to a joint session of Congress after 11 September, the Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú, whose homeland has witnessed tens of thousands of murders by state-sponsored terrorism in the last forty years, puts the president's speech into the larger context of America and of American history:

> Mr. President, upon listening to the message you gave to the Congress of your country, I have been unable to overcome a sensation of fear for what may come of your words. You call upon your people to prepare for "a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen" and for your soldiers to save their honour by marching to a war in which you intend to involve all of us, the peoples of the world.
>
> In the name of progress, pluralism, tolerance and liberty, you leave no choice for those of us who are not fortunate enough to share this sensation of liberty and the benefits of the civilization you wish to defend for your people, we who never had sympathy for terrorism since we were its victims. We, who are proud expressions of other civilizations; who live day to day with the hope of turning discrimination and plunder into recognition and respect; who carry in our souls the pain of the genocide perpetrated against our peoples; finally, we who are fed up with providing the dead for wars that are not ours: we cannot share the arrogance of your infallibility nor the single road onto which you want to push us when you declare that "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists."

The reflection thrown back at the United States in Rigoberta Menchú's riposte is unmistakable. What resonates here is our American discourse, once again, as echoic mirror of America's own illusion of uniqueness. And we, American Americanists, who, as a general rule, have viewed critical reflection and theoretical interrogation as inimical to the myth of our pragmatism—forgetful that pragmatism is a theory (a philosophy that has defined itself more than once as the religion of those who set out to do good and end by doing well)—we, finally, may be coming to understand that at the heart of anything close to a cultural dominant that serves as descriptor or as defining discursive instrument lies a discursive tautology where the crossing point of American culture and American studies turns out to be a house of mirrors.

Mirrors, especially mirrors in a public space and in the public sphere, like glass houses, tend to be extremely self-conscious landscapes. Barring narcissism, a not uncommon proclivity in the vocations of academic performance, most people, when it comes to mirrors, would prefer a fun house to a prison house. A productive discovery for critical discourse in the last few years has been the realization that these may well be the same house, where the ludic and the lugubrious overlap, and that cultural workers of discursivity who may think of themselves as inhabiting one serve all the while as the inadvertent symptom and instruments of the other. In this sense, we have come to learn in our studies of culture that nothing blunts the assertive shrillness of essentialist or self-privileging identity pursuit more than the deflating concession to subjects, individual or collective, that they are indeed who or what they think they are in the mirror of their own claims.

Negative, or mirrored, valence, like negative freedom, always holds great enchantment. The pursuit of what one is not is no less magnetic than "freedom from," invariably more attractive than "freedom to." And so, if identity would be wrought through differentiated denial of alterity and the spectral appropriation of the other, the most just riposte may be to concede the identity sought and the flight pursued, in conformity with the ambivalent benediction of "May you get what you wish for," dictated by the venerable wisdom of the Chinese.

If this narrative of American self-diagnosis seems somewhat ambivalent, ambivalent reck-

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oning is endemic to America (and no less so to our American studies). It began with Columbus's first voyage, whose calculated hyperbole and double bookkeeping—one rhetorical, the other computational—were conflated into the equivocal discourse that has since characterized America and its sense of self-proportion. In the most recent American studies, this equivocation lies at the juncture where presentism and radical contextualism meet. The first has its American premiere in Columbus's enjoining his crew to attest, with their signatures, to the captain's log entry that the coast along which they tacked was the coast of continental terra firma. In fact, it turned out to be the coast of an island, Cuba, whose countervailing winds would from then on periodically blow in the face of any reality construed by the presentism of discursive assertion and self-convincing attestation. What was made present through such representation, which became tantamount to materiality for America's finding father, is qualitatively no different from the paradisiac utopias hyped by John Smith about Virginia or by Robert Cushman's buoyantly promotional *Reasons and Considerations* (1622) on behalf of New England.

The projective fetishization of landscape and economic desire has held true for the perennial avatars of these founding discourses in American presentism. The most recent iteration of such constructedness lies in textualist hermeneutics that simultaneously eradicate and reinscribe the subject and subject agency so that writing, like the culture it inscribes, may find its self-confirming valence without corroborative or disconfirming reference to anything concrete outside itself. There the signature of identity, individual or collective, may also find its validity as differentiated essentialism alembicated by historical retribution and compensatory justice, free at last of any and all transcendental and providentialist justifications that historically created identity's plight.

A priori protestations notwithstanding, the presentist's constructs have a need for foundational groundings, historically dubious and discursively shaky as these may be. (Some go so far as to invoke such expediency in the name of "strategic essentialism.") Such expedient scaffolding is invariably sought, and inevitably found, in a radical contextualism, by which is meant the location of culture and of its discursive formations, ontic or epistemological, in the situatedness and specificity of its historical context. For Columbus, this meant the textual enablements that authorized his conviction to sail for and reach India, for which he already had an elaborately wrought contextualized specificity in the most authoritative repertoire of textual and cartographic instruments of his time. In our time, such inevitably successful contextualism has thoroughly suffused American studies through the radical contextualist constructs of neohistoricism. Its most overt version in the discourse on America is to be found in a compendium that declared the newness of the New American Studies in near simultaneity with the declaration of the New World Order by George Bush I. I refer to the 1991 gathering of essays from the neohistoricist journal *Representations*, collected by Philip Fisher under the significant title *The New American Studies*.

Oscar Wilde considered America's youth and newness to be our oldest attributes, already three hundred years on when he remarked their tenacity at the end of the nineteenth century.[7] And the providentially authorized natural unity of America, dating from 15 November 1777, when the thirteen former British colonies in New England declared in the Articles of Confederation the establishment of "a perpetual union [. . .] under the style of the United States of America," thereby appropriating in perpetuity the name *America* for the union of the United States, would be remarked by the Argentinean essayist Ezekiel Martínez Estrada through the misdirection of an ironic statement, no less trenchant than Wilde's wicked quip. Martínez Estrada noted, and I translate from the Spanish, "There is an American unity in what really is not American; but the differences, however, indeed belong to

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us" ("Hay una unidad Americana en lo que realmente no es americano; pero las diferencias nos pertenecen"; 84). The rhetorical differentiations of Martínez Estrada's statement point to the paradox in America's claimed uniqueness and to the recurrent catachreses in its unitary claims.

And so it is that novelty continues to be the most unfazed of self-diagnostic palpations of American American studies. This is the most recent novelty, whose regime of truth goes, with clockwork predictability, by the moniker *New American Studies*.

The designation *New American Studies* has its genesis in would-be dissent, and it is the product of an occasion not altogether free of critical self-assessment—that is to say, yet another tactical turn in the predictable pattern of chronic self-reconsolidation through self-disruption in American discourse. A critical protestation in conformity with what the critique would rebuke, the occasion in this instance is an omnibus review in the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of the *New York Review of Books* (27 Oct. 1988) by the American scholar Frederick Crews. Crews's review essay is entitled "Whose American Renaissance?" Its critique is directed at some four dozen United States Americanists who, in two collected volumes and three single-author books, engage in what Crews calls "sheer ideology, false consciousness that calls for the exposure of its historical determinants" (68).

Rather than solely a critique of what he spurns as the ideologization of the American canon, Crews's review, itself inevitably ideologically driven, ends up being a baptism. This is so because, two years later—that is to say, in near simultaneity with the declaration of the New World Order by Bush I—one of the principal authors reviewed by Crews, Donald Pease, edits a special issue of the Pittsburgh journal *Boundary 2* (Spring 1990) and calls it *New Americanists*, thereby appropriating, in sylleptic imitation, the epithet of Crews's critique for the authors reviewed. He gives the same title to a sequel issue of the periodical in spring 1992. Thus, Pease canonizes himself and his cohort, in echo of Fisher's 1991 volume of essays from *Representations*, as the newest novelty in the American project of American studies. And so it is that our American soliloquy extends itself into the present in its tautological riff, the stage set, propulsively, for its inevitable succession in iterative novelty. In fact, Pease would have the New Americanists be their own successors; certainly his guest editor's introduction in the second of these two issues enacts a brilliant narrative of self-succession in spectral autoscopy. In that self-reflection, Pease confesses:

> In constructing a field whose practitioners were identified with the assumptions of a metanarrative, I had simply replaced one grand narrative of American studies with another. In an unintended reprise of his conceptual model, I had reconstructed Crews's American studies as if it were a minority discourse in need of a new field of American studies to become a recognizable object of knowledge. Following his banishment from the newly nationalized narrative, I had redescribed Crews as a social materiality unrepresentable within the new field and had left unexamined the process whereby that field was delimited from its environment. Although I had asserted the New Americanists' ability to transform literary masterworks into social forces, I nevertheless associated Crews with a social context wholly separable from the new academic field. In so doing, I had reaffirmed Crews's fundamental tenets: the necessity of a national metanarrative as paradigmatic dimension necessary for a recognizably New Americanist subject/object of knowledge. ("National Identities" 2)

In its clenching autolepsis, Pease's self-explanation is as meaningful in its declaration as it is significant as a case for study. As much a reinscription as it is a palinode, Pease's confession compounds and furthers the incorporative impulse of a monadic national project, whose cultural monolith he wishes to open to multidimensionality. However, as plurality and as metanarrative, this project becomes a demonstration of its own impossibility. And the manner by which it plots its self-transcendence

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becomes, likewise, a significant attestation to this impossibility:

> An adequate understanding of the New Americanists' status as liaisons between academic disciplines and U.S. publics would require an account of their emergence from and continued interconnection with different emancipatory social movements.
>
> The essays I have gathered for the second volume *on* [emphasis mine] New Americanists initiate such an account. They configure individually and collectively *post*national narratives as the surfaces on which New Americanists have constructed their identities. The term *postnational* indicates New Americanists' multiple interpellations: their different identifications with the disciplinary apparatuses in the new American Studies, as well as with social movements comprised of the "disenfranchised groups" already cited. (3)

The emphases on *postnational* are in Pease's original. The "disenfranchised groups" he alludes to are ones to whom, he feels, he assimilated Crews in his editorial introduction to the first special issue: "I had reconstructed Crews after the image of the series of figures—African Americanists, feminist Americanists, Chicano Americanists, Asian Americanists, gay Americanists—he had excluded from his field of American studies and thereby had implied that all of these 'minority figures' had been constructed out of commensurable assumptions" (2).

Two things should become readily apparent in this declarative new newness of American American studies as clearly enunciated by Pease. First is an unconditional assimilation of Americanists to American studies, so that the "new account" of American studies postulated in this second volume, which should serve as corrective not only to Crews but also to Pease's representation in the first special issue two years earlier, now identifies, tout court, the practitioners of American American studies with the field of American studies through that telling preposition, "on," I flagged in the above citation. This tautological invagination of American Americanism moves beyond the guild, or gremial, identification of the scholars and teachers with their field of inquiry in what Pease terms a "field imaginary" ("National Identities" 1), into identity constructs whose formations complete the overlap and totalized congruity between field identity and personal and professional identity. Thus, by this reckoning, to be an Americanist is tantamount to being an American of one sort or another. By the time one gets to the final essay of the second issue, this equational coupling makes American and Americanist identities inextricable. Daniel O'Hara's "On Becoming Oneself in Frank Lentricchia" becomes an apt capstone to this clenching self-seizure. To do American studies as a non-American, by this logic, is to engage in un-American activities, or—as Bush II would have it in his historic congressional address on terrorism, counterterrorism, and their regimes of truth—if you are not with us, you are one of them.

The logic of this totalized autolepsis segues into the second symptom that this self-consolidating tautology betrays. The prefix in Pease's (and, by extension, the New American Studies') "*post*nationalism" emerges as a more capacious nationalism that reinscribes a nationalist project, whose cultural dominant proves nothing less than a more variously differentiated nationalism, to be reiterated by Janice Radway in her (United States) American Studies Association presidential address of 1998 (see n3, below). Thus, the prefix *post-*, emphasized, no less, serves as a strategic prosthesis and a ruse in the perennial nationalist project of self-affirmation through self-differentiation, broadened in its scope, base, and illusionary political unconscious to the identity formations of "minorities" or "disenfranchised groups," for whom the subject agencies deployed as authorial personae of American Americanism in this volume stand as prosopopeias, by which "[t]hey configure individually and collectively *post*national narratives as the surfaces [*de caras y caretas del descaro*, as Oscar Wilde might have quipped in Spanish] on

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which New Americanists have constructed their identities. The term *postnational* indicates New Americanists' multiple interpellations [. . .]."

The final word of the citation, "interpellations," harks to Louis Althusser's hailing or come hither, which implicates the subject in a specular identification with the ideological state apparatuses, or, here, with what Pease terms, in distorted echo of Althusser, the "field imaginary," now imploded into the fun or prison house of mirrors I spoke of earlier. This implosion leaves no space between these variegated American identities and the identification of American American studies taken in as naturally and as inexorably American. All fissures have been sealed, the circumscription completed, the wagons impenetrably circled, and America, once again, is securely interred within itself (or what its illusions deem to be that identity of self) to carry on its spectral soliloquy in the discursive essentialism of the New World Order decreed by Bush I in uncanny simultaneity with the self-declaration of the New Americanists.

With a certain inevitable continuity, the election of Bush II to the United States presidency and the ensuing international policy based on the New World Order of a First and Sole World emerge as an inexorable way station along the narrative stream of what Parrington diagnosed as "currents in American thought," where all thought currents are American or American tributaries, as are all images in Trilling's "imagination," whether liberal or conservative. This New Americanist program could serve as springboard for another American Renaissance, after Matthiessen and after the cold war—this time for launching a new phase in the official Americanization of American studies on an international plane, duly refitted for the age of globalization and America's renewed, unique, and indispensable place in the world as master coalition builder of incontestable good against ubiquitous evil.

In echoic consistency with America's sense of centrality as culture of global reference, the New Americanist avatar as articulated, far from reaching "a meta-narrative" or a disruptive position of self-interrogation and critical insight, emerges, isomorphically, as yet another grand narrative from the enclosure of a localized site of incorporation that continues along its own propulsive self-replication and self-globalizing discursivity. The inclusionary reach toward the hitherto disenfranchised groups persists in its appropriative, assimilationist, and acculturating project, while the projective identity constructs of the professional American Americanist serve as instruments for homogenizing diversity into identity and interpellating alterity into ulterior sameness. The novelty of American newness thus plays itself out with predictable precision and self-naturalizing reiteration.

This sort of rethinking in the illusory impermeability of a political or disciplinary unconscious, where *re-* translates into an iterative emphatic of doing, yet again, what national(ist) history has proved inevitable, is far from a resituating of American studies into an exogenous discourse and critical disciplinary project, what may be the best hope for American self-apperception through an honest critique. For this to be achieved, America has to be turned out of itself, certainly out of that foundational identity construct, territorial and human, that the ideology of a formative national apparatus at its moment of inception on 15 November 1777 interpellated into itself as "America" through an exclusive and hegemonic nomination when it forged "a perpetual union [. . .] under the style of the United States of America," a unitary and unique self-projection into perpetuity still resonant in the "infinite justice" sought by the infinite wisdom of the first twenty-first-century military campaign launched against insidious evil and world terrorism. The humble suggestion by our Islamic coalition partners that with "infinite justice" we persist in playing God obliged us to spin that nomination into some other unending righteousness, with the declaration and pursuit of global, infinite war, in homage to some other deity than the Muslim or the Christian.

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To arrive at a discriminating and self-critical position by and on America, we will have to persuade those self-differentiating human subjects, including the perennially "new" American Americanists who continually reinforce this illusion of novelty, that America is something other than what it deems identical to itself. We must endeavor to demonstrate, theoretically, materially, and through invocation of historical precedent, that the investment in self-differentiation as unique and unilateral entails a necessary violence, especially when through such difference we deem ourselves to be the truly blessed, the chosen people, for history's exceptional agency. Such repositioning may prove difficult, since identity construction based on difference has been the most tenacious endeavor of America's history and still continues to be, now strategically, now vicariously, in and through the further exploitation (discursive this time) of those unassimilable cultures, referred to by the New Americanist discourse as "minorities" or as "disenfranchised groups."

We will also need to persuade our America and our American Americanists to see that what we go on labeling *America* is a lexical and a historical malaprop, that *America* refers to a whole hemisphere and to over five hundred years of history, of which some 270 years antedate 15 November 1777 and the United States Articles of Confederation. We will have to reiterate, yet again, that America extends back to 1507, when the philologically impish cosmographer Martin Waldseemüller, from his own fun house of language, introduced as a pun on Amerigo Vespucci's name the term *America* to designate what is now South America.

Just as important, and obvious as this may be to some, we will have to recall that the discursive geography and epistemic structures that have defined American studies and, in turn, identified America through them are constructed and not natural or inevitable. In the process, we need to keep reminding ourselves what American studies has been in the house of mirrors of its scholarly and pedagogical agents, as well as in our predictably repetitive institutional history. We need to recall that American studies has been foremost American, in a politically and ideologically self-reinforcing sense of that nomination. American studies has been a corpus of materials for study, an experiential and archival object of scrutiny. It has been an institution, an academic culture, a cultural map, a site of incorporation, a national policy instrument, certainly a mirror, and the lapidary elements of identity construction. The theater, the site of discourse, for this constellation of ontology and episteme, of being and of know-how—that is to say, the location of this culture and its discursive habitus—has been, and continues to be, tautologically and inexorably "Americanized."

The predictable question might be, Is America not American? What else would there be to it other than its Americanness? Our answer would have to dislocate this essentialist grounding and naturalized reification by switching the question from "what" to "where" and "how." Yes, we might respond, America is American, but it is not only in America, most certainly not just in the United States. America is only part of a larger physical and human geography of the Western Hemisphere properly called America, and, in a myriad of other ways, the United States is also in the rest of the world. And even if it were "only in America," America, even in the United States, is a heteronomy that, demographically diverse and culturally plural, complicates those unitary identity constructs that hark back uncritically to the hegemonically reductive naturalization of 15 November 1777.

As a result, America is both smaller and larger than it thinks itself, whether in the minds of its Americanists or of its politicians. America, in other words, is not reducible to the discrete and differentiated identity formations that would eradicate otherness, its own or others', and thereby elide or co-opt diversity, internal and external. America and American Americanists who persist in this national project, whether as moral constructivists of the right or as liberal

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imaginations of the left, negate a large percentage of the people inside United States borders. And they annul even a greater number of the diverse peoples in the bicontinental hemisphere, "between the ice-caps of the two poles," as Diego Rivera noted. Those negated as human subjects in this process are erased as persons and as cultures, eradicated from history, along with the materiality of their cultural practices, which, at best, might survive only in reservations and ghettos or as museological specimens and objects of anthologized nostalgia.

In an age of inexorably, and often tragically, globalized military, fiscal, and political entanglements, such perils of erasure, subsumption, or elision are no longer limited to the intranational United States of America or to the inter-American bicontinental hemisphere. And this is why, now, as the preeminently hegemonic power of a First and Sole World fully capable of and historically inclined to unilateralist solipsism, and preemptive aggression, the United States of America is too important to be left to itself and to its myths, whether these are the "grotesques" of Anderson, the "heresies" of Blackmur, or the *al-qaʿida* of Mernissi.

In our intellectual vocation and professional ethos, particularly as cultural critics and students of languages used to formulate and articulate the platforms of regimes of truth, we have to pursue, consciously and assiduously, a comparative and relational refocusing of America in the larger world context, if, that is, we are to be anything more than symptomatic echoes of America's official, nationalist mythology.[8] And as Americanists who would seek an exogenous assessment of America, especially, we have an obligation to value diverse recognition above the tautological misrecognitions of identity formations, whether in literature or in other forms of discourse, as we remain fully alert to national hubris.

To the degree possible, we must remain wakeful to and resist interpellation into the ideology of state apparatuses, or into what Mernissi's characters ominously termed the *qaʿida*, our own and the one we pathologically mirror. To guard against such perils, our theorization, scholarly investigations, critique, and teaching must not shun the tumult of disruptive epistemologies and must not evade, even at the risk of being considered un-American, interrogating parochial or nationalistic epistemes or regimes of truth. Our perspective must be translocal and relational, rather than fixed or naturalized. Our discursive locus must be supple, mobile, transnational, and, as mediate subjects among academic cultures and disciplinary fields, we must be ethical agents of transculturation, especially in times of affective paroxysms, when critical reason may be dimmed and civilized conversation drowned out. Only thus can we be more than expedient symptoms of one or another culture and of the collective delusions of its commonsense or unthought rhetoric. And only thus can we temper with an ethical impulse the hegemonic impetus of our own critical interventions and institutional representations.

Notes

[1] With "organic cosmopolitan," I extrapolate from Antonio Gramsci's "organic intellectuals" (173), those cultural workers whom he considers capable of giving voice to the needs and aspirations of people, as opposed to the traditional intellectuals, whom he considers "experts in [the] legitimation" of governing regimes (60).

[2] I am grateful to Wandia Njoya, a member of my graduate theory seminar at Penn State University, for reminding me of this passage in Mernissi. I also thank the graduate students and faculty colleagues in my seminar Rethinking America and in the Penn State Working Papers in American Studies Series, organized by Sandra Spanier and Carla Mulford, where an early version of this essay was initially rehearsed. The ongoing support of the Penn State University Americanists Focus Group is duly acknowledged.

[3] A telling illustration of this national soliloquy in United States and United States–generated American studies may be the presidential address at the 1998 annual conference of the American Studies Association by Janice Radway. Her nation-centered and nationalist discourse, despite, or because of, the topic of the conference (American Studies and the Question of Empire: Histories, Cultures, and Practices), in effect characterized the country as a hetero-

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cosm sufficient unto itself by virtue of its internal ethnic and cultural diversity. Valiant efforts by certain members of the ASA International Committee notwithstanding, attempts to internationalize the field have proved little more than outreach for the public diplomacy program of the State Department and its division, the United States Information Service, whose role in the export of an official, state-sponsored national(ist) pedagogy for American studies has historically defined the field and its transational practices.

[4] For a philological parsing of *America*, see Kadir, *Columbus*, ch. 4.

[5] See, e.g., Rowe, *Post-nationalist American Studies*, and Carafiol.

[6] On this form of sublimation, see Giles, "Virtual Eden" and "Virtual Americas."

[7] For a broader discussion of America's historical errand as fetishized novelty, see Kadir, *Questing Fictions*, esp. ch.1.

[8] For a less United States–centered international American studies, see the recently launched *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, from Great Britain (http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journals/Details/j0487.html), and the efforts of the International American Studies Association, founded by an international group of Americanists in 2000 (http://iasa.LA.psu.edu).

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