American Literary and Cultural Studies since the Civil War

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Fisher's essay is framed by recent changes in the field of American studies. In addressing the critical shifts within American studies, Fisher conceives of the new generation as moving from myth, a singular, static story, to rhetorics, a plural, dynamic view of culture. Fisher begins by discussing the development of American studies and its myth of American national identity. Despite the determination of Americanists to identify a grand unifying myth, reality fails to live up to the imagined, complicated by the pluralistic aspect of American culture. According to Fisher, diversity resists being subsumed by myth and thus often creates what he terms "episodes of regionalism in American cultural history" (p. 35). These regionalisms include geography, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality. Fisher describes American culture as a pendulum swinging between regionalisms and unifying projects.

According to Fisher, the new American studies provides an alternative to regionalism by identifying a set of national facts, such as democratic culture and the culture of freedom, around which identities are formed. This allows for analysis within American studies to focus on sectors of a diverse culture rather than on a monopoly of power, recognizing rhetorics rather than ideology. Fisher's essay originally appeared as an introduction to his The New American Studies (1991). The version here was adapted for inclusion in the collection Redrawing the Boundaries (1992), edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn.

FROM MYTH TO RHETORICS

The essential books of the last fifteen years in the literary and cultural study of American life represent the work of a new generation within American studies, and they represent, at the same time, a new idea of what it might mean to do American studies and how one would go about doing it. In combination they also represent the rich diversity of explanations and materials

One way to characterize this newness would be to say that, in this generation of American studies, interest has passed from myth to rhetorics. Myth in this perhaps too simple formula is always singular, rhetorics always plural. Myth is a fixed, satisfying, and stable story that is used again and again to normalize our account of social life. By means of myth, novelty is tamed by being seen as the repetition or, at most, the variation of a known and valued pattern. Even where actual historical situations are found to fall short of myth or to lie in its aftermath, the myth tames the variety of historical experience, giving it familiarity while using it to reaffirm the culture’s long-standing interpretation of itself.

Rhetoric, in contrast, is a tactic within the open questions of culture. It reveals interests and exclusions. To look at rhetorics is to look at the action potential of language and images, not just their power or contrivance to move an audience but the location of words, formulas, images, and units of meaning within politics. Rhetoric is the place where language is engaged in cultural work, and such work can be done on, with, or in spite of one or another group within society. Rhetorics are plural because they are part of what is uncertain or potential within culture. They are the servants of one or another politics of experience. Where there is nothing openly contested, no cultural work to be done, we do not find the simplification into one and only one rhetoric. Instead we find the absence of the particular inflammation and repetition that rhetoric always marks. We find no rhetoric at all, only the ceremonial contentment of myth. Rhetorics are also distinct from ideology. Within the term ideology we are right to hear a combination of calculation, cynicism about social truth, a schoolteacher’s relation to the pupils, indoctrination, and propaganda. Whether as reality or hope, ideology implies that one part of the legitimacy of authority is a monopoly on representation, and this is exactly the condition in which rhetorics become irrelevant.

To understand what a move from myth to rhetorics might involve, it is useful to look at two things: first, how the claim of a unitary myth worked and was used during the period that we might call the transfer of literature to the American university; second, the counterelement to central myths within American studies—the force of regionalism.

**Myths and the University**

The new field of American studies came to maturity in the years just before and after the Second World War. Its description of American experience had as its audience both Americans themselves and, even more important, a wider world in which American culture had begun to work as a kind of world culture. Both Europeans and Americans were asked to consider in mythic terms a prior state of American experience, one whose essence and importance lay in the fact that it no longer existed but had generated the cultural heart of American experience. But to this prior culture of Puritan mission, frontier, wilderness, garden, and innocence, contemporary Americans were just as much outsiders as Europeans and Asians were.

In this charged pre- and postwar atmosphere of cultural victory and cultural defeat, Americanists undertook the search for a central myth of America. Such key works as Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden*, R. W. B. Lewis’s *American Adam*, and Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration through Violence* encouraged a study of literature, everyday culture, and history around a shared mythic content that captured American uniqueness and national identity. American studies as an academic field in its first generation took this myth of America to be its central topic and its method for linking the classics of American poetry, fiction, and painting to the culture of images, newspapers, sermons, political rhetoric, and, especially, popular fiction and verse. Here the western and the sermon met.

The first of these all-encompassing myths of America had, in fact, been defined half a century earlier. This was the frontier myth of Frederick Jackson Turner, a hypothesis as Turner called it, but ultimately a story rather than a scientific speculation, and a story whose appeal lay in the curious fact that it described just those social features that had been lost forever in the formal official closing of the American frontier noted in the census of 1890. Although Turner’s great myth appeared before what we might call the capture of American culture by the universities, an event that took place in the 1930s and 1940s, his strategy of discovering one fundamental fact or myth that explained the identity of America as a nation set the stage for the mythic cast of the first generation of the academic study of American culture. After the frontier myth, the most important global explanation lay in the myth of the Puritans, their mission, the unique significance of intellectuals and ideology within the Puritan experience, the primacy of New England’s religious forms for American political experience, and the residue of Puritan energy, now changed to commerce and self-cultivation, that remained as a permanent trace within the national character. If the frontier myth was a myth of the West, the Puritan myth was a myth of New England culture, asserting its right to a permanent steering function in national life. Where the western myth was democratic, based on the experience of immigration and self-reliance, the New England myth was ultimately a myth of the importance of intellectuals and, with them, of the crucial role played by writing and those who provide ideology, self-description, and history—the importance, finally, of preachers and their later descendants, the intellectuals of the nineteenth century and the university professors of the twentieth.

In spite of the built-in resistance of our literature and its awkward wilderness, no cultural fact is more decisive over the past fifty years than the wholesale movement of every component of our literary life, past, present, and future, into the universities. American studies and American literature have everywhere arrived at legitimacy. American poets have been signed up as
The high-level professional work on the new subject of American literature has been shaped to a remarkable degree by the residence of culture within the academic world. The university and the professor think, as they must, in terms of courses — that is, in terms of a coherent set of books or themes that fit into the fifteen-week semester. Such distinguished critical studies as F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*, Marx’s *Machine in the Garden*, or Smith’s *Virgin Land* represent our past as a set of model courses. The great interest in myths of the frontier, the machine, the Puritan errand into the wilderness (see P. Miller, *Errand*), American violence, or American individualism served to give shape to the academic year in an ordered, consecutive, schematic way with developments and oppositions. The problem of the American romance, as opposed to the novel, or the description of so arbitrary a period of our history as what is known as the Gilded Age, redesigned the past to fit the intellectual needs and temporal rhythms of the newly professionalized study of the past.

The most common thread of the first generation of the study of America has been what could be called the disappointment of myth by fact, the failure of reality to live up to the ways in which it has been imagined. America is first mythologized as the second Eden, its purpose linked to the Puritan mission, or pictured as a frontier or free space for the unbounded individual, but then, in each case, the myth is betrayed by fact. The promise is unkept. As the purity of what was imagined grew stained over time, American reality, by means of the apparatus of myth, took on the look of a fallen state. The frontier had been closed. The high moral purpose of the Puritans had given way to commerce and commercial purpose. The innocence had blood on its hands. What was there had the look of heavily discounted possibility; what might have been had been disappointed in the act of making. Significantly, one of the master texts of a whole generation of American study was Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*, perhaps from an academic point of view the most perfect book ever written by an American. James’s hero Strether creates a myth of Paris, a myth of his charge, Chad, a myth of Chad’s relation to Mme. de Vionnet. Each myth is betrayed by fact, stained by the complexity of the real world. An entire academic generation saw its own love of criticism, observation, nuance, disappointment, myth, and defeat in James’s novel.

As the great academic popularity of James’s novel made clear, if there has been one history lovingly traced by intellectuals over the past fifty years, it has been the history of intellectuals themselves. From the work of Perry Miller in the late 1930s, the explanation of America as a long history of Puritan hope and decline resulted from the fact that, looking into the past to find not necessarily its chief actors but precisely those congenial figures whose analytic and critical stance most resembled their own, the academic intellectuals discovered in Puritan writing what was for them the most intelligible feature of the past, the one mirror most filled with familiar features. The Puritans too were intellectuals, engaged in holding up a mirror of admonition or exhortation to their society. In theocratic New England they embodied one of the most secret self-images of all intellectual cultures, a world in which the critics and intellectuals of society were not marginal but actually in power.

The Puritan intellectuals had their successors in the radical critiques of society from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1950s and 1960s. Utopian intellectuals of the left in the 1930s found in the radical Puritans of three hundred years earlier their own model for the role and hoped-for importance of the intellectual within politics and society. However marginal intellectuals have been actually within American culture, the study of America has reclaimed them.

Useful as the history of intellectuals as written by their own aspiring descendants might be, it amounts only to a rather timid look into the most friendly and probably most unrepresentative district of the American past. The actors in exploration and settlement, in enterprise and invention, in the making of cities and the long history of money and speculation in America, in the tangled history of black and white, Native American and settler, political and personal rebellion, have been the primary characters of the American story, even if, unlike the intellectuals, they have seldom been their own best historians.

Myth creates a fault line between what ought to have taken place and what did. It permits ideas and facts to criticize each other. Like the rebellion of an individual or like the more collective movements of reform, myths embody what Henry Adams in his *Education* called the “spirit of resistance.” The search for central myths — myths that were already closed off, as the frontier was at the moment of its first description as the most vital experience for the foundation of an American identity — was inseparable from the study of resistance within culture, whether in the Gothic style of *Pierre* or in the reflective émigré style of *The Ambassadors* or the self-ironic Adams of *Education*. The appetite for resistance led Lionel Trilling to propose that all culture in the modern period was basically adversarial, at war with the commonplace or everyday social energies and beliefs. In European society of the nineteenth century, this adversarial position reflected the failure of self-belief in the emerging middle classes that had at last arrived at political and cultural power equivalent to their economic importance. But in the United States the source was quite different. It lay in a utopian or even moral radicalism combined with or concealing the resentment of artists and intellectuals at their rather small voice in a national life dominated by business and politics.
The belief in spiritual radicalism led to a focus on those writers, like Melville, who said their “No! In thunder.” Such oppositional figures as the hero of Melville’s *Pierre* or of “Bartleby the Scrivener” or, in real life, Thoreau defiant of Concord and moving two miles away to Walden Pond or spending a night in jail, Henry James withdrawn to England because American reality was not thick enough, the protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* stubborn and free: These defiant, adversarial figures, along with the challenging distance they created in standing out by standing against their world, are what the study of the tension between fact and all that resisted fact brought to the center. Within American studies the study of America had become the study of dissent. The rebels and dissidents came to the front as the leading patriots. It was the era of Thoreau, Henry Adams, and Bartleby, not of Emerson and Whitman.

By an accident of timing, American literature arrived in the university at a highly politicized moment. Its arrival coincided with the polarization between right and left or, in European terms, between fascism and communism in the period between the two world wars. The study of resistance was attractive, in part, because both the conservative right and the liberal left had rejected one key feature of what had been a synthesis in the most vital parts of nineteenth-century American culture. The right was hostile to democracy; the left to capitalism. They shared a distrust of the optimism, energy, confidence, and what might be called the surprisingly guiltless relation that figures like Emerson, Whitman, James Fenimore Cooper, or Francis Parkman had had to their own past. The lack of apology or contrition, the robust feeling of the right to be where and as they were in spite of slavery. Indian massacres, the failures of national politics to be dignified or even honest, the violence of the West, the polyglot hustle of the new cities — such guiltless self-regard seemed shallow to a left and to a right equally convinced, from different sides, of the nightmare of history. A whole new meaning of the term *innocence* had to be invented to make it seem that only some youthful unawareness of evil could explain the pride or health of Twain, Whitman, William James, or Emerson. That the greatest figures of our literature were not oppositional figures seemed almost beyond belief. But it was a fact. There is no margin of frictional energy that accounts for Emily Dickinson or Theodore Dreiser or William Faulkner. Whitman and Emerson continue to embarrass by their failure to have been seen through democracy and capitalism or, rather, by their having imagined themselves to have seen into the philosophic and temperamental depths of those two systems and to have found them both profound and humane, exhilarating and enduring.

One key to the new ground claimed by critical work of the last few years has been the implicit rejection of this heroism of oppositional dissent and its replacement by collaborative and implicational relations between writer or speaker and culture. Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Twain, and William James are the masters of this new relation, not Melville and Thoreau. Richard Poirier’s books on the tactics of Robert Frost within language (*Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*) and the cultural meaning of Emerson (*The Renewal of Literature*) set out important accounts of the rich entanglement of writer and culture. In Poirier’s account, the work always lives off and lives through the spaces open within the language and especially within the plural languages of culture.

The pressures of cultural life are plural and not a single hegemonic ideology that must be resisted, subverted, or surrendered to. Cultural life, in this formulation, is open to the activity of rebalancing and reconstruction that the literary work makes possible. Poirier’s is an aesthetics of survival that represents at the same time a confident aesthetics of pleasure within the forces of culture and the possibility of mastery over them, what we might call the outwitting of the up-to-then apparently dead ends of language and feeling, the traps of rhetoric and commitment. In this respect, his work is remarkably similar to the claims of the major book within African American theory, *The Signifying Monkey*, by Henry Louis Gates Jr. For Gates, signifying is a way of taking over cultural formulas, living off and living within whatever is given because whatever is given can always be topped, reformulated, bent to build in whatever it was designed to place or to place out. In his theory of culture, the trickster once again displaces the victim as the essential subjectivity and actor within the cultural script. One major weakness of the theory of ideology and myth has always been its specification of subjectivity as either that of power, victim, or coopted dupe. What Gates celebrates in the trickster, Poirier had earlier called the “performing self,” and the great model of this performance might be sketched out by combining the moves of Huck Finn and Whitman with those of Emerson and Frost. These tactics of freedom in the face of the givenness of reality are normative for Emersonian artists in the face of an already given set of forms, for adolescents discovering and differentiating themselves within a world of parents and parental society, and for African American culture and its practices within and yet above the surrounding culture into which they have been thrown.

A simple catalog of moves within collaboration would include boasts, lies, tricks, exaggeration, the mastery of language, even an entrepreneurial relation to language, the play with masks and roles, the caginess of Frost and Emerson, the folksy and the elusive. All are wrapped together as elements of a heightened self-consciousness and strategic style of thinking. They define the cultural location where the signifying monkey meets the performing self, when the ambiguity of Hawthorne and the glib half-serious language of Twain meet the canniness of Frost and the daring extravagance of Emerson’s and Whitman’s verbal bravado. Gates and Poirier have returned the study of moves within culture — the moves of the trickster — to their real importance over against the “No! In thunder” of opposition and the sentimental pathos of the many narratives of victims crushed by all-pervading scripts of power.

Sacvan Bercovitch’s study of Hawthorne and what Bercovitch calls the “a-morality of compromise” interrogates and deflates the rhetoric of oppositional purity in favor of a remarkable and nuanced idea of politics, a term of extraordinary importance as an alternative to the purity of cultural dissent and protest. Politics and, along with it, the pragmatics of action and compromise within a given temporal horizon and in the face of specific counterforces
that cannot be defeated but must be enlisted in a joint project define the 

essence of a stance beyond the merely gestural "No! In thunder" but equally 
beyond the various forms of radical purity — the expatriation of Henry 

James, the internal expatriation of Thoreau at Walden, the aloof aristocratic 

unemployment of Henry Adams, the utopian posture of Thoreau or the his-
tory of intellectual socialism and communism in the hundred years between the fall of the Paris Commune in 1870 and the collapse of that utopia in the 

face of the crisis in real-existing socialism at the end of the 1980s.

Like the texts by Poirier, Gates, and Bercovitch, but from an entirely dif-
ferent direction, Walter Benn Michaels’s book on naturalism and the 1890s — 
The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism — has demolished the opposi-
tional simplicity in what had seemed the easiest period to locate the author 
automatically outside and over against the culture of capitalism. In my own 
book Hard Facts, the nineteenth-century models of cultural work are deliber-
ately taken to be different from and more varied than the work of protest and 
negation or its opposite, pious complicity and conscious or unconscious 
propagation of a single leading ideology. In its literature a culture practices 
and memorizes its own self-relation, only one part of which involves its re-
tion to what it takes to be its past, to what circumference of action and choice 
it holds itself accountable for in the present, and what future it takes to be its 
promise to itself, as opposed to the merely abstract or utopian bad infinity of 
possibilities. Cultural work is pragmatic, not Hegelian. Its plural objects are 
local, open matters, necessary cases, hard facts. One measure of cultural work 
is not realism but a certain decay within realism that announces that some 
local fact of culture has been altered or restabilized so that the work now done 
has made the earlier representation obsolete — that is, no longer realistic. For 
later periods the effectiveness of that work can be felt in what now seems like 
excess or exaggerated emphasis — what we sweep to the side as genre. What 
feels sentimental, in the bad meaning of the term, in Stowe or Wordsworth, 
Dickens or Dostoevsky, is exactly the marker of suffering now casually with-
in the field of vision that once had to be forced into representation. What is 
now noticed as shrill in Whitman — once the work of Whitman to center the 
sexual and democratic self has succeeded — becomes obsolete, part of the 
genre or category of the egotistical sublime, the excess of Romanticism, the 
emotional fraud of mid-nineteenth-century boosterism, whether for land 
schemes, political candidates, or, in Whitman’s case, self-description and con-
struction of the role and stance of the democratic poet.

Cultural work is one concept of a cultural pragmatism, a concern with 
the effective strategies of culture that includes, at the level of individual psy-
chology, such strategies as performing and signifying. Poirier’s Emerson, in 
The Renewal of Literature, is a model of the tough-minded intellectual within 
American culture. One part of his model is that bravery of fools that Emerson 
shared with Whitman and Twain. Bercovitch’s Hawthorne, with the notion of 
politics and the intriguing morality of compromise, is a second, equally 
important cultural model. Both are elements of the major recuperation of 
American philosophical pragmatism that has been a significant project of the 
new collaboration between American philosophy and American literary 

studies in the 1970s and 1980s.

The worldliness and local field of vision of pragmatism has always 

existed as the rough alternative both to dissent and to the spiritual purity of 
transcendentalism, utopianism, and Puritanism — those three overlapping 
radical energies within our culture. In the books of Stanley Cavell and 
Richard Rorty, the philosophical and literary tradition of American pragma-
that has been returned to central interest in our cultural life. The easy combi-
nation of the literary and the philosophical is only one of the novelties of this 
recent examination of pragmatism. The contingency, irony, and solidarity that 
Rorty has brought together as key terms in one of his titles define a posture 
of liberal generosity and a dismissal of the vehemence and refusal of solidar-
ity with one’s own culture that are the classic tonal pitch of self-appointed 
radicalism. That Emerson and William James stand also for a genuinely pop-
ular and culturally central relation of the intellectual to society is no small 
part of their value and interest. They are, we might say, anti-Nietzschean 
models of the intellectual.

Cavell, Rorty, and Poirier have laid the basis in recent books for a pro-
found and profoundly impure — that is, contingent and political — tradition 
of American intellectual culture. At the same time it is notable that Cavell and 
Poirier have created analyses of culture that broke the barrier between high 
culture and the innovative commercial and popular culture of our own time. 
Cavell has brought both philosophy and Hollywood into the register of liter-
ary vision. His work on film, especially on the Hollywood comedies of mar-
riage and remarriage — Pursuits of Happiness — has set a new configuration 
in place of the older-style American studies negotiation between “major 
authors” and the “wider culture.” Poirier’s The Performing Self did similar 
decisive work in building analytic paths into the complex languages of pop-
ular music, political writing, and such authors as Frost and Norman Mailer. 

Gates’s The Signifying Monkey is the key recent revision of our description of 
the text culture in its links to the strategies and range of everyday oral and 
written performance. An encyclopedic summary of what used to be called 
“our classic authors” in terms of this wider culture of possibilities was 
achieved by David Reynolds in his book Beneath the American Renaissance.

REGIONALISM AND CENTRAL CULTURE

Alongside the search for grand unifying myths, with their inevitable narra-
tive of a fall into imperfection and disappointment, a second element shared 
the stage within American studies between the 1930s and the 1970s — the 
claim of pluralism within American culture. This diversity, which resists the 
single shelter of myth or ideology, has again and again risen to dominance in 
what we might call the episodes of regionalism in American cultural history.

Cultural life in American swings like a pendulum between a diversity of 
sectional voices and an ever-new project of unity, between the representation 
of the nation as made up of weakly joined districts and the depiction of a cen-
The suffrage movement had followed and drawn its vocabulary from the abolitionist movement against slavery, set the model for the denial of what came to be called essentialism, the claim to an overriding common human identity. Later gay and lesbian movements, as well as ethnic identities that were now conceived not along the model of the earlier hyphenated identities but along the more radical model of black or female identity, reopened the full spectrum of regionalized culture. Native American, Chicano, gay, black, lesbian, female: Once again, an episode of regionalism set out its claims against, in this case, a central technological culture made up of the new media — television and film — but also against the older forces of education and mass representation. The model that black or female identity set in place for regionalism was refractory in a novel way because these regional — as opposed to universal — models for identity were the first within American experience that neither mobility nor the succession of generations would alter. Earlier geographic or ethnic identities had been episodic in that the mechanisms of the culture itself would erase them over time. California, with its new "identity," was obviously composed of people who had shed — by means of the simple act of driving across the country and choosing to settle there — their prior New England, midwestern, southern, or western identities. Jewish Americans who moved to the suburbs of New York City and watched their children marry Italian Americans, German Americans, or Wasps may have seen the fading and erasure of these regionalisms in the lives of the grandchildren who went off to school in Chicago or Los Angeles. Earlier American regionalisms had been temporary and easily bargained away once the alternatives were attractive enough. The weak hold of geography could be seen in the all-purpose category "Sun Belt," which encompassed not only the states from Florida through Texas to Southern California but also, in the case of Florida, the new security of retirement and the simple desire for a warm and convenient climate that would lead Americans to desert and shed their regional identities, homes, and friends, even late in life for a carefully calculated new start. By contrast, to be black or female was an unnegotiable identity, one that could not be dissolved by those American master plots: education, intermarriage, mobility. Insofar as other groups, including ethnic groups, took over the black model, they chose to see their own regional identity as final and began to argue for their own language, education, and culture.

In American universities the departments of American studies, established in the 1950s, 1940s, and 1950s, found themselves in the 1960s and 1970s quickly regionalized into departments of black or African American studies, Jewish studies, women's studies, Native American studies, Chicano and Asian American studies, and, in some cases, gay studies. One consequence of these new identity claims was what the proponents viewed as an aggressive unmasking of the myths of the previous generation, among other things a series of overwhelmingly white male myths of America. The pastoral, the western, the Puritan mission, the frontier experience of individualism,
self-reliance, and democratic values: all had, at their center, white male actors with various supporting casts. The self-appointed task of unmasking hegemony, essentialism, and the many disguised operations of power within the culture has defined what could be called the fundamentalism of this third and most recent swing of regionalism. We have lived for twenty years within a scholarship that could be more and more clearly identified as, in effect, the unegotiable regional essentialism of gender, race, and ethnicity. This new regionalism demanded and made claims for a wider membership within the university on behalf of women, blacks, and others while supplying the new members with an automatic subject matter: themselves, their own history and rights within the national array of culture.

The new American studies has grown up alongside but also as an alternative or aftermath to this regionalism, which tore apart the previous unifying and singular myths of America. The key limitation to this new phase, as well as to all earlier regionalisms, was its need to define itself and thrive only within a highly politicized atmosphere. Regionalism is always, in America, part of a struggle within representation. It is seldom or never a matter of tolerance, the blooming of a thousand, or even of three, flowers. In the regionalism of the last two decades, identity is formed by opposition: black-white, female-male, Native American-settler, gay-heterosexual. Because of this opposition, identity is located above all in the sphere of politics—that is, in the sphere of felt opposition, of movement, laws, demands, negotiations over representation, and, in the university, in struggle over curriculum and requirements. The new American studies has stood outside this regionalism by locating a set of underlying but permanently open national facts around which all identities are shaped. It is with these permanently open cultural questions that the many rhetorics of our culture are engaged. Among these permanently open, that is, never won or lost, national facts are democratic culture and its demands; the culture of freedom that permits conditions of dominance, whether economic, sexual, or cultural, and has permitted even permutations of slavery as one aspect of the nature of freedom itself; the creation of a national life that is economic rather than religious or, in the anthropological sense, cultural. This troubled utopian core of enterprise, freedom, and democratic culture, baffled by preexisting social facts while never surrendering to them, is central to much of the best recent work in American studies.

The Civil War within Representation

One consequence of the new American studies has been to replace the traditional concept of the American Renaissance with the new category of a literature located within the Civil War and driven by the particular concepts of freedom and independence, politics and compromise that the war period, with its preparation and aftermath, froze into place. Recent European historical work, particularly Reinhart Koselleck’s essays on the concept of revolution in his book Future’s Past, has brought to the center of attention the part played by civil wars in the grounding and contesting of national identity in the three hundred years between the Thirty Years’ War and the English Civil War of the seventeenth century and the end of the general European civil war of 1914–45. Like the American Civil War, or the French and Russian revolutions with their phases of civil war, all such conflicts put at risk the very existence of the society itself in the name of uncompromisable values. Periods of civil war are periods without ideology, because two or more rhetorics of self-representation, national purpose, and historical genealogy are in wide enough circulation to elicit complete support, even to the point of making people willing to die for them. Civil war is the alternative condition to what we call, following Foucault’s relentless analysis, the power of the centralized state, the structured, all-pervading system for stabilizing and describing a fixed social reality.

In contrast to the condition of two or more contesting powers that we can, in a shorthand way, express by the notion of civil war, the very idea of a cultural period like that of Romanticism or the American Renaissance leads us to look for a unified set of ideas and aesthetic practices. We then come to think of such concepts as the ideology of the American Renaissance or some other period. Writers can be viewed as expressing or dissenting from that ideology. Ideology, dissent, a sense of identity and of an authoritative discourse within each period are all interdependent notions. Once the idea of civil war as a normative situation within representation replaces that of ideology, the entire array of concepts falls away together.

In literary studies of the last ten years what has been called the new historicism has, as a result of the strong influence of Foucault and modern experience of totalitarianism and its analysis by, among others, Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno, focused on the fate of representation within absolutist states or societies. The English Renaissance, taken as a glorious period of monarchy, along with its secondary pressures and exceptions, became the natural topic for new-historicist demonstrations.

The condition of civil war can be taken to be the fundamental alternative to that of monarchical power, self-display, uniform discourse, ideology, and controlled representation. American new historicism has its basis in the representational situation not of monarchy but of civil war. To see the central American historical episode as the civil war is to bring to the front the power of rhetorics, incomplete dominance of representation, and the borrowing or fusing of successful formulas of representation. The actual war of the 1860s stands in for the pervasive, continuously unsettled, open struggle within American culture. All cultural history in the United States is the history of civil wars.

The civil wars between contemporaries are only a local version of what, to use an Emersonian formulation, should be seen as the fundamental, permanent conflict in any society that is, as the United States is, an economy rather than a culture. That underlying civil war, as Emerson described it in his essay on Napoleon, is between the young and the old, between power that represents work done in the past and the effort of the young, who will
displace all that is being defended in order to make room for themselves in the world. Railroads overthrew canals and water-based transportation, and no sooner had they succeeded than the automobile and long-distance truck overthrew the railroad. No sooner did Western Union have a monopoly on long-distance communication than the telephone industry emerged to make that monopoly worthless.

The representational topic of monarchy is the inheritance, diffusion, and protection of already-held power. The subject of civil war is the unstable contest for short-term control that is uninheritable and, in the end, undefendable. Power is not the topic of this historicism but its weak long-term expectations in a culture in which economic dominance is not located in land — that one genuinely scarce, readily transferable, and not easily variable basis of hegemony.

**Print Culture without the State**

The ordinary culture within which our classic authors and painters have worked has to be called a print culture, but now understood in a wider sense than the Gutenberg culture of the book. A photograph is also called a “print,” as is the copy of a film. Newspapers and journals, advertisements and billboards are also, in this sense, prints, offprints, and reprints. In his book on the profession of the author in America, Michael Warner sets out the model of the printer Benjamin Franklin, with his new-made career within print culture, a culture replacing the oral culture of sermon, oratory, and statements linked to the personal presence of the speaker and the audience’s identification with the spoken words. After Franklin all American authors, photographers, and filmmakers are printers.

In his important book on American photography, Alan Trachtenberg has defined the photographic print as a cultural text within the Civil War, the reform movements of the 1890s and 1930s, and the modernist aesthetic of the early twentieth century. In the photographic images of the war itself, Trachtenberg reads the rhetoric of representation as it appeared within the camera — which, like the machine gun, was one of the new instruments of this conflict. The very existence of photographs during wartime for the first time, alongside or combined with day-by-day newspaper reporting from the battlefield, set up a contest for the control and definition of this new visual genre. The photograph and newspaper did not define an ideology of the war experience and certainly not a myth. Instead, they embodied the rapidly shifting competitive rhetorics within the as-yet-unstabilized representation that would only later, with victory and time, become what we know as the “Civil” War.

Unlike myths that take on all possible historical circumstances as illustrations and by this means become universal explanations, rhetorical analysis is never universal. One important reason for the local nature of the analysis of rhetorics found in recent work is the lack of what might be called, in the European sense, the state in American experience and therefore an absence of any monopoly of either power or of violence on the part of the state. Centralization of power on the European model, and with it the centralization of the power of representation and self-conception as it has been described by Foucault, was never present in America. Unlike French schools, American education has always been local, variable, responsive, for good and ill, to local pressures and the demands of the moment. When, in the twentieth century, state control over, and funding of, culture became fundamental and deeply ideological in Europe and throughout much of the world, politicized between the radical cultural projects of the right and the left, American culture developed an almost singularly market- and consumer-based formula of funding, selection, and survival. American newspapers, music, film, radio, publishing, and television were all competitive, decentralized, and in the hands of ever-new players. Only the highly paradoxical analysis of European intellectuals, like those of the Frankfurt school, with their horror of popular or commercial culture, could have invented the claim that this unsponsored and competitive culture itself expressed an even more rigid and tricky ideology than the more obvious overt ideologies of twentieth-century European experience, the so-called ideology of capitalism (see Jay). But by 1945 no European intellectual could any longer imagine what it might mean to live in a society without a state that owned, sponsored, and used for its own purposes all the media of cultural life.

Even outside the arena of cultural conflict, or civil war per se, American culture provided the richest possible resources for escape, invisibility, and defiance. The right to “move on” or “head out west” was only one of the possibilities that limited the creation of a state. More important was the economic commitment to a rapidly changing culture of invention, with its dizzy cycles of the amassing, loss, and transfer of wealth and power. The economic commitment was far more decisive than the purely individual right to escape or move on, but even the apparently individual mobility was historically profound because it was the means of renewing the act of immigration — leaving behind and moving on — that was each individual’s first drop of American identity. In fact, such an economic pressure — what has been called the “creative destruction” of the market economy — is a form of willed, collective instability, because it accepts the future as an already bankable asset that can be borrowed against to speed up the overthrow of the past. In a speculative culture, for instance, the profits of the railroads fall into an investment pool, where, since they are expected to yield the highest returns, they no longer are invested back into the railroad system itself but into the automobile industry, whose only purpose is to overthrow the railroads as the fundamental transportation system. By means of the speculative system, the past becomes the silent partner of a future that will abolish its own hold. A culture of speculation is opposite in its action to those of preservation, inheritance, and self-reproduction, which we tend to take anthropologically as the human norm. Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* — precisely because it is concerned with societies whose primary goal is reproduction in the widest sense of self-replication and continuation, as is, over time — can never
describe an Emersonian or speculative society whose commitment to self-destruction in the name of its own next possibility is far more important than its interest in the transfer of the forms of the past to a future generation.

For these reasons analysis within American studies will always be of sectors of a diverse culture characterized by the absence of a monopoly of power. These studies will always be historical and not anthropological, because of the commitment of the culture itself to a rapid building up, wearing out, and replacement of systems of all kinds by new arrays of persons and forces. The updraft is strong, the door of immigration both to and within the country is open, the exhaustion of control is always imminent and control itself is porous. Because America had no experience of monarchy, it has a permanent democratic core working against not only the centralization of power but, more important, its inheritance or preservation over time.

In the absence of a state, we find ourselves freed of the intellectual component of the systematic state: ideology. We have rhetorics because we have no ideology, and we have no ideology because we lack the apparatus of ideology: a national religion, a unitary system of education under the control of the state, a cultural life and media monopolized by the state by means either of ownership or of subsidy. Ideology is a cultural mechanism of stabilization and transmission, neither of which is a primary topic of a culture of speculation. The study of rhetorics is our necessary alternative to the study of ideology. Rhetorics are the sign of the play of forces within cultural life, and at the same time of the power of invention and obsolescence within culture. Rhetoric is the mark of temporary location and justification. The nuances of provisional justification and defense, the opening up of newness within culture without escaping the grip of the master problems and resources of the culture: This is what is at issue within the newest writing on American literature and culture.  

NOTE
1. This essay has been adapted from the author's introduction to his volume The New American Studies (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993).

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
A particularly thoughtful group of essays, on literary issues and texts from the eighteenth century to the present, that reflect what the editor refers to as "the self-reflexiveness that characterizes this period of critical interregnum."

One of Cavell's recent collections of essays that display his efforts to recuperate the writings of Emerson and Thoreau for serious philosophical reflection and show how their pragmatist absorption with the ordinary and the familiar constitutes a profound response to the modern problem of skepticism.

A study of the way cultural forms like novels transform certain of the disagreeable facts at the center of social experience—in nineteenth-century America, the removal and destruction of Native American peoples, the enslavement of African Americans, and the later commercial objectification of all Americans—into something not only palatable but naturalized.

An important work that focuses on the trickster in African American literary experience, a figure whose talents for signifying, for redescription, constitute a subjectivity that can elude the structures of rhetorical and ideological closure associated with the dominant society.

A study of the renaissance of pragmatism in contemporary American intellectual culture and its application to a variety of literary and critical contexts.

A definitive study of the myth of the American Adam in the nineteenth century and of some of the tragic collisions to which its moral and spiritual pretensions were exposed in the literature of the last two centuries.

An examination of the development of nineteenth-century American literary pastoralism as a response to the social, political, and emotional threat of the rise of industrialization.

A classic study of the American literature of the mid-nineteenth century that displaced the Fireside Poets as the preeminent authors of the period with a new canon that included Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville.

A work that summarizes some of the themes that circulated in Miller's numerous and often majesterial studies of the Puritan mind, from the role of the jeremiad in American culture to the place and function of millenarianism in the American psyche.

A path-breaking study that explores the work of what are here held to be the seven major writers of the middle years of the nineteenth century (in addition to Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman—Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson against the background of a rich but little-known world of sensational and popular literature on which they drew for many of their themes, characters, settings, and even idioms.

A more effective demonstration than any of his other books that Rorty has breathed new life into pragmatic critical in its analysis and resituated them at the center of contemporary cultural existence.

A literary history from the colonial era to the present that reflects the shift from ideological explorations of essential American myths to a pragmatic concern with the conversation between different American rhetorics and styles.

An analysis of the translation of the history of American photographs into a social text. The approach not only affords a new way of reading that history but turns it into a theory of how American culture has itself been read.

WORKS CITED


Jay's essay originally appeared in an issue of College English (1991), but it sparked so much discussion that an essay collection, The Canon in the Classroom (1994), edited by John Alberti, was published presenting the essay with several responses to it. Jay begins with the radical notion that universities should no longer teach American literature. While he is pleased with recent progress in expanding the canon, he notes that these pluralistic revisions do not dismantle the "oppressive nationalist ideology" that has framed our study of American literature. Jay attempts to make visible the power dynamics and privilege that affect how cultural history and literature are reproduced and institutionalized. He believes a responsible pedagogy is multiculturalism at its best — one that seeks to foster dialogue with the Other. Jay is quick to distinguish his brand of multiculturalism from assimilationist "melting pot" rhetoric that attempts to erase difference.

Rather than promoting a literary history based on fabricated consensus, Jay proposes replacing it with a history rooted in a geographical and historical paradigm, which allows us to see the borders between the United States, Canada, and Mexico as the products of our history rather than its origins. Similarly, the lines between cultural groups within the United States would be seen as permeable borders that allow for cultural exchange. The argument for dismantling American literature and replacing it with "Writing in the United States" pushes one to question the current approach to American literary studies. According to Jay, we must not merely expand the canon, but disrupt and problematize our notion of the field. This would entail addressing the way in which assimilation and translation inform American literature. American literature must be reconceived as a study of "how various cultural groups and their forms have interacted during the nation's ongoing construction" (p. 53) Jay concludes his essay with a practical discussion of what his revised Writing in the United States course might look like. For example, rather than organizing the syllabus by period or by theme, he proposes arranging the course along a list of problems that would place texts from different cultural groups into dialogue with each other.

BACKGROUND READINGS FOR TEACHERS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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PREFACE

Anthologies are a mainstay for many literature instructors, but it can be difficult to find a suitable selection for our courses. Many of the current anthologies have become almost unwieldy in their attempt to include everything that an instructor might wish to teach. However, The Bedford Anthology of American Literature takes a very different approach by aiming for representation rather than comprehensive coverage. The anthology includes frequently-taught writers while also reflecting the gender and ethnic diversity of American literature. The editors also seek to provide crucial historical context for the selections by including brief introductions to the periods and writers. Yet, what I find most attractive about the anthology is the inclusion of clusters of related works found in the American Contexts sections and the brief Through a Modern Lens features, which put later writers in conversation with their predecessors. Because of my excitement about this new anthology, I was pleased to be asked to edit this companion essay collection on the challenges of teaching American literature.

In an era of canon expansion and even destruction, one of the clearest challenges is determining what constitutes American literature. With the increased emphasis on diversity, scholars are questioning why certain women and ethnic writers have been undervalued. Critics are also insisting that issues of sexuality and class be addressed in discussions of literature. The landscape has clearly changed and many instructors lack formal training in more recent critical approaches. While many of us use conferences and professional journals to keep up with the changing times, it can be hard to find time for such professional development. In addition to a more diverse body of literature, instructors are also faced with a more diverse student body, and instructors often require a variety of teaching methodologies in order to be successful in the classroom. It is to these challenges that this collection speaks. While one book cannot provide all of the answers, I do believe that this set of essays addresses some of the most pressing issues in the field and provides essential resources for teaching in the trenches.

I think many teachers are, like me, collectors. I am always looking for good ideas and resources for my classes. I have a sizeable collection of books...