

Introduction

The Study of the American Problems

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What is the object of American studies? This opening salvo really asks two questions. What does “American studies” study, and what does it want? Some would say that the question *is* the problem. “Must self-identification as an Americanist put one under the obligation to be an upholder or subverter of American institutions?”¹ Why should American studies take upon itself the call to endorse a program, especially one saddled with all sorts of nationalist connotations, more than any other field of literary and cultural studies? To say that the nation *is* the self-evident truth of the field simply states a tautology. W. E. B. Du Bois, author of “The Study of the Negro Problems” (1897), a foundational essay on the origins of his own methodological creativity and experimentation in studying an object, offers an answer. The scope of any problem, Du Bois recognizes, changes over time and across space — as surely as black life in the United States is conditioned by the long fetch of history that unfolded in the broader Atlantic world. “All Art is propaganda and ever must be,” he wrote some twenty years later in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926).² Translation: all American studies scholarship is ever propaganda. This is a place to start, not something either to celebrate or to decry.

In pressuring the object of American studies, we are questioning how the things that this interdisciplinary field studies — whether bits of material culture as small as a cigarette stub or as large as war — imply a political position or practice. Still following Du Bois, we could say that we do not care a damn for any methodology that is not used for political ends. For now, though, we advance the less controversial point that all politics have methodologies, and it is about time that American studies consciously evaluate the strategies,

tactics, and assumptions with which it approaches culture. The fact that a long and rich research and curricular history exists in what is sometimes called “American cultures” programs makes this project at once more urgent and axiomatic. “The Study of the American Problems” may be just the ticket, a reformulation that looks back to Du Bois’s problems and forward to its own future solutions.

A lifetime student of the singularly misnamed “Negro Problem,” Du Bois provides a model for Americanists who would rather not be a member of the club. (Indeed, many of the contributors to this volume consider themselves interlopers to the field of American studies.) He remade the singular problem (“we ordinarily speak of the Negro problem as though it were one unchanged question”) into a “plexus of social problems” and proceeded from there.³ In Du Boisean spirit, instead of breast-beating about the name “America,” we were inspired by the salutary boom across traditional interdisciplinary studies in the last three decades of the twentieth century. We started our project hoping to wed the object-centered field expansion of the 1970s and 1980s — all the hyphenated minority cultures and canons, histories and regions — with the theoretical work on nations, nationalism, and transnationalism of the 1980s and 1990s. The result turned out to be less a happy marriage than a healthy lack of consensus that extends to the naming of the field itself. U.S. cultural studies, American cultures, critical U.S. studies, Americas studies, Inter-American studies, and, of course, the default, American studies: the proliferation of possibilities suggests how this field has long defined itself through a lack of definition and routinely grounded its projects and methods in flux and transition.⁴

But despite moves toward some “outside” or postnational “beyond” that would define the discipline as impossibly external to itself, these new directions in American studies, we argue, are a part of a familiar pattern that, for all its disruptive energy, does not confront basic issues of scope and scale. Objects hold their place in archives and imaginations just as much as they endure in the form of course anthologies, surveys, and exam lists that we regularly require. In light of the challenges that interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary scholarship presents to traditional ways of “doing” American studies, this volume examines how an object of study is set, identified, defined — or, most commonly, simply assumed. Even, or perhaps especially, when the canon has been opened up and expanded, as is undeniably the case with American studies today, the object itself multiplies yet remains, oddly, more or less static. Has inclusiveness, extending from our

texts to the languages we acquire, become a substitution for methodology? As Du Bois would say, “A combination of social problems is far more than a matter of mere addition — the combination itself is a problem.”⁵ Likewise, for the study of the American problems, we are marking our difference from prevailing feel-good methods, which, too often, operate according to principles that are merely additive, a sort of scholarly liberal pluralism that fails to address how interdisciplinary practice might actually throw into question the disciplinary assumptions of history, textual analysis, and cultural studies from which they draw. Instead of envisioning such genuinely unsettling interdisciplinary agendas, American studies has often settled for a multidisciplinary regime as the mark of a comparativism that parades coverage in place of comparison and the totality of the nation-state in place of theory.⁶

If objects are often the focal point of desire, then our investigation is best taken as a variant of Freud’s bafflement about what a woman wants. This question bears some adjustment, not the least because there were a lot of male professors around the seminar table at the institutional beginnings of American studies. What does an American studies scholar want? At first glance, the answer is nothing sexy: theory and praxis. But a closer look at alternative approaches to the field provided by this volume suggests that our desires to merge theory and praxis, our fantasy to make our objects of study coincide with our political goals or objects, might be rather risqué.

To recognize this possibility, we ask readers to engage in a thought experiment: imagine that you have an object and that you want to study it. The object could be anything, an artifact drawn from popular culture, a text culled from the archive, even something that is more of a moving target because of its location across or between cultures. In the pluralist ethos that characterizes the field, your object could be lowbrow or highbrow, material or virtual, national or transnational. The dime novels once unearthed by Henry Nash Smith that later become Michael Denning’s mechanic accents, the fugitive expressions of sound recaptured by Stephen Best and Jonathan Sterne, the forms of affect explored as female complaint by Lauren Berlant or as hieroglyphs of black female flesh by Hortense Spillers, and the border narratives that have been so important to the work of José David Saldívar and other scholars of the Latin American-Latino diaspora exemplify one range of possibilities.⁷ Another set emerges as a series of objects and people in motion, trafficked across alternative regions of study, including the Black Atlantic (itself pointing back to the earlier formulation Atlantic world), the circum-Caribbean and the global South.⁸ Now that you have your object,

which methodologies will contextualize and explain your selection? You might historicize the object or pay close attention to its language (and, of course, languages are not limited to print texts), but you also might set the object adrift, as it were, along the flows of capital, persons, and information that have characterized, albeit very differently, transoceanic worlds as well as digital and hyperreal spaces.

This positioning of the object quickly introduces another sense of object: what goal do you have in studying, recovering, or critiquing your object? Du Bois poses exactly this question as the initial charge of “Criteria of Negro Art.” Addressing the Chicago NAACP, he asked “What do we want? What is the thing we are after?” Even if American studies cannot quite claim to be like the NAACP, “a group of radicals trying to bring new things into the world,” this is not an innocent question. Like Du Bois, we “do not doubt but there are some in this audience who are a little disturbed at the subject” we have chosen. Just as he dismissed “the wailing of the purists” when it came to art, so too we doubt the existence of a mode of inquiry that could be described as pure scholarship or scientific truth.⁹ Instead we see his advocacy for the ethical and political responsibility of art and literature as tied to the “things” that American studies wants to study.

While our objects have been expanding along with our names for the field, they are strangely static. It once looked to us as though the problem was that the category of time was missing amid the fixation with space in American studies, which as an interdiscipline often seems still profoundly wedded to the privileging of region that characterized the development of area studies in the postwar era. We wondered what happens to disciplinary critique when the transnational is described and deployed as primarily spatial, as a phenomenon of borders, rims, and spheres. As in Du Bois’s understanding of problems, the transnational is also a temporal problem, its sudden appearance in recent years only the latest coordinate to be plotted on a map that includes points such as José Martí’s “Nuestra América” (1892) and Randolph Bourne’s “Trans-national America” (1916). But we need to do more than isolate temporality because such a singular focus would replicate the very one-dimensionality that we want to change. The spatiotemporal approaches adopted and adapted by the contributors to *States of Emergency*, in contrast, prioritize comparability as both the practice and the goal of American studies. And thinking through space-time helps to question the putative neutrality of comparison as a method. Objects, after all, are not only located in spaces such as archives and anthologies; objects are just as easily lost as

found in time that, for commentators like Hegel reflecting on Africa, denies historicity to some people and that, for critics like Johannes Fabian, afflicts “the other” with difference.¹⁰

The issue is one of metrics, as units of study range from region to nation and from state to globe—hence, the ubiquitous formula of the local and the global. Units of study are also time bound, with their temporality expressed through conventional periods of study divided by major “events” into “pre” and “post” that partition history into a new, ever-updated sectionalism: the antebellum United States; the American Renaissance and its later companion period, the Harlem Renaissance; the post–World War Two era; and especially the global narrowly conceived as a purely contemporary phenomenon. But, in speaking of the “pre” and the “post,” we could just as readily be speaking of space, which is broken down and opened up into the pre- and postnational, not to mention the transnational or even subnational.¹¹ The convertibility of these tags in marking units of space or geopolitical divisions suggests their overlap, in a kind of asymmetrical equivalence. For every spatial dimension, we should think in terms of an analogous temporal unit and vice versa. By putting pressure on the space-time of scale and comparison, the essays in this volume together represent an attempt to locate the study of American problems within a larger sociology of knowledge.

This thought experiment is what our contributors offer by collectively taking up an array of objects — the weather, oceans, cigarettes, archival material, AIDS, the enemy, extinct species, torture — and recalibrating the metrics of time and space with which we study these particular American problems. Nan Enstad locates cigarettes within a global economy, but spatial coordinates are not adequate to expressing how carcinogens and other toxins have an elongated temporality that inhabit the body for years. Rodrigo Lazo works from the other direction, at first concentrating on the temporal dimension of the archive as a historical accretion only to confront its stolid placement in the public institutions of the nation-state. Another kind of temporal tension underwrites Kenneth Warren’s intervention on the Black Atlantic as both an object and a method of study, divided between historical periodization (the Atlantic world identified with the early modern and thus as the designation of a historical period) and transtemporal forms of identification (the cultural studies focus on the aesthetics and ethics of black identification or affiliation across space and time). Objects, for Anne McClintock, would seem to be irrefragably an issue of space. What could be more bound to a spatial location than tortured bodies imprisoned by the “War on Terror” — but McClintock’s

4. The most important contribution to this debate is Janice Radway, "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November 1998," *American Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1999): 1–32.

5. Du Bois, *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 346.

6. On the spatiotemporal relation and the viability of comparative study, see Harry Harootunian, "Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem," in "Problems of Comparability/Possibilities for Comparative Studies," ed. Harry Harootunian and Hyun Ok Park, special issue, *boundary 2* 32 (Summer 2005): 23–52.

7. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950; repr. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 1998); Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Stephen Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press 2003); José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature* (1989; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), translated as *Vidas en vilo: La cultura cubanoamericana* (Madrid: Colibrí Editorial, 2000); Anna Brickhouse, *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

8. See, for example, Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, eds., *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

9. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 752, 757.

10. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). Africa, for Hegel, "is no part of the historical World; it has no movement of development to exhibit" (*Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree [New York: American Home Library, 1902], 157).

11. See Wai Chee Dimock, "Scales of Aggregation: Prenational, Subnational, Transnational," *ALH* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 219–28.

12. The Janus face is associated with Walter Benjamin's angel of history as well as with Tom Nairn's work on nationalism. On the zigzag, see Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (New York: Verso, 2005).

13. Frederick Cooper, "Race, Ideology, and the Perils of Comparative History," *American Historical Review* 101 (October 1996): 1135.

investigation leads simultaneously to the identification of a temporal malady, the persistent foreboding of a paranoid empire. By disrupting what we think we know about time and space, by questioning the disciplinary handholds to which we cling as Chris Castiglia does in writing about the “post” that is so dear to queer theory, by calling for new coordinates of analysis as Robert Levine does in writing about apocalypse, we come to have a revitalized sense not only of each of these objects but of our object, our goal, our commitments, our investments, as cultural critics.

As these examples make clear, the blending and crossing of space-time also involve competing metrics, a series of counterunits such as borders, diasporas, and contact zones. In the temporal realm, a variety of counterunits (the Janus face of history, historical return and repetition, uneven development, the “zigzag”) have been proposed to offset the presentism that dogs teleological timelines and their linear metrics.¹² Frederick Cooper, for example, calls for a “history that compares” in contrast to an inert “Comparative History,” one that is too flatfooted to consider transatlantic or global situations.¹³ Units of time, such as the history of slavery, that trace synchronically whole systems or structures as though their building blocks remain static in a kind of monumental time create a need for counterunits, such as the history of slave revolt, that track more uneven, asymmetrical developments and phenomena. Questioning the category of nation is one thing, but there are limits, as well as possibilities, to the counterunits-of-study approach. Maybe, in addition, the efforts to retool U.S. studies have been overshadowed, skewed by all the frequent, if not ritual, uses of “post,” “beyond,” and “beneath.” How to compare by putting space-time back together again?

Neoliberalism, both within and outside the academy, makes this task all the more difficult. Under neoliberalism, temporalities and spaces lose their multiplicity and are governed by a market sensibility of supposed individual freedom that in actuality is the abandonment of the social contract. Lacking the contexts of comparison, space and time are flattened out, and, as Enstad contends in her look at the invisible hand of the market, the frames available for analysis become severely limited. Not only does neoliberalism reduce competing worldviews to a singular American perspective, sometimes masked by the rubric of globalization, but it also enforces a hegemony that, as McClintock shows in her examination of torture, hides in plain sight. In each case, whether it is global circulation of toxins or the spectacle of torture, the body bears the brunt of neoliberal practice. And, if Srinivas Aravamudan is right in his assertion that we have entered a phase of “dominance without

hegemony,” then the task of decoupling the state and the discipline of American studies has become still more crucial. Working in conjunction with our other contributors, Enstad, McClintock, and Aravamudan suggest that while our methods, epistemological frames, and scales of analysis often are blind to and even complicit with force and violation, American studies practice also has a critical potential to fragment such accretions of power.

In the face of neoliberalism’s hegemony, then, we need a robust and routine comparativism that does not just replicate the methods or the objects of comparative history, such as long-standing “two-country” pairings, but rather is attuned theoretically to questions of both time and space in its construction of analytical units. Nor can a systemic comparativism echo what has been traditionally called “comparative Literature” because the bases of comparison, which were ascendant in postwar culture, are no longer in place as they once were in the 1960s and 1970s. We think that American revolutionaries may have been on to something in devising a methodology whose watchword of “one if by land and two if by sea” tracked the movement of troops and other objects in a world that was global, colonial, and militaristic all at once. Updating this wisdom, we might say that we need transtemporal sites of comparison, such as those defined by oceans as well as by land, if we are to make visible both the global and the local routes that bring the objects of American studies — race, slavery, immigration, the state — into circulation. Such spatiotemporal paradigms would go a long way toward counteracting the tendency within conventional area studies, not only the older, pre-cultural studies variety but also the “new American studies,” to privilege either space or time but never both at once.

The essays we have gathered together show how this theoretical dexterity operates in practice. In Benjaminian spirit, we envisage an innovative approach to the conventional, scholarly collection of essays. Rather than one, massive phone book, we propose instead a modest volume, with essays of different lengths, but none reaching the standard thirty-pages plus of the usual academic-journal article. It intersperses intervention-style, think pieces with manifestoes and keyword entries. With a philosophy of less-is-more, the object is less likely to overwhelm the methodology — or vice versa. Thus, we intend Warren’s piece on the space and time of the Black Atlantic as a short suture — permanent, not the dissolvable kind — to the rest of the essays. Coming after McClintock’s analysis of tortured bodies sequestered at sites in the Caribbean and Middle East and preceding Baucom’s account of enemies manufactured by the philosophy and economy of the Atlantic

world, Warren's Black Atlantic provides both a rupture and a bridge to the volume in the spirit of the very short gangplank that Toni Morrison envisions for the *Beloved* reader, the abrupt and unexpected "*in medias res* opening" that unfinished and open-ended political projects such as ours (and hers) warrant.¹⁴ With Warren's Black Atlantic marking key lines of tension within black studies, our volume opens out, we hope, onto an interdisciplinary environment that our contributors all recognize as both utterly familiar and completely foreign. Wai Chee Dimock looks to the warming ocean air that becomes the engine for catastrophic hurricanes as a way of reconsidering nations, sovereignty, and other land-based notions. Also attentive to oceans and the crisscrossing currents of history, Baucom identifies the Atlantic as the spatiotemporal region from where contemporary understandings of "the unjust enemy" originate. From the perspective of Warren's Black Atlantic, Ian Baucom advances a view of history as both repetition and redemption, reflecting the paradoxical impulse to use history to overcome history that is centrally indebted to Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history. So, too, by translating the study of American problems into times and places that fail to abide by the regularities of U.S. history, the U.S. literary archive, or even the traditional interdisciplinary pairing of history and literature, these essays, like Aravamudan's examination of American studies' roguish past, seek a perspective on what Walter Benjamin called a "state of emergency."¹⁵

For Benjamin, living in a state of emergency requires a good deal of temporal flexibility. A supple view of the past is necessary in order to combat the exceptionalism that isolates a present crisis as somehow extraordinary, creating a situation that demands all sorts of extraordinary measures, not just civil and legal but also philosophical. Benjamin's assertion that the state of emergency "in which we live is not the exception but the rule" has uncanny relevance for both a nation and a field of study that has founded itself on exceptionalist narratives. This view is thus always implicitly comparativist, taking slices of the past and other objects and refusing their isolation, separateness, and partitioning from one another. But never should events or objects be strung together in a smooth, continuous sequence, like the "beads of a rosary" that allow for predestined stories of progress and overcoming.¹⁶ Following this heretical spirit, the essays here do not string together one coherent method or theory. Nor is looking fixedly at the past a desired strategy. One's view must also be messianic, which is to say that any method for understanding culture then and now must also be concerned with what is

coming. Thus, the ideal position is famously Janus-faced, like the angel of history, facing back toward the past but propelled toward the future.

As opposed to manufacturing an artificial state of emergency that plucks the present moment out of context, “our task [is] to bring about a real state of emergency,” writes Benjamin in the present tense, directing his critical energies along an irregular timeline from the debt owed the past toward the future. In this sense, Benjamin’s critique has an object, which is not the same thing as having a sure destination or even a plan. Like the object of Benjamin’s critique, our volume has no lofty misconception that it points the way to a better interdisciplinary day or that it stands at brink of the new, waiting to usher in “the beginning of knowledge.”¹⁷ Our goal is more modest: to take the objects we study as problems, which, neither beyond comparison to other objects nor snugly fitting into a chain of events, make a problem out of the tools we would bring to the study of an event, phenomenon, performance, or artifact.

In short, what would it mean to understand the field of American studies as in a state of emergency? For Du Bois, the really crucial question is one of scale and time: to measure the many successive problems grouped around the object and the study of “America,” and to trace their historical development and probable trend of further development.¹⁸ For Benjamin, to say that the emergency is not exceptional suggests that it is routine, standard operating procedure, except that “standard operating procedure,” like “state of emergency” itself, has morphed perversely in meaning. Both terms are now used virtually synonymously, to justify the increased extension of government power over questions of citizenship and individual rights after 9/11. Our contributors are hardly alone in looking at objects through the lenses of wreckage and destruction seen in New York City, Iraq, New Orleans, and elsewhere.¹⁹ But when we asked Anne McClintock to consider the object of American studies, she encouraged us toward a type of critique that pays attention to the shadowy objects of present history, specifically the prisoners of Abu Ghraib, both occluded and hyperembodied by the state. Journalist Philip Gourevitch’s 2008 *Standard Operating Procedure* notes the eerie absence of attention to torture in the whole spectacle of Abu Ghraib, asking: where’s the anger?²⁰ He confirms the problem — a time of crisis has been transformed into a state of emergency that is not real but artificial, defined instead as standard operating procedure — that McClintock studies from a Du Boisean range of relative perspectives, including but not limited to her analysis of the photo archive. While Gourevitch opts for interviews and

deliberately omits the photos from his book, McClintock concludes instead that the images *are* the necessary object of study that have the potential to move us through compassion and outrage to political action, the only way to stop the atrocities. Taken up in our double sense of object as both the topic and the point of critique, the Abu Ghraib photographs bring about a real state of emergency in defiance of official and artificial proclamations of the same.

While Benjamin inspired our title, it was actually Benedict Anderson who suggested the convergence of ideas about time, space, and the nation. Anderson's *Imagined Communities* — the subsequent editions that followed the original in 1983 — underlines both how critical it is to stress the New World origins of nationalism and why it has proved so difficult to do so.²¹ Benjamin's concept of messianic time informed Anderson's focus in the 1983 *Imagined Communities* on the Americas as the locus of different structures of simultaneity underlying medieval and modern forms of imagining. But because "the crucial chapter on the originating Americas was largely ignored," Anderson explains in the 1991 preface, an additional chapter, "Memory and Forgetting," further develops the special nature of nationalism in relation to the newness of the New World. Rather than genealogical continuity *from* the old *to* the new, in the Americas "new" and "old" were understood "synchronically, coexisting within homogeneous empty time" as a sense of parallelism, simultaneity, or, in a nutshell, comparability.²² The "doubleness of the Americas" accounts, Anderson concludes, for "why nationalism emerged first in the New World, not the Old"²³ — and, we would say, for why the key originating role for the Americas in the genesis of nationalism is so subject to memory and forgetting.

From this slightly askew spatiotemporal perspective, the old specter of American exceptionalism starts to have a new and charmed life. American difference turns out to be rooted in its special comparability. Anderson foregrounds both American difference, the particular novelty of its newness, and American comparability, how "Creole pioneers" of the New World imagined themselves as comparable to, existing synchronically alongside their Old World counterparts (see the retitled chapter 4, *Imagined Communities*). This "exhilarating doubleness" could reposition both the object and disciplinary method of American studies.²⁴ First, it avoids the trap of the two Americas, sometimes associated with Latin American intellectual history, which pits one against the "other America" [*la otra América*].²⁵ Instead, this American doubleness makes comparability both internal and external to the Americas,

the object studied in relation to Europe, Asia, and Africa, to the Atlantic and Pacific worlds, as well as to itself. Temporally and spatially, American doubleness multiplies into a simultaneity of times, places, and languages coexisting unevenly across the multiple national states of the Americas. Second, from this perspective the early United States is “just another creole-led revolutionary state” and the Civil War a minor conflagration at the periphery of worldwide explosions of anarchist violence in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Finally, the doubleness of the Americas sidesteps the “spectre of comparison” that haunts other colonial-imperial histories, in which the worlds outside Europe are condemned to see themselves through the small end of the telescope, a kind of second-order doubling, shadowed by the ghosts of European modernity. Offering perfect arguments against both national incomparability and Eurocentrism, this model accounts for why the specter of comparison is so palpable and elusive, so formative and forgettable in the Americas context.²⁶

Our essays take up Anderson’s challenge and show how the object of American studies benefits from a structure of comparability, meaning a theory of space and time that recognizes how changing apprehensions of both coordinates produce new thinking about the nation in local and global contexts. In practice, “nationalism’s undivorceable marriage to internationalism” also means that we do not have to throw out the baby with the bathwater in order to “transnationalize” American studies.²⁷ Nations and other “old” units remain in play even as comparative spaces (such as oceans or borders) and times (such as nostalgia or amnesia) can change the standard operating procedures of American studies. Considering toxicity allows Enstad to pay new attention to the problem of scale: is the object a chemical, a body, a particular human or animal population, a geographic location of consumption, or a global network? Thus bridging the analytic dichotomy between local reactions and global forces, “toxin” is by definition a relational term that can track the effects of global capitalism in particular times and places. If the study of AIDS raises its own question of scale, in Castiglia’s formula, “too big for queer theory and too small for American studies,” then not just AIDS but the history of sexual liberation struggles may fall through the cracks of institutional memory. In objecting to trauma as a countertemporal term that does not respond to the cry of the past, Castiglia questions the standard yardsticks used to measure a crisis.

As the scale of analysis fluctuates, old objects enter the archive in new ways. Lazo advances this argument by turning his attention to texts that

require translation — that is, they move across borders of language, nations, and generations — to ask how our methods change the objects that we study. But it also might be the case, as Levine shows in his essay in this volume, that our present methodologies lack proper calibration for studying the usual cataclysms — you know, little things like species extinction, global warming, the day of judgment, or the end of the universe — that in one form or another have contributed to postapocalyptic visions since at least the era of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Nor do all the essays mechanically or slavishly fill in the dotted lines between the coordinates of “Space New and Old” and “Time New and Old.”²⁸ The view from the volume’s bridge shows historical changes envisaged as simultaneous yet capable of producing configurations of difference, to the extent that comparisons highlight the local meaning of each event and, sometimes, the exceptionality of each case. Sovereignty and historiography undergo specific material and conceptual explosions in the oceanic histories of Warren’s Black Atlantic, Baucom’s “crucially Atlantic” figure of the unjust enemy, and Dimock’s “flooded” world. Baucom locates three corners of an Atlantic triangle in Europe, America, and Africa of the late sixteenth, seventeenth, and twenty-first centuries as the simultaneous space-time of the figure of the unjust enemy. In this strange hybrid crossing of modern imperial history with humanist jurisprudence and ancient Roman law, Baucom finds the precedent for America’s enemies, the so-called unlawful combatant, just one of the ghosts haunting a body of international law that exempts the “conflict zones” of the Americas and Africa from the normative regulations of the laws of war. Dimock writes her own “nonsovereign history” from the watery standpoint of global climatological catastrophe — hurricanes, floods, soil erosion, loss of wetlands — that have the potential to produce an analogously enlarged sense of democracy, rooted, asymmetrically, in micro-evidence and bottom-up chronologies. If Warren’s Black Atlantic seeks to bridge “then” and “now” by writing the slave past as a history of and for the present, likewise Baucom and Dimock join McClintock in their attempts to make sense through different states of exception to our contemporary experiences of law, violence, human and inhuman, and sovereignty. Each finds the wolves inside the sheepfold that, as Aravamudan would have it, confuse sovereign right and the unjust enemy. They are all practitioners of rogue studies, making the study of the United States unfamiliar to itself and finding some form of political hope in so doing.

This preview of the volume’s essays brings us to our final sense of “object.”

Up to this point, we have been using “object” in a double sense to denote both the things we study and the aims implicit in methodologies of scale that we employ to tackle the coordinates of space-time. But “object” can also be used as a verb to signal disagreement or voice opposition. It is in this sense that *States of Emergency* objects to American studies, its history of exceptionalism, its often dogged fixation on spatial questions over temporal ones, its affected innocence about the political implications of methodological choices, or, vice versa, its unquestioning adherence to an assumed political righteousness, regardless of methodology. The posture of critique has become an endgame, a substitute for self-criticism. Then there is the tendency to repetition that no one seems to notice or resist: call after call for the new, the post, the beyond, none of which states of disciplinary consciousness we ever actually get to or get to live in. Take the nation, for example. Despite the fact that Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (itself only the most traveled of many theories of nationalism) has now gone through three editions, we do not have to look very far to find Americanists still scratching their heads in wonder at all the field shaking that will take place once we shift away from nation-based frameworks. Yet many scholars in allied disciplines are working with and after the news that (as Anderson puts it) nations have their own biography, just like the race concept. (Du Bois was already writing his own “essay toward an autobiography of a race concept” in the “dusk of dawn” of 1940.)²⁹ The fact that African American studies has long gone from being a subsidiary of the national corporation and moved through key changes from black studies to diaspora studies to black literary and cultural studies has had, as Warren suggests, surprisingly little impact on the mother lode.

Our response: don’t object, just correct. Just say yes! In this spirit, several of our contributors suggest models for methods and objects of study from specific disciplinary constellations. Srinivas Aravamudan and Ian Baucom work in eighteenth-century British literature from a perspective informed by ocean and postcolonial studies, while Warren, working in African American studies, travels a similar route but asks a different question: what happened to that field in the wake of diaspora and comparative ethnic studies? Together they point to the burgeoning of Atlantic world as an analytic that crosses national literatures, races, histories, and languages as well as spans several centuries. So, too, Anne McClintock’s work has traveled from its nominal origin in postcolonial studies to such unexpected places as the field of world history, which is itself undergoing radical disciplinary reinvention. Nan Enstad approaches toxicity from her own view as a cultural historian,

showing how work on consumer culture interfaces with a new interdisciplinary influx emerging around environmental studies, via fields traditionally underrepresented in American studies, such as geography (again), history of science and medicine, epidemiology, and biology. Wai Chee Dimock uses an interdisciplinary discussion of climate change, human health, and environment to address the “scale politics” of American studies. Such studies further the time-honored tradition of shifting the object and disciplinary mix of American studies work in order to respond to current states of emergency.

Thus, neither the critique of any of our contributors nor ours here is negative. It is not really the effect of some being outsiders to American studies “proper,” because we have tried to show how object matter depends on different scales rather than being determined by area of study. All of us would rather have improper relations to our different fields. We believe that it would be somewhat perverse and altogether shortsighted to oppose this interdisciplinary without seeing an inverse potential in using American studies to object to the standard operating procedures — the toxicity of everyday life, amnesia, excesses of state power, and torture — of our own particular, but surely not exceptional, location in space-time. That location is nothing less than the here and the now.

NOTES

1. Lawrence Buell, “Introduction: American Literary Globalism?” in “American Literary Globalism,” ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, special issue, *ESQ* 50, nos. 1–3 (2004): 1.

2. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton, 1997), 757.

3. The first quotation is from “The Study of the Negro Problems,” in *W. E. B. Du Bois, On Sociology and the Black Community*, ed. Dan S. Driver and Edwin D. Driver (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 72; the second quotation is from *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), excerpted in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 346. While Du Bois offers a prospective for an American studies methodology, our attempt here is not to produce a retrospective as a bookend. Contributions to mapping the field in these ways include *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007); *American Literary Studies: A Methodological Reader*, ed. Michael Elliott and Claudia Stokes (New York: New York University Press, 2003); *The Futures of American Studies*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

14. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (Winter 1989): 32.
15. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. See Du Bois, "Study of the Negro Problems," 72–75.
19. See George Lipsitz, "Learning from New Orleans: The Social Warrant of Hostile Privatism and Competitive Consumer Citizenship," *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2006): 451–68. This essay is exemplary in moving between the different senses of object as both thing and political aim: focusing on New Orleans and Iraq, Lipsitz seeks to invest scholarly practice with the spirit of public political discussion, as he does in *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), a book whose title is indebted to Benjamin.
20. Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, *Standard Operating Procedure* (New York: Penguin, 2008).
21. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd and 3rd eds. (London: Verso, 1991, 2006).
22. *Ibid.*, 187.
23. *Ibid.*, 191.
24. *Ibid.*, 195.
25. On "the other America," see J. Michael Dash, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), and an unpublished conference paper by Peter Hulme, "Expanding the Caribbean" (keynote address at "Writing the Other America: Comparative Approaches to Caribbean and Latin American Literature," Humanities Research Centre, University of Warwick, February 2006).
26. On the United States as "just another creole-led revolutionary state," see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 210, and on the Civil War as one of "the three longest and bloodiest wars . . . on the periphery of the world-system," see Anderson, *Under Three Flags*, 3. See also Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).
27. Anderson, *Spectre of Comparisons*, 207.
28. See *ibid.*, 187, 192.
29. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; repr., New York: Schocken, 1968).