

American Studies Today: Critical Relations among Internationalism, Ethnic Studies, and Indigenous Studies

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My paper today is adapted rather loosely from my Presidential Address of 15 November 2002 for the American Studies Association, and its meeting in Houston, Texas. Some of what I am to say is dated back to that time, when it was not only a special occasion (meaning specific to that particular evening) but also a specific time in history, while President George W. Bush threatened but had not yet launched his war on Iraq. My audience consisted predominantly of United States scholars of American Studies. It was for them that I wanted to speak about the work of our international colleagues, such as yourselves, Ethnic Studies, and Indigenous Studies. Please bear with me while I speak to you as if I am speaking to Americans. My purpose for delivering this speech to you, meanwhile, is to report to you the view of American Studies delivered by the President of the ASA in this year and for this year.

To prepare the first third of my remarks for this paper, I expressly asked some colleagues for thoughts about the international dimensions of American Studies, the field, and American Studies, the Association. I have also reflected upon the unsolicited words, insights, and examples of colleagues who have been involved in various and significant ways with concerns about international dimensions of American Studies. I would like to acknowledge the following scholars for their generous replies to my questions or for the examples they have shown me over the years, of American Studies in theory, practice,

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and history internationally. I thank and acknowledge: Olutayo Charles Adesina, Frances Aparicio, Martha Banta, Gülriz Büken, Pedro Castillo, Young Choi, Youn-Son Chung, Emory Elliott, Doris Friedensohn, Mike Frisch, Fumiko Fujita, Masako Iino, Djelal Kadir, Amy Kaplan, Mary Kelley, Linda Kerber, Paul Lauter, Günter Lenz, Bernard Mergen, Gail Nomura, Masako Notoji, Gary Okihiro, Naoki Onishi, Anne Pakir, Gonul Pultar, Janice Radway, Yasuo Sakakibara, Eric Sandeen, Hiroko Sato, Sandeep Shastri, Kirpal Singh, and Takeshi Suzuki.

In addition to ASA colleagues worldwide, institutions have been sustaining me in my efforts that is, in my privilege to be involved in American Studies internationally: Tsuda Women's College, Tokyo; International Christian University, Tokyo; the University of Tokyo Center for Pacific and American Studies; the Doshisha University, Kyoto; the Japan-United States Friendship Commission; the Japan Association for American Studies and our joint ASA-JAAS Project; the American Studies Association of Korea; the South India American Studies Network; and, through its members' history of scholarly contributions to the field, the European Association for American Studies.

My colleagues in the Association for Asian American Studies include many who have given me roadmaps and directions, especially for South Asian American and diaspora studies in recent years. I shall not attempt to name these friends here because I have already unintentionally left many names out and would only compound the mistake by trying further to list you all.

I am gratified that a number of colleagues sent me remarks that are critical and candid, in particular in reply to my questions about how the ASA is doing internationally and how the association may do better. I will not, however, be attributing specific remarks to specific colleagues unless: (1) their remarks have already been published

under their names; or (2) you come to me after this speech and ask that I credit you by name, in print, for specific thoughts you shared with me. Some of the colleagues I have named may well be surprised by my naming them aloud: we have "merely" been fellow travelers in American Studies in the world, yet I cannot help but to have learned from watching their moves and how they do them. Paul Lauter, for instance, may not recall that on his way to an ASA conference he had a change of planes at Detroit Metro Airport, where I was beginning my trip. We crossed paths there. Paul was busy at a pay phone, his two small bags snugged against his legs. We grinned at each other. It was as if our grins said, "Here we are again, slouching toward another Willy Loman convention." Paul and I have also traveled together internationally, *trying* to be of service to American Studies.

Let me begin by mentioning some practical considerations given me by international colleagues. One cautions that scholars of American Studies abroad are uncertain of what the name of the field means any more, when it seems that in the United States we concern ourselves mainly with a "discussion of identity politics variously represented as universalism, multiculturalism, nationalism, postnationalism, American Studies, New American Studies, globalism, localism..." This leader of a national association for American Studies outside the United States goes on to state that in that association more direct concerns are "with economy, security, politics," and so forth, in addition to "the identity question." The respondent would "like to find some ways to combine these two different [sets of] concerns." This colleague goes on to call for help with constructing American Studies course syllabi that would be most useful in colleges where English is not the native language. Here the question of what is "canonical" and whether and how it may be included in a syllabus has meaning within a context that is distinctive to that setting for a course outside the United States.

A colleague calls attention to the Sakakibara International Scholar Paper with its monetary award. Joanne M. Mancini of the University of Sussex is the first recipient of the Sakakibara Prize. Last year it was not awarded because the entries were too few for the committee to make a meaningful selection. The Sakakibara Prize is now established. International ASA scholars are encouraged to submit their papers for consideration for an award that would pay some expenses for traveling to the ASA conference where the paper will be featured. I want to make a similar appeal for the ASA-Japanese Association for American Studies Project. Each year in the early fall a call for proposals appears in the *ASA Newsletter* and online. Each year at or immediately following the annual ASA conference two of the proposals are selected by our project committee, and the two scholars who submitted them become delegates to the next conference of the JAAS, in early June of the coming year. The delegates in effect receive an all-reasonable-expenses-paid trip to Japan for about two weeks in return for giving talks and meeting with scholars and students in interactions conducted in English. Applications are still rather few, but delegates have nonetheless been chosen every year, and some return from Japan to tell us that their experience of serving as visiting American Studies scholars in Japan for two weeks is "life-changing."

Fitting the pursuit of American Studies in research, teaching, and learning within local and national contexts is a theme in other ways as well, in several responses to my questions about the international dimensions of the field and the ASA. One respondent writes about how in recent years the ability to teach and research American Studies has fallen and risen because of major political changes in his African country. (In the United States I think we tend to react to such a statement by thinking that political upheavals that affect the conduct of scholarship occur in "foreign" countries but not in the United

States. We might well consider, however, how in the United States, too, we are affected by the comings and goings of politically appointed Directors of the National Endowment of the Humanities). In 1994 Professor Kirpal Singh of the National Institutes of Education (NIE), Singapore, informed me that the controlling national government of Singapore was less than enthusiastic about allowing the establishment of American area studies, where with its history in the former British Empire Singapore ought first have "British Studies." Professor Singh and his colleagues instead began a program in American Drama and Theatre, which the government did allow, to house interdisciplinary American Studies. By 1999 there must have been a change in direction by the Singapore government, such that at the National University of Singapore (NUS) faculty members were able to establish an American Studies Centre. Similar government approval has been necessary in India, where beginning in 1994 a determined group of multi-disciplinary "Americanists" began the South India American Studies Network, to develop theory and practice in interdisciplinary American Studies. The group has consisted of scholars in political science, economics, literature, education, women's studies, history, business, law and jurisprudence, sociology, in an array rarely seen among us in the United States. In order to introduce a curriculum in interdisciplinary American Studies in universities and colleges of South India, the plan, courses, and specification of papers for degrees required the administrative savvy and intellectual work of constructing syllabi and gaining the approval of the University Grants Commission of India.

Linda Kerber has raised a question about the term, "American Studies," as it is used both within and outside the United States. She notes that in 1993 the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission dropped the term "American Studies" and adopted in its place the term "the study of the United States," because at that time "American Studies" seemed

emphatically to refer to "the interdisciplinary study of American popular culture," or cultural studies (as Günter Lenz maintains, in an article I cite below). In Japan, Professor Kerber goes on to note, in 1993 "American Studies" meant something like the study of American "national character." In any case, the Commission was concerned that Japanese scholars of political science and economics, in American Studies, would find themselves increasingly distant from the strong new cultural studies emphases in the field. On behalf of the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission, Professor Kerber—one of the originators of both the ASA and Organization of American Historians projects funded by the Commission, and now appointed a member of the Commission herself—is asking whether the term "American Studies" is becoming once again an invitation for political scientists, economists, as well as scholars of other social sciences and of literature, history, cultural studies, religion, and the arts to participate. She asks whether "American Studies" has changed again, since the 1990s when cultural studies dominated, so that possibly the term "now would encompass some of the more capacious international studies that come under the heading of the 'internationalization of American studies'...."

And indeed in the range of scholarship and disciplinary spines represented in journals of American Studies outside the United States it does appear that political scientists, economists, and others prevalent abroad but rather scarce in American Studies within the United States have not fled the field. I hold up for you four recent publications by American Studies organizations outside the U.S.: *Amerikastudien/American Studies/Amst: A Quarterly* 47.1 (2002), by the German Association for American Studies; *Journal of American Studies* 33.2 (Winter 2001), by the American Studies Association of Korea; *Pacific and American Studies* 2 (March 2002), by the Center for Pacific and American Studies, University of Tokyo;

and *In Pursuit of American Studies: Experience of South India*, edited by Bernard D'Sami and G. Gopa Kumar for the South India American Studies Network (released in April 2002).

Besides articles on American literature (e. g. an article each on James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman and his Oriental mysticism, and Chang-Rae Lee, by Young Min Hyun, Dai-Young Kim, and Gi Taek Ryoo, respectively), the *Journal of American Studies* of the Korean association contains discussions based on legal studies (Jae-Hyup Lee), political science (Hyok Kim), history (Nam Gyun Kim), economics and international relations (Sang-Hwan Lee), comparative U.S. and Korean hardcore rap (Jae H. Roe), globalization and culture (Min-Jung Kim), pedagogy (Gordon E. Slethaug and Hee Kang), and "The 'New Woman' in the American Jazz Age"(Chang Shin Lee). All of the articles in the volume are in English, as are all the papers delivered at the annual ASAK international conference. The 2001 conference from which the published articles were drawn was ASAK's 36th annual international conference.

I read to you the preceding paragraph to illustrate for you how I went on to present the other international journals and collections of American Studies that I earlier named. The roll call of scholars and their articles was of course long. By doing this I wanted to impress our American colleagues to remember that international American Studies is substantial and of broader scope, often, than we are practicing ourselves in the United States at any given time. The announcement of works of international scholarship presented a heavier lesson to our colleagues than a simple statement would have offered, easily forgotten.

Our colleagues Günter Lenz and Masako Notoji sent me selections from *Amerikastudien* that brought me thoughts about further matters of substance in considering international dimensions of the field of American Studies. In "Toward a Dialogics of International American

Culture Studies," an article published in *Amerikastudien* in 1999 (44.1), Professor Lenz presents his view of how American Studies reached a low point of intellectual stagnation in the late 1960s: "It was declared intellectually bankrupt, politically reactionary, a handmaiden of American imperialism during the Cold War era, and a failure in its effort to offer an interdisciplinary understanding of American culture as a whole, past and present," writes Professor Lenz with a tone of assurance and compact judgment that we in the United States may need our international colleagues to give us (5). I am speaking here of Professor Lenz's publications at length because they are on the very topic at hand, the international dimensions of American Studies. He traces how new, "politically engendered and committed" interdisciplinary scholarship in women's studies, Black studies, urban studies, popular culture, Native American, Chicano/a, Asian American studies, and Queer studies replaced American Studies. And when these studies in turn faced "methodological and institutional problems" similar to ones that had enervated American Studies, then cultural studies—specifically, British Cultural Studies—caught the attention and enthusiasm of scholars of American Studies. According to Professor Lenz, beginning in the mid-1980s and running strongly to the mid-'90s and still much in evidence today, a cultural studies phase of American Studies has in quick order been confronted, complicated, and extended by scholars in the field. Writing about the ideas of Donald Pease, Lenz judges that Professor Pease's "notion of 'postnational narratives' is crucial to the future of American Studies. It points to a reconceptualization of the national context, of national identities, of *intracultural* differences and conflicts of the U. S. American (multi)culture" (11). Lenz goes on in his article to develop his idea, then, of a "dialogics of international American Culture Studies" by discussing and critiquing works by a number of American Studies scholars. In part—and only in part—his idea of a dialogics of

international American Culture Studies calls for the study of how "American" culture imported into nations and cultures outside the United States becomes transformed by and within the new context into which it is introduced. Such transformations of American culture affect how American culture is apprehended, perceived, understood, and adopted, and thus the transformations are part of the meanings of "American Culture" internationally and indeed within the public cultures of the recipient, transformative nations.

Other statements by Professor Lenz about the intellectual trajectories of American Studies from the 1960s to the present and the need and prospects of an internationally dialogical American Studies can be read in his article in the *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, under a title he too finds somewhat puzzling, "Periodization and American Studies." As perhaps many of you know, Lenz spoke about "Transculturations" in the session organized by the International Committee of the ASA at the conference in 2000 in Detroit. He was a presenter along with Alan Winkler, Bruce Tucker, Masako Notoji, Alfred Hornung, and Maureen Montgomery, in what in my experience was the most heavily attended and vigorously dialogical program ever to have occurred in the ASA presented by the International Committee and scholars from outside the United States. In their ways, Professors Tucker from the Canadian Association for American Studies, Notoji from the Center for Pacific and American Studies, University of Tokyo, Hornung from Mainz University, and Montgomery from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand each presented a sketch of how American Studies has been developing, and why, in each one's respective nation. Each too offered commentary and analysis of American Studies and "transculturation", both broadly defined and sharply focused, in general comparable with the idea of a "dialogics" of American cultural studies: American culture is imported into nations abroad and yet it is transformed, the transformation thus

running at least two ways simultaneously, for transculturations affect both the United States and the nation that transforms American culture.

In reply to my inquiry about international dimensions of American Studies and the ASA today, I was privileged to receive sharp criticism of the ASA. I say I was "privileged" because of how my respondents entrusted me with their critiques. I want to state them as succinctly as I can.

To one of our colleagues, the best years of international relations in the ASA have passed. They happened from the 1980s to the mid-'90s, following which a distinct careerism began to redirect the ASA's international projects and plans. Participation has become politicized by individual ambitions. This respondent's concern, however, is not with saying unkind things about us—myself included, after all—but with an increasing lack of interest among Americanists and American Studies scholars around the world in participating in ASA activities, such as this annual conference, and in joining the ASA. The ASA conference is too busy an event for conversations to take place that might make it worthwhile to travel the distance. We American scholars, busy with our careers while meeting at our conference, appear aloof to our international colleagues, seen at best as mere visitors. When we Americans ourselves are invited to speak abroad, we may sometimes or even too often appear to have discovered our Americanness in a foreign and comparative national environment, and we speak with a consequent air of superiority and perhaps defensiveness. To this respondent, it appears that scholars in Europe and Asia are finding it more productive to meet with colleagues in American Studies of and within their own countries and across national borders in their global regions, rather than to journey to the ASA. What then is of interest to study in such a dreadful circumstance? Our colleague points to an example: there is a strong interest in the literature of American "diversity" (refined in theories of

"postnationality") for the United States is still considered a model for negotiating ethnic differences relatively peacefully and productively. But overriding topics of "globalization" too plainly mean "Americanization," and attention to this theme, according to this respondent, "extracts too great a price in the loss of their own cultural identities."

Another respondent makes one point absolutely clear: "The ASA is a national association, with the potential and actual dangers of being part of the national formation it takes as its object of scholarly scrutiny." To alleviate such dangers at least somewhat, this respondent urges that the ASA become part of an international association that will promote dialogue—"global and multilateral conversation"—among members of other national, regional, and continental associations of scholars of American Studies.

I want to conclude this part of my speech by making three pronouncements of my own.

First, I trust you can tell already that the publication of journals and anthologies of American Studies in places outside the United States I have been able to cite—Europe, India, Japan, Korea, Singapore—serves invaluable, transcultural purposes for all of us and particularly for scholars in those regions of the globe. One colleague eloquently urges us to think of ways of funding the productions of American Studies journals in places that do not periodically have them, in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, parts of Latin America, and so on. May we heed her appeal to us?

Second, in 1993 Emory Elliott, then the Chair of the ASA International Committee, and John Stephens were advised to consider applying for a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to hold a conference at the Rockefeller facility in Bellagio, Italy. As a member of the Committee, with Gail Nomura and Pedro Castillo, I drafted a proposal that put to use some years of thinking and talking I had given

to a certain theme. I called it "The Global Construction of American Culture." The proposed conference was to have brought together about fifteen scholars from around the world to begin discussing how so-called "American culture" has been historically constructed from worldwide borrowings. This was to be the opposite of a discussion of American influences abroad and the Americanization of the world. It was to be about the global construction of America. Further, the plan was to involve international scholars on an equal footing with United States ones, since the project would depend upon the scholarship of international scholars studying what had been exported, so to speak, from their global regions and imported into the United States and into the colonies prior to the Republic. It was also our idea of the moment for how to develop a post-Cold War, post-exceptionalist kind of international scholarship and relations in American Studies.

For my own reasons in Asian American studies, I wanted to ask and if possible to demonstrate how no group of people should be considered "alien" in the United States, because the United States is made of stuff from everywhere else—stuff including religion and political philosophy, not to mention material culture and food, from Asia. At home and abroad, my opening move when discussing historically Asian roots of American culture has been to ask if my audience knows about the Boston Tea Party. Heads nod. Then I ask, "Where did the tea come from?" Maybe I should simply stop with the success of my question. The proposal to Rockefeller failed. Maybe a few of you out there vaguely remember it because you were referees of the application we made. One of the criticisms of the proposal was a question, about why in the world we American Studies scholars were asking to meet at Bellagio. Was it just a junket? In our foolishness we thought that since the conference was international and global, any place on the globe would be central. Evidently the foregrounding of international scholars in the project also bothered

someone. So my pronouncement is this: while we study the "transculturation" of American culture in foreign settings, from another direction we need, I believe, recognition and much further development of how America has been shaped by the world, has shaped American versions of the world in this transcultural process, and in many instances has cut off and denied that debt to international sources of "American culture."

My third pronouncement is this: our international colleagues are asking of us Americans in our field that we pay attention to them and their work not selfishly for the sake only of making them feel personally welcome or for us to be liked by them, but for the development of American Studies and the ASA. Therefore, any of us who is going abroad to participate in an American Studies conference, seminar, meeting, or speaking engagement should prepare by reading something of the scholarship of the people we are about to meet. I ask you to remember this when you receive an invitation to speak. It applies to all of us, including the scholars who have come from other countries and are with us today and who of course are already familiar in various ways with the scholarship of us American "hosts" of this conference. A year ago I promised colleagues in Japan that when as President of the ASA I take a delegation of two ASA members to the 2003 conference of the Japan Association, I will require that we read articles that our hosts assign us. Believe me, it's the *least* we can do.

Meanwhile, many of you will recall how in 1997 Mary Helen Washington's ASA Presidential Address, in Washington, DC, was roundly centered on the United States. We move now from the international to the domestic. Our President Washington challenged us in that speech, in her presidency, and in the ASA Ethnic Studies Task Force that she commissioned, to ponder how despite the gains we all have made in including matters of American ethnic studies in our interests and in our curricula, these interests were still not central to

American Studies and the ASA, in ways that she pinpointed and addressed. To some of us, it was implicit or inferred that when calling for a central role for ethnic studies in 1997, Mary Helen Washington was exhorting us not to forget our critical domestic, United States agenda in ethnic, women's, class, and gender studies while the field of American Studies was expanding with postcolonial, transnational, and cultural studies of professedly global dimensions evidenced in terms not only of transnationalism and globalism but also of border crossings and the porosity of borders.

For the ASA conference of 2002, opportunity struck hard.

At the meeting of the Executive Committee of the ASA in May 2001, Shelley Fisher Fishkin told me that as far as she knew, the Recovery Project—Recovering the U. S. Hispanic Literary Heritage—would be meeting in Houston in November 2002 at the same time as the ASA. We went on to inquire about the coincidence of the two conferences, and by the end of 2001 the ASA and the Recovery Project were moving forward with plans for a joint conference. This is not the first joint conference for the Recovery Project; their generosity in reaching out to the ASA, palm to palm, is backed by their experience. This is, however, the first such joint conference for the ASA. In some measure, the dovetailing of the two conferences instantiates Mary Helen Washington's call for ethnic studies to play a central role in the ASA. The ASA is grateful to Professors Jose Aranda, Nick Kanellos, John-Michael Rivera, Alejandra Balestra, and their many associates in the Recovery Project for conjoining our two organizations on this occasion. We are truly grateful too to our ASA colleagues (who in any case are jointly connected with the Recovery Project) Sonia Saldivar-Hull, one of the ASA Program Committee Co-Chairs, and Shelley Fisher Fishkin for suggesting the very idea in the first place.

The evident gain of holding a joint conference with the Recovery Project should not mask the ongoing challenge, the same challenge involved in Professor Washington's 1997 address. How central are ethnic, race, women's, sexuality, and indigenous studies in the American academy?

To this day, in certain senses ethnic studies has not assumed a central role in American Studies. The first question I have, though I shall not go on to respond to it directly at this time, is: does American Studies have a "center" in the first place? From my point of view, because I now have a single appointment in a Department of American Ethnic Studies and not one "split" or "joint" with English or American Studies, I see myself working in a departmental structure where ethnic studies is indeed central, and I thus have a basis, still new to me, for relating ethnic studies with American Studies. In American ethnic studies it is not only quite usual, though by no means exclusively, that the "object" of our studies is ourselves, perhaps in ways both dangerously and happily analogous to how American scholars of American Studies are ourselves part of the construction that is the object of our studies. In ethnic studies, it seems to me possible for the ethnic "object" in other contexts rather to be the central "subject," the speaker, capable of agency and self-definition. I need to demonstrate this by performing for you.

In a play by Philip Kan Gotanda, who like me is a *sansei*, third generation Japanese American, a character named Vincent Chang has made a career of playing the "oriental" in countless films and television shows since World War II. He is in his sixties, in, say, 1988 or 1989, when the play, *Yankee Dawg You Die*, was first performed in Berkeley and soon afterward off Broadway in New York.¹ You

¹ Philip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die* is published in his *Fish Head Soup and Other Plays*, introduction by Michael Omi (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1995), 69-127.

yourself know Vincent. You have seen him as Sergeant Moto the rabid, sly, buck-toothed enemy soldier in a dozen or more American war movies, whether he was supposed to be Japanese, Korean, Communist Chinese, or Vietnamese—in any case, the oriental enemy on late-night TV. You remember him—or rather; you remember the type from the musical he was in, *Tea Cakes and Moon Songs*, where, as Charley Chop Suey the waiter, he sings the title song to woo the lovely Mei Ling:

Tea cakes and moon songs,
June bugs and love gongs,
I feel like dancing with you.

Roast duck and dao fu,
Lop chong and char siu,
Strolling down Grant Avenue. (93)

Yes, you know Vincent Chang because you know the type. In Gotanda's play, Vincent gets his comeuppance when he meets a young actor of the next generation, Bradley Yamashita, who crushes Vincent with criticism of the stereotypical roles Vincent, Bradley's only role model in the industry, has performed and perpetuated. About Vincent's makeup in a science fiction film set in a post-nuclear world where everything and everyone is a mutant, Bradley says, "You had so much hair on your face you looked like a fucking chimpanzee!" (85). About *Tea Cakes and Moon Songs*, Bradley cries out, "You're acting like a Chinese Stepinfetchit. That's what you're acting like. Jesus fucking Christ, Vincent. A *Chinese Stepinfetchit*" (93-94).

Vincent and Bradley both are speaking subjects in this play. They fight, argue, and come to terms with each other in mutual struggles over how to avoid, how it is impossible to avoid, and how to subvert the stereotypes that the entertainment industry demands that they play. Neither the beginning nor the ending is happy. Not far into the

play, only midway through the first of two Acts, Vincent hits one of his low points. First he receives an award:

This is a great honor. A great honour, indeed. To be recognized by my fellow Asian American actors in the industry. I have been criticized. Yes, I am aware of that. But I am an actor. Not a writer. I can only speak the words that are written for me. I am an actor. Not a politician. I cannot change the world. I can only bring life, through truth and craft, to my characterizations. I have never turned down a role. Good or bad, the responsibility of an actor is to do that role well. That is all an actor should or has to be concerned about. Acting. Whatever is asked of you, do it. Yes. But do it with dignity. I am an actor. (94)

What could "dignity" possibly mean when a beat later we see Vincent right here, in Houston:

Howdy! Howdy! It is good to be here in Houston, Texas. In case you don't know me, I am Vincent Chang. (*Applause*) Thank you, thank you. And if you do not know who I am, shame on you! And go out and buy a copy of *Tears of Winter* [in which I star with Peter O'Toole]. It is out on video now, I understand. Hey, you know what they call Chinese blindfolds? *Dental floss!* (*Laughter*) And I would especially like to thank Tupper ware for inviting me to be your master of ceremonies at your nation—no, I take that back—your *international* convention. Yeah! Yeah! What's the word? (*Holds mike out to audience*) TUPPERWARE! Yeah! What's the word? (95)

It may be possible to play stereotypes like this without perpetuating them but by subverting them instead. Here parody can be one method of subversion. Central to Gotanda's play are the words, thoughts, texts, and subtexts of Vincent and Bradley when they are not performing stereotypes; the stereotypes themselves are thus not central and are both performed and perceived as parody when the play is replete with cues for the complicated ways the actor and the audience should be

troubled, disturbed, and not merely entertained by an Asian American performing an Asian American stereotype. When Vincent cracks his cheesy joke about Chinese blindfolds made out of dental floss, the theater had better be dead quiet and audience downright morose. If anyone does laugh—as everyone in the Tupperware convention is supposedly laughing at and with Vincent—then the rest of the audience would turn to the laughing one and glare balefully. In the play, late in his career Vincent escapes from having to represent identity, race, and culture through stereotypes by joining an Asian American production in which he gets to play a character who reminds him of his own father, a Japanese American farmer in the Central Valley farm country near Sacramento before the War. In performance he becomes a Japanese American subject (he was born Shigeo Nakada but changed his name to Vincent Chang after the War) when Japanese American history and culture are central to the play, something that has never happened before in his career. I am trying to say by this example or analogy that ethnic studies I think is still best presented and represented in the work of ethnic studies scholars, programs, and departments, whereas like many of our areas of scholarship it is not central yet to American Studies.

Having said this, I am nevertheless pleased to announce that at the conference in Houston the ASA National Council accepted a proposal for establishing a standing Committee on Ethnic Studies. While this Committee is historically an outgrowth of the Task Force on Ethnic Studies that Mary Helen Washington set in motion in 1997, the conversion to the status of a standing committee is itself a sign that to make ethnic studies centrally interactive with other committees of and central to the ASA, a permanent committee and ongoing work are needed. As happened in the MLA in 1988 when the Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession and the Commission on the Literature and Languages of America (i. e., "multiethnic literatures")

became standing committees in the MLA, the organization recognized that these commissions were unlikely, theoretically and practically, ever to complete their "missions" under political, social, and cultural conditions and structures of the United States. The members of the former ASA Task Force on Relations with Ethnic Studies Programs, Faculty, and Students (its full name) recognized in their proposal that the project of involving ethnic studies centrally in American Studies is not a task accomplished, but a continual, dialogical endeavor: "The logic behind our call is not informed by a 'this here, that there' model—in which the Committee on Ethnic Studies is forging its own space within the ASA without any interaction with other standing committees. The fundamental project of the Committee on Ethnic Studies is to make evident that Ethnic Studies is American Studies and American Studies is Ethnic Studies. The two are interwoven at the same time that they often have discrete needs and concerns, scholarly and otherwise." The Committee on Ethnic Studies will work with other standing committees of the ASA and will link the ASA with ethnic studies organizations outside the ASA, as has been done with the Association for Asian American Studies since 1988 and is a feature of the present joint concurrent conference with the Recovery Project. I thank the members of the former ASA Ethnic Studies Task Force, led in the past year by Jonathan Holloway and Carol Miller, for writing and submitting their proposal and getting it passed.

While we center ethnic studies in American Studies, we should also think about how American multiculturalism has a troubling basis. United States imperialism lurks within it, for "multiculturalism" in the United States does not happen until conquerors conquer and until workers from around the world are imported, for instance slaves from Africa. It may well be that if Hawai'i were still a nation, not taken over by the United States in an unlawful act of war in 1893 and annexed in 1898, whatever the cultural mix and dynamics today, it

would be possible to live in a Hawai'i-centered culture in that place today. In other words, Hawaii's multicultural Localism, over the course of more than a hundred years now and continuing today, has supplanted or displaced a native Hawaiian culture that was fully capable of perpetuating its traditions and effecting innovations and vast changes, as Hawaiian rulers and people demonstrated in the nineteenth century when they constituted a Kingdom with all of their nation's attendant political deals, conflicts, and compromises.

In an earlier published paper I illustrated the erasure of native, indigenous Hawaiian culture by recounting the history, or story, of the battle of Kuki'iahu. This battle took place in November to December 1794 and was one of the important engagements in the larger arena of warfare that culminated a year later with Kamehameha's final conquests and subjugation of the main Hawaiian islands to consolidate a sovereign, united Kingdom under his rule. The battle of Kuki'iahu is little known to people in Hawai'i today. To learn where the battle raged is to realize how thoroughly the colonial regime of Hawaii has obliterated the native history: Kuki'iahu took place on the shores of what today is known as Pearl Harbor. The battle that the name "Pearl Harbor" signifies today is of course not Kuki'iahu but the Japanese attack on that place on 7 December 1941. People interested in Hawaii's history may recall some earlier events associated with that English name of the place, Pearl Harbor: the Massie rape and revenge murder case of 1931; the deals made or attempted between the Kingdom of Hawaii and the United States to grant the right to use Pearl Harbor for military purposes in exchange for a break from foreign sugar tariffs levied on Hawaiian sugar by the United States; the machinations of a certain Dr. John McGrew of Pearl Harbor to effect an annexation of Hawaii to the United States so that Pearl Harbor would serve as a naval launching site in the acquisition of empire in and across the Pacific. All of these references to Pearl

Harbor still recollected in multi cultural historiography today have to do with the building of an American empire. The native Hawaiian history and historiography of Kuki'iahu are all but forgotten. I mean to suggest by this illustration that almost all contemporary conceptions of multiculturalism of the United States are based upon erasures of native, indigenous-centered narratives. Note well: when Queen Liliuokalani writes in her book, *Hawaii's Story* (1898)², about a Chinese merchant who has settled and is prospering in her nation, she speaks of him as a *subject* of Hawai'i, not principally as an immigrant who either threatens Hawaiian culture with cultural difference and unfair economic advantage or else who in some superior way is held up as an example, a model minority, who validates the nation as a modern, multicultural construct (57). This is one of the ways we can see and state critically that the multiculturalism of ethnic studies is at odds with indigenous studies.

I began to voice my concern about a deep conflict between ethnic studies and indigenous studies at the ASA conference in Nashville, 1994. After the session in which I could muster only an oral rough draft of my thoughts about this conflict, a colleague tried to sympathize with me. That is, it must have seemed that I as a Local Japanese American of Hawai'i, were under siege and struggling, standing accused like my fellow Locals of neo-colonialism, accused by native Hawaiians. The colleague commiserated, "You, in Hawai'i, have to deal with this kind of problem with native people?" I had to reply, "You, in California, do not?" Then over the years another comment spoken to me focused these questions in another way. Characterizations of the United States as a "nation of immigrants," in whatever guise this notion occurs, including multiculturalism, places high value in both theory and practice on

² Lili'uokalani, *Hawaii's Story by Hawaii's Queen* (1898; rpt. Honolulu: Mutual Publishing, 1990).

historical constructionism, it too based on a bold set of assumptions that opposes determinism and supports a conviction that what human beings have constructed, human beings can take apart and change. A distinguished senior scientist, a friend in India, observed to me first that in effect historical constructionism is not so important a mode of discourse, analysis, and theory in India; Indians do not care so much about history. I was puzzled. I said that in my eyes, "history" was everywhere I looked in India and certainly in the tourist guide books (to their credit). He said that to the contrary, I might notice that historical ruins scattered and clustered about are ruins because the people do not care about them as Americans think they should; people use ruins as public toilets. Then he said something unforgettable: "In India we are all indigenous." Compared with the United States, the peoples of many nations are "all indigenous." Historical constructionism does not reach what involves those aspects of "culture" that predate "history". I was to find that in Japan, when my students and I studied Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* and viewed Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals*, there is no ready word in Japanese for "indigenous," because its opposite is meaningless or does not apply. When the KREZ radio announcer in *Smoke Signals* stretches wide and greets the day with cheer and irony, "It's a great day to be indigenous," the students hurriedly pecked at their handheld electronic pocket translators, and yet we never did find a suitable Japanese word for "indigenous." Internationally, then, American Studies is performed by scholars, indigenous to their nations or their nations of origin, who in their ways are aware that in the United States our scholarship and teaching are based mainly on the displacement of the indigenous that most of us in the United States have not been born into, experienced, lived, and even given central attention to in our work.

In reply to my inquiries about international dimensions of American Studies I received support for strengthening self-reflexive

attitudes and moves in the conduct of our scholarship, especially in the United States. I conclude with a thought about an astonishingly unself-reflexive use of words bombarding us every day. In November 2002 we were told that there was a belligerent nation rising awfully like a fleet of warplanes above the horizon in the dusk. The nation is armed with weapons of mass destruction and will deploy them as it has in the past. For my speech I chose some historical examples and allusions to introduce a theme of war and suggest how it dominates our concerns—World War II, Pearl Harbor and its predecessors, and Kamehameha's conquests. When I hear the phrase, "weapons of mass destruction," I see warlike nations, and one is US. This is not to deny threats that Iraq and its leader posed within and outside that nation or to discount Iraq's possession of its weapons of mass destruction, which have yet to be uncovered. The war of such words we are fighting by deploying such slogans is a war in which the United States is posing itself and its enemy as mirror images of each other, however unequal may be the real power and potential the combatants have, to wage war and to use their weapons of mass destruction. In the long run, there is no winner in such a war, though one will be decided, after many have been killed. Underlying conditions will be unlikely to change, for instance the causes and consequences of demonizing that particular enemy and valorizing ourselves, the effects on the peoples of this particular nation, the United States, who are thought to be related to the enemy nation and are racially profiled as possible terrorists, the consequences for all the people of the United States who continue forward to harbor and to suffer the prejudices that are perpetuated by weaknesses of our self-reflection and the vast machinery of an economy and an economic system that prejudice, intolerance, and social injustice serve in America.

As I did in 2001 when I was given the solemn responsibility of calling for a moment of silence in memory of the victims of 9/11, I

offer these parting words as a simple token for all that you and I are variously thinking about terrorism and its connections with contemporary America: our thoughts are heavy with 9/11, the war in Afghanistan, the war on terrorism, the Washington, DC snipers, and the war on Iraq in the name of a war on terrorism that has no bounds. Let us go, then, and do the very best we can, mere scholars and teachers though we are, to try to make things better.

Abstract

American Studies Today: Critical Relations among Internationalism, Ethnic Studies, and Indigenous Studies

Stephen H. Sumida

Originally written and delivered as the Presidential Address to the American Studies Association in November, 2002, the aim of this paper is to expose and discuss some tensions among three important interests in current practices and theories of interdisciplinary American Studies: the interests in internationalism, Ethnic Studies, and Indigenous Studies. At the same time, the paper recognizes the importance of each of these analytical categories and is an attempt to demonstrate productive interactions among them by putting their tensions to use. International practices of American Studies and some theories that have arisen from them (for instance, the development of a “postnational” American Studies) had not been highlighted in a single plenary address to the ASA before this speech was delivered. Internationalism, however, may tend to detract attention from domestic American Ethnic Studies; and longstanding attempts to make Ethnic Studies “central” to American Studies are still in process, perhaps in permanent unsettled dialogue. Like a tautology, Ethnic Studies is central to Ethnic Studies in ways that it is not central to American Studies. Seemingly forgotten in both internationalism and Ethnic Studies is Indigenous Studies of Native Americans and Pacific Islander American subjects. In whatever versions, multiculturalism in Ethnic Studies has displaced the indigenous from a central role in American culture and history. Finally, since the paper was delivered four months before the beginning of the Iraq War, its conclusion about

the arriving clouds of war mark the paper with a particular occasion, time and place, in current events. A shortened, spoken version of this paper was delivered at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in May 2003. The full text of the paper was published in *American Quarterly* 55.3 (September 2003): 333-52.

Key Words: American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Indigenous Studies,
Internationalism, Multiculturalism