

American Studies in the 21st Century: A Usable Past

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American Studies in the 21st century is a field that is reinventing itself in fresh and dynamic ways. In this essay, I'll describe some of the transformations taking place in the field today, and will then mine the past for figures who can help light our way as we set out in these new directions. I'll conclude by describing some instances of model scholarship that exemplify where American Studies is heading.

I. The Field Today

The myth-and-symbol analyses of American national character and the belief in American exceptionalism that dominated American Studies when the field first became institutionalized in the 1950s and 1960s have given way to more complex and nuanced perspectives on American culture as a nexus of multiple cultures constantly influencing and reshaping each other, as a site in which lived experience is inflected by race, by class, by ethnicity, by gender, by

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sexual orientation, by place of origin, by region, and by religion in complicated and dynamic ways, as a culture whose myths and symbols need to be interrogated rather than reified, and as a culture and nation just as vulnerable as other cultures and nations to the seductions of greed, arrogance and empire.

Revisionist historians have re-examined every chapter of U.S. history and uncovered perspectives ignored by previous generations, listening to voices that were previously silenced, exploring conflicts previously erased, and probing power relations that were previously so naturalized as to be invisible. Revisionist literary critics have mined canonical American literature for traces of these silenced voices and evidence of these naturalized power relations and forgotten conflicts. They have recovered vast bodies of texts that have expanded ideas of what American literature is, was, and might be, in ways that their predecessors could not have imagined. Notions of "mainstream" and "margins" that a previous generation of scholars found obvious and unremarkable have been challenged and dismantled. What was known as the "mainstream" turns out to have been shaped in profound ways by cultures on the so-called "margins," and those "margins," turn out to have been profoundly influenced by the mainstream. Literature and history once segregated as "minority" literature or "ethnic history" is increasingly recognized as "American literature" and "American history."

The physical place that is the "United States" has been decentered as the object of study in American Studies by scholars who know that there are stories and histories that don't take place in the U.S. at all that are central to the field as it is recognized today: how Korean popular culture or Turkish popular culture appropriates forms of American popular culture, and transforms them into something distinctively Korean or Turkish is American Studies; what happens at American bases in Okinawa or Guantanamo can be the

subject of American Studies, just the as actions taken by American troops in the Philippines in 1898 is American Studies. We are paying more attention now to American literature in languages other than English a move that makes poems written in Korean by Jung Ja Choi, a Korean immigrant to America as much American Studies, as a poems written in English by Sue Kwok Kim, a second-generation Korean-American from New Jersey who won the prestigious Walt Whitman award.¹ Distinctions between the "domestic" and the "foreign" are increasingly challenged as scholars become more aware of the ways in which each informs the other. As the twenty-first century opens, scholars' ideas about what constitutes "American Studies" are changing in dynamic and exciting ways that make the contributions of international scholars more important than ever.

Where the old American Studies aspired to describe American Culture as a monolithic, stable, homogeneous entity characterized by universally-shared experiences, myths and symbols, the new American Studies increasingly understands American Culture as a

¹ See, for example, Jung Ja Choi's "Fallen Leaves 1 (37). "Choi, former President of the Korean Writers Association in New York, has published seven volumes of poetry, including *Love for Daisy Fleabane Flowers* and *Returning Life*. She received the Chon Sang-byung literary prize from Seoul in 2002" (37). Sue Kwok Kim won the 2002 Walt Whitman Award from the American Academy of Poets for *Notes from the Divided Country*, her first book of poems... Kim was a Fulbright Scholar at Seoul National University, a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, and is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She has published her poetry in journals including *Poetry*, *Paris Review*, *Yale Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Harvard Review* and *Ploughshares*. For more on the general move to consider work in languages other than English to be American literature. See Sollors and Shell's edited collection of critical essays, *Multilingual America*, as well as the following collections of primary texts: *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* edited by Werner Sollors and Marc Shell; *Chinese-American Literature since the 1850s* edited by Xiao-huang Yin and Roger; *Creole Echoes: The Francophone Poetry of Nineteenth-Century Louisiana* edited by Norman R. Shapiro, M. Lynn Weiss and Werner Sollors; *Jewish-American Literature: A Norton Anthology* edited by Jules Chametzky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum and Kathryn Hellerstein; and *Herencia: The Anthology of Hispanic Literature of the United States* edited by Nicolas Kanellos.

crossroads of cultures. In recognition of this fact, I selected "Crossroads of Cultures" as the theme of the next American Studies Association national conference. Our call for papers noted that

Crossroads and contact zones can be peaceful, violent, challenging, or generative; spiritual, spatial, literal or figurative; planned and purposeful, or accidental and contingent. They arise wherever multiple populations with different traditions mingle and reshape each other in complex and dynamic ways through trade, through war, through migration, through storytelling, through electronic media systems, through collective and individual imaginations. Crossroads can be places where narrative traditions and historical memories intersect where one narrative or one historical memory erases another, or where two narratives fuse. They can be places of danger and places of creativity; sites of highly asymmetrical power relations, and sites of the unpredictable and some-times rich dynamics of cultural exchange. Museums, battlefields, occupation zones, classrooms, kitchens, city streets, sports arenas, adoption agencies, recording studios, hospitals and cyberspace can all be such crossroads...sites where cultures blend and reshape each other, creating new hybrid forms and traditions, or where one culture displaces or obliterates another--sites of influence, absorption, erasure, acculturation, appropriation, appreciation, exploitation, symbiosis, or some combination of these terms.... [Indeed] the field of American Studies itself is a crossroads, a site where competing visions of "America," "the American people" and "American Studies" meet.²

In place of exceptionalist, triumphalist narratives of progress, American Studies scholars today are reconstructing complex stories of crossroads and contact zones, of conflict, transformation, and change. In place of unitary ascriptions of a particular meaning to a particular event, scholars are contextualizing and historicizing the construction

² The entire "Call for Papers" for the 2004 American Studies Association Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, may be read on the American Studies Association's web site: theasa.net.

of memory and meaning during different periods, understanding why different pasts become "usable" at different moments in time.

[I might add that one thing that the "new" American Studies has in common with the "old" American Studies is its aspiration to being interdisciplinary. But the field in the U.S. remains by and large an enterprise that brings together scholars from multiple disciplines in the humanities—literature, history, art, music, film, religion, etc. with an occasional anthropologist or sociologist in the mix. The field still lacks models for fully integrating social sciences. Perhaps Korean scholars will come up with some better ways of doing that.]

Some of the keywords that characterize the new "American Studies" are "transnational," "intercultural," "international" "multicultural," "diasporic," "multilingual," "counter-hegemonic" and "comparative." In its understanding of American culture as a series of crossroads and contact zones, the field of American Studies is increasingly paying attention to ideas and topics that were less central to the field in the past.

Since the early 1990s, for example, the idea of **empire**, largely missing from discussions of the United States in the past, has been foregrounded by a number of scholars as part of the project of dismantling ideas of American exceptionalism and recognizing what American responses to Mexico in the 1840s, to Cuba and the Philippines in the 1890s and turn-of-the-century, and to Central America during much of the 20th century, had in common with imperial projects on which other nations embarked. In place of celebratory narratives of American victory, scholars are framing **counter-hegemonic** stories in which the complexities of American policies and their impact on the rest of the world are examined freshly, and from perspectives that foreground the view from the other side—such as the turn-of-the-century Filipinos who welcomed the U.S. as their liberator, only to find that they had replaced one colonizer with another.

Hybridity is another idea that has come into its own as scholars have increasingly understood "American" culture as a large of various cultural traditions informing and influencing each other, and sites of cultural crossings and exchange continue to attract a lot of interest. **Borderlands** are an increasing subject of attention, as well, those places where different cultures rub up against each other in both hostile and peaceful ways; borderlands study originally focused on the U.S.-Mexico border, but the term is increasingly extending to other sites as well.

Migration is a term that is increasingly central to American Studies scholarship whether it be the migration of people or capital or products or texts or cultures. **The Global** and **the Local** are increasingly recognized as mutually constitutive, and American Studies is increasingly understood as a field in which both terms may be productively linked. **Race** and **racism** remain, as they should, terms that are central to American Studies research, but these days they are increasingly studied in more comparative contexts, not just in terms of understanding the different ways in which people of different races have been treated in the U.S., but understanding race and racism in the U.S. in comparison with other cultures in Europe, in Latin America, for example. And **gender** remains a central organizing concept, but often inflected by race, region, and a range of national traditions, and often complicated by greater attention to sexual orientation.

Although literature and history, the traditional core of American Studies, remain at its center, as the field becomes more transnational and inter cultural, scholars are increasingly focusing on the global circuits traversed by popular culture, music, and film; on transnational adoption; on the meanings of democracy, civil rights and human rights in comparative perspective; on the global dimensions of consumer culture; on the social impact of multinational corporations on the U.S.

and on the world; on comparative approaches to ecology, to the construction of historical narrative, and to the politics of public history sites and civic commemorations.³

Americans may pledge allegiance to "one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all," but Americanists in the U.S. today recognize that that one nation was shaped by many nations, and by multiple religious traditions with multiple conceptions of God; we're understanding the ways in which that allegedly "indivisible" nation was bitterly divided at various points in its history; and we're grappling with its ongoing, unfinished struggle to make the dream of "liberty and justice for all" a reality.

II. A New Usable Past

The term "usable past" was coined by Van Wyck Brooks in an essay in *The Dial* in 1918 called "On Creating a Usable Past" (337-41). The world we find ourselves in 86 years later is vastly different from the one that Brooks knew. But our need for a "usable past" is just as strong. Are there intellectual forebears who can light our way as we struggle to reinvent the field of American Studies to respond to 21st-century exigencies? What would a "usable past"—in terms of forebears—look like for the field of American Studies as we recognize it today? I'll speak briefly about five figures that can serve that role and the ways in which they can guide us as we shape new paradigms of inquiry for the future. Each of these figures was a rebel and iconoclast who refused to be confined by his or her peers' understanding of what the United States was or could be. Each was alternately ignored, embraced, celebrated and rejected by mainstream

³ Many of these topics are reflected in the program for the 2004 American Studies Association annual meeting, which may be accessed at theasa.net.

society. Each was brave enough or foolhardy enough to push ahead despite detractors, writing not only for audiences in their day, but for posterity. We lost four of these figures in the twentieth century; we lost one of them last month. Each "speaks to our condition," as the Quakers say, providing us with wisdom and guidance as we seek to develop new ways of doing "American Studies." Let me tell you what these five figures—Gloria Anzaldúa, Robert Morse Crunden, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Mark Twain—can teach us about what we need to be attending to. And then let me give you some examples of some of the new kinds of transnational, collaborative, counter-hegemonic scholarship to which their examples point.

Last month we lost Gloria Anzaldúa, one of the leading American poets and essayists of the 20th century. With her death, the world lost a brilliant cultural theorist of the arbitrariness of borders and the pain that they inflicted, of the rough realities of internal colonization, and of the challenges and delights of straddling multiple psychic locations and living in multiple languages. With her death, I also lost a friend. Anzaldúa saw the border between the U.S. and Mexico as

1,950 mile-long open wound
 dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
 running down the length of my body,
 staking fence rods in my flesh,
 splits me splits me
me raja me raja.
 This is my home
 this thin edge of
 barbwire. (*Borderlands* 2-3)

"The U.S.-Mexican border," Anzaldúa wrote, "*es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds

merging to form a third country—a border culture" (3). There are other borders Anzaldúa straddles as well: she is Anglo in a Mexican world, Mexican in an Anglo world, and Indian in neither yet both; female in a male world, lesbian in a heterosexual world—and unwilling to reject any part of herself to stop the contradictory voices that buzz through her head. But the miracle of *Borderlands/La Fronterais* that she transmutes the buzzing into a tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction that is precisely where creativity lives. "In perceiving conflicting information and points of view," Anzaldúa tells us, "the new *mestiza*"

copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality. She operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, ... nothing is rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.... (*Borderlands* 79)

"*En unas pocas centurias*," Anzaldúa writes, "the future will belong to the *mestiza*. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms; it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures..." (80).

The "new *mestiza*," Anzaldúa tells us, is willing "to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar."

Indigenous like corn, the *mestiza* is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. Like an ear of corn—a female seed-bearing organ—the *mestiza* is tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. Like kernels she clings to the cob; with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth—she will survive the crossroads. (*Borderlands* 81)

In a poem called "To live in the Borderlands," Anzaldúa writes,

To live in the Borderlands means to
put *chile* in the borcht,
eat whole wheat tortillas,
Speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
Be stopped by *la migra* at the border checkpoints;

... ..

To survive the Borderlands
you must live *sin fronteras* [without borders]
be a crossroads. (*Borderlands* 194-195)

(I might remind you again that the theme of next year's American Studies Association conference is "Crossroads of Cultures," and I plan to dedicate my Presidential Address to Gloria Anzaldúa).

Robert Morse Crunden, an extraordinary scholar who passed away in 1999 shared Anzaldúa's passion for understanding creativity—but in very different contexts. A gifted teacher and mentor to students and colleagues all over the world, Bob Crunden understood that transnational perspectives and contacts were essential to allow the field of American studies to flourish. He also knew they were essential if scholars were to get things right; for he recognized the irrelevance of political borders to the dynamic circulating system of ideas and influences that made up culture. And he knew that Americans had much to learn from scholars of American culture around the world; I was fortunate enough to have him as a colleague and a mentor, and that was one of the lessons that he taught me. One of his many contributions to scholarship was the invention of the term "climate of creativity"—by which he meant an atmosphere in a dynamic, urban center—whether New York or London or Chicago or Paris or Los Angeles—where diverse individuals bounced ideas and artistic projects off each other, where the resultant energy and openness fueled creativity in writing, in music, and in art. In his books

American Salons: Encounters with European Modernism, 1885-1917 (Oxford 1993) and its sequel *Body and Soul: The Making of American Modernism* (Basic 2000), Crunden demonstrates the importance of cross-cultural, cross-genre cross-fertilization in the development of the arts. The cultural conversation for Crunden is where culture itself takes shape and transforms itself. And he never lost sight of the importance of bringing international voices into that conversation.

Anna Julia Cooper, the nation's first black feminist intellectual, a woman who was born a slave and lived to be 105, challenged the nation's hegemonic, totalizing grand narratives with an awareness of the importance of conflict to the health of a democracy, and articulated that idea in ways that the nation must still learn to appreciate. In her landmark 1892 book *A Voice from the South*, she observed that

There are two kinds of peace in this world. The one produced by suppression, which is the passivity of death; the other brought about by a proper adjustment of living, acting forces. (150)

This other kind of peace, she noted wisely, "is the result of conflict; and conflict, such as is healthy, stimulating, and progressive, is produced through the co-existence of radically opposing or racially different elements" (152). To challenge the legitimacy of nativist forces that would suppress those "racially different elements" in America, Cooper impersonated those who endorsed them:

America for Americans! This is the white man's country! The Chinese must go, shrieks the exclusionist. Exclude the Italians! Colonize the blacks in Mexico or deport them to Africa. Lynch, suppress, drive out, kill out! America for Americans!

"Who are Americans?" comes rolling back from ten million throats. Who are to do the packing and delivering of the goods? Who are

the homefolks and who are the strangers? Who are the absolute and original tenants in fee-simple?

The red men used to be owners of the soil, — but they are about to be pushed over into the Pacific Ocean. They, perhaps, have the best right to call themselves "Americans" by law of primogeniture. They are at least the oldest inhabitants of whom we can at present identify any traces. If early settlers from abroad merely are meant and it is only a question of squatters' right's—why, the Mayflower, a pretty venerable institution, landed in the year of Grace 1620, and the first delegation from Africa just one year ahead of that,—in 1819. The first settlers seem to have been almost as much mixed as we are on this point; and it does not seem at all easy to decide just what individuals we mean when we yell "America for the Americans." (*A Voice* 164-165)

Cooper recognizes that

this nation was foreordained to conflict from its incipency. Its elements were predestined from their birth to an irrepressible clash followed by the stable equilibrium of opposition. Exclusive possession belongs to none. There never was a point in its history when it did. There was never a time since America became a nation when there was not more than one belief contending for supremacy. Hence no one is or can be supreme. All interests must be consulted, all claims conciliated. Where a hundred free forces are lustily clamoring for recognition and each wrestling mightily for the mastery, individual tyrannies must inevitably be chiseled down, individual bigotries worn smooth and malleable, individual prejudices either obliterated or concealed.... (*A Voice* 164)

Cooper's faith in the power of this cacophony of democratic voices to wear bigotries smooth is enormously appealing.

W.E.B. Du Bois shared Cooper's sense of the importance of all voices being heard, and all voices being valued. It is in part for that reason that this towering writer and thinker began each chapter of his book *Souls of Black Folk* with a quotation from a poem in the western

tradition and a bar of music from the "sorrow songs," the spirituals in which the slaves articulated their hopes and their dreams. Linking African-derived spirituals with western lyric poetry at the start of every chapter, Du Bois pioneered in shaping an awareness of diaspora, and bridged the social sciences, the humanities, and the imaginative arts to foreground the significance of race and racism in our understanding of America's past and present. *The Souls of Black Folk*—despite its title—is not just about the *Souls of Black Folk*. It is about American identity—who and what we are as a nation and how we got that way. And it models the ways in which we try to understand American identity today. It is highly interdisciplinary, embracing not just literature and history and music, but also social sciences that we are still struggling to make full-fledged parts of the field, today. In addition to being interdisciplinary, it uses multiple narrative strategies—including objective third-person narrative, autobiography and fiction, as well as text-and-graphic experiments. Du Bois recognizes that eloquence and not jargon is needed if he is to break through the reader's defenses. And he knows that by focusing intently, and imaginatively, on one particular dimension of American society he can provide a lens through which the whole appears in a totally new light. He is listening to a range of voices in the book—from the voiceless at the bottom of society to the elite of the western world—and he incorporates all of those voices into his text. It's probably apparent to all of you why this appeals to me so much as a model for what American Studies scholars do—or should aspire to do—today. Including multiple disciplines, eschewing jargon, using clear eloquent prose to reach our readers, embracing a wide range of voices from all reaches of society, and experimenting with multiple media to convey our point (*Souls*).

And finally, Mark Twain, a figure as complex and complicated as he is reductively misunderstood, rejected American exceptionalism and

lacerated American imperialism while embodying for much of the world what was positive and appealing about his native land. In 1897, after a long career of carefully observing his countryman, Twain concluded: "I think that there is but a single specialty with us, only one thing that can be called by the wide name 'American.' That is the national devotion to ice-water" ("Bourget" 196-97). As he put it elsewhere in the same essay,

There isn't a single human characteristic that can be safely labeled 'American. There isn't a single human ambition, or religious trend, or drift of thought, or peculiarity of education, or code of principles, or breed of folly, or style of conversation, or preference for a particular subject for discussion...or any other human detail, inside or outside, that can rationally be generalized as 'American.' Whenever you have found what seems to be an 'American' peculiarity, you have only to cross a frontier or two, or go down or up the social scale, and you perceive that it has disappeared. And you can cross the Atlantic and find it again. ("Bourget" 190)

But although he knew that deep down Americans may be just like everybody else, it pained him to watch his nation fall prey to the same kind of arrogant nationalism and imperialism to which the European powers had fallen prey. Despite the ice-water quip, he really hoped that Americans were different after all—better. And it hurt him deeply that they were not. As vice president of the Anti-Imperialist league during his later years, he challenged the assumptions that had sold the Filipino freedom fighters a bill of goods and had substituted one master for another without freeing the people at all.⁴

These five figures are forebears American Studies scholars today need to embrace and celebrate. Together they point us toward new paradigms for American Studies in the 21st century that are

⁴ For more on Twain's anti-imperialist views, see Jim Zwick, and Mark Twain, *Equator*.

transnational, collaborative, and interdisciplinary, that acknowledge the importance of communicating across borders, and that wear down the prejudice and arrogance that is inimical to good scholarship.

None of these figures stayed home. I had the privilege of going to Mexico with Gloria Anzaldúa in June of 1992, and working with her to design a course on "Identity in America from a Multicultural Perspective" that we co-taught at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico in Mexico City.⁵ Bob Crunden ran the American Studies Center in Hyderabad, India, for two years, and was twice a Fulbright chair in Finland. Anna Julia Cooper took her Ph.D. at the Sorbonne. Du Bois studied in Berlin before returning to the U.S. for graduate studies, and spent the final portion of his life in Ghana. Mark Twain lectured in Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia. Wherever they went they connected with writers, scholars, and ordinary people. They listened. They learned from them. They grew as a result.

They were also into collaborating on intellectual projects co-authoring or co-editing books, often with scholars and writers from outside the U.S., and actively participating in communities working for education, social justice, and social change. Du Bois, for example, proposed that "All Africa should be invited and urged to participate" in the *Encyclopedia Africana* that he proposed, enlisting the support of President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, among others; he was also a key planner of four pan-African congresses. Robert Crunden organized a series of conferences on American Studies in Hyderabad, India, out of which a number of publications emerged, including *New Perspectives on America and South Asia*, co-edited with Manoj Joshi and R.V.R. Chandrasekhar Rao and *Traffic of Ideas between India and America*. Anna Julia Cooper, an ex-slave herself, wrote her Sorbonne dissertation on French attitudes toward

⁵ Other colleagues who designed and co-taught the course with us were Carla Peterson, Lillian Robinson, Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky and Richard Yarborough.

Slavery in French colonies,⁶ while Gloria Anzaldúa limned in searing prose the plight of Mexican-Americans painfully caught between two cultures and two countries, fully embraced by neither, yet richer, in many ways, than their mono-cultural compatriots on either side of the border.⁷ Meanwhile Mark Twain's contact with a range of native peoples around the world and a range of colonizers led him to cast his lot with the victims and not the victors, writing scathing condemnation of Belgian imperialism in Africa, British and German imperialism in China, and American imperialism in the Philippines, and becoming one of the country's most visible anti-imperialists (see Zwick).

There are questions that can only be answered by crossing borders, by collaborating with scholars in multiple locations. Such questions should be at the center of American Studies scholarship today. Let me offer some examples of it.

III. Research Models at the Crossroads

One example of border-crossing, transnational research is Gordon Chang's article in the *Journal of American History* (March 2004), entitled "Whose 'Barbarism'? Whose 'Treachery'? Race and Civilization in the Unknown United States-Korea War of 1871," an article which required that Chang consult both American and Korean sources to piece together two diametrically opposed constructions of the past—a moment when each side declared victory and went home satisfied and proud (Chang).⁸

⁶ Anna Julia Cooper's *Slavery and the French Revolutionists, 1788-1805* was originally presented as the author's University of Paris doctoral thesis under the title: *L'attitude de la France à l'égard de l'esclavage pendant la révolution*, and translated with a foreword and introductory essay by Frances Richardson.

⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. See also other publications by Anzaldúa including *This Bridge We Call; This Bridge Called My*, edited by Cherrie L. Moraga And Gloria E., *Making Face*, edited By Gloria Anzaldúa.

⁸ Chang's article focuses on a "battle between American and Korean military forces in

Another example is Tsuyoshi Ishihara's forthcoming book on "Mark Twain and Japan," that looks at, among other things, the cultural work that translations of novels like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* played during the occupation, when the American forces were anxious to promote what were then thought of as iconic images of democracy, and when the Japanese feared that this particular icon might encourage juvenile delinquency; Ishihara uses Japanese and English-language sources to track Mark Twain's impact on twentieth-century Japanese popular culture.⁹

A third example is K. Scott Wong's 1996 *American Quarterly* article, "The Transformation of Culture: Three Chinese Views of America," which uses Chinese and English-language sources to explore "the links between Chinese and Chinese American intellectual and cultural history." Wong examines "Chinese representations of George Washington, the travel diary of Liang Qichao (1873-1929)

June 1871 near Korea's Rock of Gibraltar, during an American expedition to 'open' Korea as Matthew C. Perry had opened Japan in 1853." He notes that "The standard American interpretation of the war differs dramatically from the Korean, with the differences having everything to do with national perspective rather than with 'facts' alone. The nationality of the storyteller commonly predicts which side will be identified as the 'aggressor' and which the 'defender' in the conflict." In this particular case, "each side has claimed glorious victory over a demoralized enemy. Each side has built its own version of a victory column at home and honored its martyrs as national heroes. . . . [Few] if any, American students (and only a small minority of American diplomatic historians) know anything about the 1871 events in Korea. It is, for Americans today, an unknown war. (Those who know of the incident may have read articles entitled 'Our Little War with the Heathen,' 'America's War with the Hermits,' or perhaps 'When We Trounced Korea,' the dismissive titles themselves reflecting a common historical attitude toward the Asian enemy.) In contrast to their American counterparts, most Koreans, in the south as well as the north, are familiar with the outlines of the Shin-mi Yang-yo (the barbarian incursion of 1871, a name suggestive of attitudes toward the Western adversary) and with the valiant Korean resistance to the aggression. A respected Korean scholar, Dae-Sook Suh, eulogizes the war as 'one of the bloodiest battles that Koreans have fought to defend their country.'" (1331-32).

⁹ The book is based on Ishihara's doctoral dissertation in American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, *Mark Twain in Japan: Mark Twain's Literature and 20th Century Japanese Juvenile Literature and Popular Culture* (2003).

published in 1904, and the personal memoirs of Yung Wing (1828-1912)," noting that "These three views of America reflect a developing understanding of American society on the part of the Chinese [and] also disclose a growing sense of how Chinese intellectuals and political reformers were influenced by what they found in the United States and its attendant culture, thus revealing that the Chinese presence in America had a mutually transformative effect on both Chinese and Americans" (Wong).

A fourth example is the collaborative research project "American Bases in Europe—Impact and Experience, 1945-2003," a joint effort of Alan Dobson of Dundee University, and other scholars based in London, Lisbon, Palermo, and College Station, Texas.¹⁰ (Perhaps this study will help illuminate some of the conundrums surrounding Guantánamo today, where some government officials argue that it is not part of the U.S. and therefore prisoners are not entitled to legal rights under U.S. law, while other government officials argue that it is part of the U.S., and therefore the Geneva Conventions do not apply).

Collaborative projects on comparative occupations might be fruitful to explore in the future, along with comparative appropriations and transformations of American popular culture.

IV. Conclusion

In the 21st century, American Studies scholars will increasingly appreciate the importance of understanding the hybridity of American

¹⁰ "In Our Backyard: AMERICAN BASES IN EUROPE - IMPACT AND EXPERIENCE, 1945-2004," planning workshop summary compiled by research team consisting of Professor Alan Dobson, Dundee University; Dr Charlie Whitham, King's College, London; Dr. Luis Rodriguez, IPRI Lisbon; Professor Jeff Engel, Texas A&M; Dr Carla Monteleone, University of Palermo; Mr Tony Jackson, University of Dundee; Professor Klaus Schwabe, University of Aachen. A workshop on this project takes place in July, 2004. I am grateful to Prof. Dobson for making this paper available to me.

culture, and of world culture inflected by American cultural forms, whether music or media or literature or politics. We will increasingly value the importance of conversations across borders, and will grow increasingly aware of the creativity that cross-cultural communication helps make possible. We will endeavor to listen to all voices knowing that freedom and justice reside somewhere in that clamoring cacophony. We will continue to be marked by a multidisciplinary openness to range of approaches and experimental genres. We will continue to be highly skeptical about arguments for American exceptionalism. And we will try to forge transnational and collaborative research agendas, recognizing that "American Studies" is as much about the world beyond U.S. borders as it is about the world within. As we pursue these new research paradigms, the five 20th-century intellectuals I have discussed today—Anzaldúa, Crunden, Du Bois, Cooper, and Twain—will help guide our way.

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Abstract

American Studies in the 21st Century: A Usable Past

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This article describes some of the transformations taking place in the field of American Studies today, and mines the past for figures who can help light our way. It concludes by describing some instances of model scholarship that exemplify where American Studies is heading. The myth-and-symbol analyses of American national character and the belief in American exceptionalism that dominated American Studies when the field first became institutionalized in the 1950s and 1960s have given way to more complex and nuanced perspectives on American culture as a nexus of multiple cultures constantly influencing and reshaping each other, as a site in which lived experience is inflected by race, by class, by ethnicity, by gender, by sexual orientation, by place of origin, by region, and by religion in complicated and dynamic ways, as a culture whose myths and symbols need to be interrogated rather than reified, and as a culture and nation just as vulnerable as other cultures and nations to the seductions of greed, arrogance and empire. Revisionist historians have re-examined every chapter of U.S. history and uncovered perspectives ignored by previous generations, listening to voices that were previously silenced, exploring conflicts previously erased, and probing power relations that were previously so naturalized as to be invisible. Revisionist literary critics have mined canonical American literature for traces of these silenced voices and evidence of these naturalized power relations and forgotten conflicts. They have recovered vast bodies of texts that have expanded ideas of what

American literature is, was, and might be, in ways that their predecessors could not have imagined. Notions of "mainstream" and "margins" that a previous generation of scholars found obvious and unremarkable have been challenged and dismantled. The physical place that is the "United States" has been decentered as the object of study in American Studies by scholars who know that there are stories and histories that don't take place in the U.S. at all that are central to the field as it is recognized today. We are paying more attention now to American literature in languages other than English, and distinctions between the "domestic" and the "foreign" are increasingly challenged as scholars become more aware of the ways in which each informs the other. As the twenty-first century opens, scholars' ideas about what constitutes "American Studies" are changing in dynamic and exciting ways that make the contributions of international scholars more important than ever.

Where the old American Studies aspired to describe American Culture as a monolithic, stable, homogeneous entity characterized by universally-shared experiences, myths and symbols, the new American Studies increasingly understands American Culture as a crossroads of cultures. In place of exceptionalist, triumphalist narratives of progress, American Studies scholars today are reconstructing complex stories of crossroads and contact zones, of conflict, transformation, and change. Some of the keywords that characterize the new "American Studies" are "transnational," "intercultural," "international" "multicultural," "diasporic," "multilingual," "counter-hegemonic" and "comparative." In place of unitary ascriptions of a particular meaning to a particular event, scholars are contextualizing and historicizing the construction of memory and meaning during different periods, understanding why different pasts become "usable" at different moments in time. Five pioneering figures whose work is particularly "usable" at this juncture in time are Gloria Anzaldúa, Robert Morse Crunden, Anna Julia Cooper,

W.E.B. Du Bois, and Mark Twain. These five figures are forebears American Studies scholars today need to embrace and celebrate. Together they point us toward new paradigms for American Studies in the 21st century that are transnational, collaborative, and interdisciplinary, that acknowledge the importance of communicating across borders, and that wear down the prejudice and arrogance that is inimical to good scholarship.

Keywords: Transnational American Studies, Crossroads of Culture, Usable Past, Mainstreams/Margins, Multicultural