



AMERICAN CULTURAL STUDIES

AN INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN CULTURE

Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean

FOURTH EDITION



'Like previous editions, the fourth edition of Campbell and Kean's *American Cultural Studies* manages to address some of the most pertinent issues in the subject in a manner that is thought-provoking yet brief. The text blends history, theory, and analysis into a narrative that is intriguing, conceptually challenging, yet accessible for introductory humanities courses; the updated chapters on ethnicity and immigration, religion, and freedom are especially noteworthy in this regard.'

Veronica McComb, *Lenoir-Rhyne University, USA*

'*American Cultural Studies* is a key text for students that details a staggering wealth of US cultural history. Campbell and Kean not only look at a huge breadth of sources but they manage to weave this into a coherent and compelling interpretation of America's ideology that will be appreciated by all students of US history and politics. Indeed if you want to understand how the US affects us all through its cultural impact then you need to read this very enjoyable book.'

Lee Sartain, *University of Portsmouth, UK*

'Richly interdisciplinary and newly updated to include discussions of Barack Obama, long-form television, and "Hemispheric American Studies", the fourth edition of *American Cultural Studies* continues to provide the best and most up-to-date introduction to American Studies currently in print.'

Frederik Byrn Køhlert, *University of Calgary, Canada*

'The fourth edition of *American Cultural Studies* provides an introduction that is thoroughly informed by new directions in the discipline – especially, the turn to the transnational – and that reads more "traditional" topics alongside assessments of subjects that have generally received less attention on American Studies programmes, such as the presence of Islam in the United States, the growing significance of Hispanic culture, and the debates over same-sex relationships. The broad coverage is delivered with an expert knowledge of the field, encompassing an impressive combination of well-known and new readings of key moments and texts, and is supplemented with excellent lists of further reading.'

Chris Gair, *University of Glasgow, UK*

'This is an indispensable guide for students at all levels, covering the key themes, texts and debates of the "new" American Studies. Comprehensive, up-to-date, and thoroughly readable, it's probably the best introduction available; it is both practical and engaging and I highly recommend it.'

Tom Idema, *Utrecht University, The Netherlands*

'I've found *American Cultural Studies* to be a really strong and engaging text for American Studies students – both undergraduates and beginning Master's students. The authors get at key American themes and ideas, successfully elucidating their nuances and complexities and putting them into useful contexts. The international perspective (from writers not based in the USA) further enriches this look at American culture and the new edition includes timely updates so that the examples and case studies remain current.'

Stephanie A. Tingley, *Youngstown State University, USA*

American Cultural Studies

Exploring the central themes in modern American cultural studies and discussing how these themes can be interpreted, *American Cultural Studies* offers a wide-ranging overview of different aspects of American cultural life such as religion, gender and sexuality, regionalism, and ethnicity and immigration.

The fourth edition has been revised throughout to take into account the developments of the last four years. Updates and revisions include:

- discussion of Barack Obama's time in the White House
- consideration of 'Hemispheric American Studies' and the increasing debates about globalisation and the international role of the USA
- long-form television and American Studies
- up-to-date case studies, such as *Girls*, *The Wire* and *Orange is the New Black*
- more material on Detroit, the Mexican border, same-sex relationships and Islam in America
- updated further reading lists and new follow-up work.

Illustrated throughout, containing follow-up questions and further reading at the end of each chapter, and accompanied by a companion website (www.routledge.com/cw/campbell) providing further study resources, *American Cultural Studies* is a core text and an accessible guide to the interdisciplinary study of American culture.



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American Cultural Studies

An introduction to American culture
Fourth Edition

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This edition published 2016
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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First edition published 1997

Third edition published 2012
by Routledge

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Caple, Chris, 1958– editor.

Title: Preservation of archaeological remains in-situ : a reader / edited by Christopher Caple.

Description: New York, NY : Routledge, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015042830 | ISBN 9780415832533 (hardback : alk. paper) |

ISBN 9780415832540 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Antiquities—Collection and preservation. | Archaeology | Archaeological sites—Conservation and restoration. | Historic sites—Conservation and restoration. | Cultural property—Protection. | Historic preservation.

Classification: LCC CC135 .P716 2016 | DDC 930.1—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015042830>

ISBN: 978-1-138-83313-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-83314-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-64720-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Palatino and Helvetica
by Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon, UK

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Acknowledgements

This is a newly revised fourth edition of the book previously published in 1997, 2006 and 2012. We would like to thank once again Professor Will Kaufman for all his productive comments on the first edition and subsequently all those anonymous readers who advised us on alterations for the second, third and fourth versions. We hope it meets some of their needs and will continue to stimulate students in their explorations of American culture. We would like to thank our colleagues, Dave Holloway, Simon Philo and Jo Bishton, and students at the University of Derby who have been involved in many classes in which these ideas have been worked out and whose voices may be heard echoing in these pages. Caroline Ball, Subject Librarian for American Studies, has been very helpful in guiding us to relevant material and helping with the updating of the website. We would also like to thank our respective families for their forbearance and encouragement. To Jane, as ever, 'Love knows no distance'. Love, too, to Trish, for continuing to give real meaning to the concept of 'new beginnings', and to Alex, Hannah, Oliver and Daniel for just being themselves.

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Introduction

The United States of America continues to be at the forefront of world events, with its foreign policy still engaged at home and abroad, with the varied consequences of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11, or September 11th), now deeply entangled with events in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. The growing threat of Islamic State and the rise of Russian militarisation in Ukraine presents new, but related, challenges for the United States's role in global geopolitics. Closer to home, there is the threat of internal terrorism such as the Boston bombings (15 April 2013), urban unrest such as that following the murders of Trayvon Martin (2012) and Michael Brown (2014), as well as the continued effects of economic recession and environmental disasters such as Hurricane Katrina (2005), the *Deepwater Horizon* Gulf of Mexico oil spill (2010), and the prolonged drought in California and the desert southwest. What these different events 'mean', how they are dealt with and what they might tell us about the USA as a domestic and international power demonstrate why it is vitally important to continue to study and analyse the United States of America in all its formations. In recent years, ever-popular concepts in American history like 'nation', 'settler-colonial state', 'empire', 'homeland', 'freedom' and 'patriotism' have been given new meanings and interpretations, contested from the perspectives of those critical of the political project of President George W. Bush and celebrated by those who supported him. With the arrival of America's first African American president, Barack Obama, on 20 January 2009, many viewed the nation as entering a new phase, perhaps echoed in the optimistic words of the president's inaugural address: 'We gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord.' Yet as the speech progressed Obama restated what so many presidents had said before him: 'The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.' Of course, spoken by an African American perhaps these

words take on an altered and more pointed meaning, reiterating old values while re-emphasising them for a new age and a new audience. In the twenty-first century, how do Americans respond to notions of 'enduring spirit', 'God-given promise' and concepts like freedom and happiness? Although clearly echoing the Declaration of Independence, does this mythic rhetoric still ring true for all Americans? As we write this latest edition of *American Cultural Studies* there is even a possibility of the first woman president in American history, something unthinkable in the nation's recent past.

In a rapidly changing world where past and present are in continuous negotiation, American Studies can be the focus for questions like these, able to critique and analyse the discourses that have shaped and continue to shape a nation and its complex relations with the world. Contrary to some who have argued for the decline of the nation-state, it now remains vital to any discussion of global events, with the United States of America still a dominant world force, guarding its borders while engaging in the policing of those of other nations, redefining new forms of power at the very heart of our critical understanding of the twenty-first century. However, the nature of what constitutes this 'nation' is still as problematic as ever. As Dimock and Buell ask (2007: 2), 'Is "American" an adjective that can stand on its own, uninflected, unentangled, and unconstrained?' The American Cultural Studies employed in this book is, therefore, interdisciplinary and international, exploring a range of ways to study American culture, in order to encourage students, who may have little experience either of America or interdisciplinary work, to develop their engagement with both of these in tandem. Our focus is largely on the twentieth- and twenty-first-century experience, but where appropriate, for instance, in the chapters on regions, religion and African Americans, we have included material from earlier periods in order to provide an important context or sense of continuity. However, in the spirit of the issues raised above, it does not seek to exceptionalise the 'American' in American Studies but to suggest rather its fluid and interconnected relations with other nations and fields of study.

AN EXCEPTIONAL PLACE OR WHAT IS AMERICA?

Since its inception in the 1930s, American Studies as an approach to the study of the culture and history of the USA has been preoccupied with certain key themes. One is what Michael Denning has described as the founding question of the subject area, 'What is American?' (Denning 1986: 360). Although often phrased in different ways, the question is concerned with the meaning of American national identity, and the ways in which America might be distinguished from other nations. A particular answer to this question has been to define the uniqueness or 'exceptional' quality

of the American experience in the form of a 'national narrative' – a story of agreed principles, values and myths that gives the country a coherent sense of identity, an 'image repertoire productive of the U.S. national community . . . through a recitation of the key terms in the national meta-narrative' (Pease 1994: 4). In other ways, however, examining the 'Americanness' of the USA has deep roots within American history itself. J.H. St John de Crevecoeur's famous question, 'What, then, is the American, this new man?', first posed in 1782, has echoed down subsequent generations of social and political commentary by both Americans and foreigners addressing the question of American identity. From Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s and 1840s through the founding fathers of American history like Frederick Jackson Turner, to post-Second World War cultural critics like David Riesman and Christopher Lasch, a considerable literature has built up dedicated to defining American character. American Studies, therefore, as the search for 'American exceptionalism', for some sense of the differences between American culture and other cultures, has come out of a deep-seated preoccupation with national self-definition. Even if American culture, on analysis, may turn out to be less distinctive from other modern societies than was once thought, one feature of it remains the durability of questions about a national identity. Indeed, as some commentators have argued, the centrality of the debate about American distinctiveness in the United States may in itself be a key component of American identity: 'The search for an American character is part of that character' (Wilkinson 1988: 2).

Simultaneously, there have been those set on contesting any coherent national narrative or essentialised sense of identity as ideological frameworks that exclude too much of the genuine experience of the USA. Criticisms of 'American exceptionalism' have tended to focus on two central weaknesses in many earlier attempts to define national difference. There is, first, the tendency to reduce questions of national identity to some essential singularity and in doing so to give undue weight to the experience of specific groups and traditions in explaining America, at the expense of other groups whose experience is, as a result, forgotten or marginalised. Second, there has been a tendency to study American society in isolation and from 'within', and in so doing to downplay those experiences the United States might have in common with other societies or that enable a comparative perspective to emerge. Increasingly in the twenty-first century some critics, as we shall see, prefer to rethink the USA as part of a 'hemisphere' or a 'world system' in order to understand its rather more interlinked histories (see Wilson and Connery 2007; Levander and Levine 2008; Dimock and Buell 2007; Edwards and Gaonkar 2010).

If we turn to the first major criticism, then the difficulties of generalising about national identity become evident. Americans, it has been

overwhelmingly argued over the last seventy years, have been marked by division and opposition, rather than by agreement and consensus. Traditional conceptions of a unified American culture when examined turn out to be partial and selective views of what America has been or ought to be, grounded in the privileged status accorded to a white, male, middle-class, heterosexual perspective. America has presented itself as a classless society, marked by a powerful degree of consensus and a low level of conflict only because historians and cultural critics had tended not to emphasise those factors that indicated deep-seated divisions in American life, such as class, ethnicity, race and gender. Once these latter factors have been duly acknowledged, then, at the very least, it becomes much more difficult to accommodate them adequately within traditional notions of a seamless national identity. Americans, it is argued, are in the end divided as much as they are united. Where unity is apparent, this is only possible because difference has been hidden by the practice of power. The dominance of specific groups and perspectives in American life has obscured the fact that other groups were subordinate, and played little part in creating an 'official' American identity. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese wrote in 1990: 'The last two decades have . . . witnessed a growing restiveness with any complacent assumptions that the culture of a privileged few could adequately represent the specific beliefs and practices of the many varieties of Americans' (Fox-Genovese 1990: 7). The construction of an American identity could thus no longer rely on a few privileged categories; Americans were 'female as well as male, black as well as white, poor as well as affluent, Catholic or Jewish as well as Protestant, and of diverse national and ethnic backgrounds' (ibid.).

A second major source of criticism has focused on a tendency in American Studies to examine American culture on its own without very much attention to cross-cultural comparison. In other words, 'exceptionalism' has often fed the very basis of American Studies as a discipline. The emphasis here tended to be on what set the United States apart from other cultures rather than what it might share with them. This approach, in turn, both fed off and encouraged that long-held belief in American history that the country had a special mission to fulfil, a mission which in the past had a strong religious, economic or racial gloss (as the 'errand into the wilderness' or 'Manifest Destiny'), but which was given renewed vigour by America's ideological role as the leader of the free world in the Cold War, and subsequently in its global 'War on Terror' (see Chapter 9). There are links between this argument and the tendency to underplay conflict in the American past for, as Giles Gunn has commented, 'wherever concern for American uniqueness was seen to wax, critical comprehension of its own inner divisions as well as its cultural complexity and contextual relations seemed to wane' (Gunn 1987: 151).

Again, this tendency drew on an understandable strain in American culture which sought to explain the country's identity from within, using American points of reference. Frederick Jackson Turner's elaboration of his Frontier thesis is only the most well-known attempt to provide an explanation of American development in terms of conditions within the country itself, arguing that the westward clash of civilisation and savagery created out of such conditions a composite American 'type' (see Chapter 5). What these various criticisms of 'American exceptionalism' suggest are the problems involved in generalising about the American experience. This is not to deny that the national dimension of historical and cultural analysis is significant, nor is it to dismiss the extensive literature on the American character, which, in any case, was rather more sensitive to matters of region and ethnicity than has sometimes been argued. It is, however, to emphasise that students, in seeking to understand American culture, need to take into account both internal variation and division as well as international and cross-cultural comparison. As we shall see later, one of the strongest themes in recent discussions of American Studies has focused on the need to 'internationalise' it, to relate it to the world and to global exchanges and transnational processes. One of the aims of this book, then, is to encourage students both to become aware of these internal divisions and at the same time to consider how they relate to conventional or accepted definitions of American identity.

WHAT IS AMERICAN STUDIES?

If the problematic nature of national identity is one major concern which recent enquiry in American Studies has addressed, a second is the process of interdisciplinary work. It may be helpful here to say something about what we mean by interdisciplinarity and in so doing to identify some of the benefits as well as potential problems involved in this kind of approach. American Studies, as practised both in the United States and abroad, has long advocated movement beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and encouraged efforts to establish more open and cooperative projects between academic areas. As might be expected, however, such an enterprise has had a controversial and much disputed life, for a whole range of reasons, particularly in the last fifty years when the very nature of what we mean by an academic discipline has come under scrutiny from a number of different directions.¹ It is not our intention here to provide a review of this work; students who wish to follow its contours may be guided by the material in the notes and further reading, or follow the debates in the *American Quarterly* over the last thirty years. Rather, we want to open up areas of debate, and thus possible avenues of cultural exploration for students to develop in their own projects. In the individual

chapters which follow, rather than providing interpretative overviews of the topics concerned, our aim is to suggest a range of potential approaches to American culture. What follows, then, by way of discussion of interdisciplinary issues, is a starting-point or a place of departure.

Central to any interdisciplinary enterprise is the relationship between texts to be studied and the contexts from which they come. There are two main issues to examine here. One is what we mean by 'texts'. Traditional approaches based on the study of literature, history and politics tended to favour certain kinds of texts at the expense of others, presenting an established canon of great works (often by 'dead white men', it is said) from which might be distilled the essence of American culture. Certain kinds of texts, such as *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) or *The Ambassadors* (1903), were appropriate for sustained examination while others, like popular films or detective novels, were not. The debate over what should be included in the canon has been hotly contested in recent years and is clearly related to the issues raised in the opening stages of this introduction. Whose America is reflected in any specific list of texts for close study? Can the works of key writers in themselves provide an adequate guide to the complexities of a culture as varied and as divided as that of the United States? Are certain kinds of texts worth more than others because they are more complex or contain particular revelatory or inspirational qualities? Can the USA only be represented from within? In attempting to come to terms with these questions, our approach has been to retain an emphasis on the importance of certain forms of literary and artistic production which seem to us to require sustained and careful reading, but at the same time not to limit ourselves to what has been traditionally included in such a category. For one thing, what might be defined as 'elite' or 'high' culture has clearly changed over time, as has the nature of the 'text' and how that text might be received and used. In the age of the Internet, social networking, Twitter and other electronic aids to communication, any assumptions about what a text constitutes are clearly changing.

If we define culture at its broadest as 'a way of life', then it also becomes clear that to restrict the study of cultural products to a small handful of approved texts runs the risk of omitting a great deal. One suggestion takes the opposite position stating texts are simply 'those stories that Americans tell one another in order to make sense of their lives' (Mechling 1989: 4). According to this definition, then, a whole range of cultural products and artefacts become available for analysis. It may still be that in such a scheme of study there remains room for qualitative judgement, that some stories carry greater conviction and resonance than others, but the possibilities for making connections between different aspects of the wider culture are greatly extended. The opening up of different kinds of texts for scrutiny, too, may yield surprising results. Listening closely to the stories they tell and how those stories fit or jar with other stories in the culture may reveal

specific texts in the popular domain which repay close study, and which are as questioning and as complex as more ostensibly 'serious' works. In this collection, therefore, while retaining a strong emphasis on the works of a range of established writers from Edgar Allan Poe to Toni Morrison, we have also juxtaposed them with material from other sources including popular culture, photography, art, music, film, television and material artefacts. Moreover, in making connections between different texts, it might be argued that new kinds of texts are created which themselves can be read and interpreted. An example here might be the description of the city as a text, which can be read in a range of different ways, but which itself is made up of a range of different texts or stories.

More specifically, one might consider the television phenomenon *The Wire* (HBO 2002–8), which, over five series, explored Baltimore through different critical prisms: the illegal drug trade, the port system, the city government and bureaucracy, the school system and the print news media. Its large multicultural, multiclass cast provided a complex theatrical long form of television in which stories evolved over time allowing its audience to invest in its textured narrative threads. In this sense it offers a new and different form of 'text' for American Studies. Using established novelists like Dennis Lehane, Richard Price and George Pelecanos, the series referred to earlier traditions of crime writing and realist fiction while carving out a whole new form of television experience, at once demanding, thrilling and thoughtful. Yet its creator, David Simon, recognised its often powerful political themes as crucial to its purpose, such as when commenting on series two as 'a meditation on the death of work and the betrayal of the American working class . . . it is a deliberate argument that unencumbered capitalism is not a substitute for social policy; that on its own, without a social compact, raw capitalism is destined to serve the few at the expense of the many' (Simon in Richard Vine 2005; see also Busfield and Owen 2009; Simon 2009; Alvarez 2009).

An American Studies interdisciplinary approach to the study of *The Wire* is productive for it demands drawing on different theories and texts to comprehend how ideas are formed, sustained and adjusted over time. The goal of interdisciplinarity is to create a resulting understanding greater than the sum of its disciplinary parts by interlinking and comparing their lines of enquiry. The aim is not, however, a unified, smooth conclusion, but rather a means to explore the show's characteristic ambiguities, its battling voices and its moral complexity. With a rich and varied drama like *The Wire* ranging across different themes, this approach is vitally important. For these reasons, even Harvard University chose to use the series on its urban inequality course because it had the capacity to 'weave together the range of forces that shape the lives of the urban poor' and demonstrate how 'various institutions work together to limit opportunities for the urban poor' (Chaddha and Wilson 2010: n.p.). Indeed, David

Simon, *The Wire's* creator, has written that it was 'an angry show' about how 'institutions themselves are paramount and every day human beings matter less' and he wanted to use the layered forms of the long-form television format (see discussion later) to enable a more nuanced recognition of social context and individual stories (in Alvarez 2009: 9, 30). The show's more novelistic form and its refusal to accept the 'simple paradigms' (ibid.: 1) of television formats that tailored the drama to fit neatly between advertisement breaks did not interest Simon. Instead, his aim was to find confrontational forms: slow, sprawling, poetic, accented and very intensely local (and yet universal), from which to break the habits of TV audiences and scripts that 'comfort the American comfortable and ignore the American afflicted, the better to sell Ford trucks and fast food' (ibid.).

If the concept of a text is open to redefinition, as David Simon suggests, then so too is the concept of context or 'history' that such new forms of 'telling' can produce. The implications of cultural theory for the discipline of history are considerable and remind us that written history is shaped and crafted in order to represent events to the reader, just as fiction is. Conventional notions of history as an empirically based quest for the truth about the past have been criticised as having an unquestioning and innocent approach to methodological and epistemological issues. Many of these criticisms are undoubtedly polemical in tone, and in their determination to make a theoretical case tend to ignore the sophistication, range and depth of much recent historical work. Ironically, they sometimes rely on particular versions of the past or models of historical interpretation which that work has undermined. Despite this tendency, however, it is nevertheless helpful to identify some of the central points in recent work on the philosophy of history, for they suggest ways of encouraging links between history and other disciplines in the humanities in a way which opens doors to interdisciplinary work. These points may be summarised as follows.

- 1 There is a critical distinction between 'the past' and 'history'.
- 2 History in the end is made by historians, defined here to include not just professional historians but all those who are interested in making some sense of the past. For example, an American historian like Frederick Jackson Turner established a narrative of Western history that sought to explain not just that region of the nation, but the entire make-up of a national character.
- 3 History as a discourse is a construct which cannot comprehend the whole of the past. The past, in its totality, is simply too big, too various, to encompass in any one account.
- 4 History, therefore, is made up of a range of different and contesting accounts of the past and we come to the past through its different

histories, and it is these histories which we must weigh against each other as we seek to make sense of the past. There is no accurate and unchanging historical record of the past out there against which we can check our stories for their truth. Thus new feminist or ethnic histories must be explored against the more 'traditional' male-centred constructions of historians like Frederick Jackson Turner.

- 5 Because history is a partial account of the past, it is subject to the same pressures as other stories; it is written according to certain conventions and rules, and employs a range of narrative devices, which may be explicit or implicit. The historian communicates by employing a range of strategies which are commonly thought of as the province of the novelist, such as metaphor, repetition, personification, closure and others. The same is true, of course, of the documentary materials which the historian consults.
- 6 These narratives are themselves contested, that is, they are in a dynamic relationship with each other. Particular kinds of narratives may have predominated at specific times, because they were the expression of dominant cultural forms or political systems. Other narratives remained unconstructed or silenced because they were not admitted into the dominant culture. Thus, until recently, Native Americans and African Americans have been silenced in history by a process that has denied them an authoritative historical voice.
- 7 Histories are written by historians who themselves are located in a specific social context, and whose observations, interpretations and judgements are partly shaped by the conceptual categories they bring to their task.
- 8 American history is part of a global system and cannot be viewed in isolation; it is *trans*-national.

It now may be possible to see how issues to do with the concept of an unproblematic national culture and identity mesh with methodological questions over what kinds of texts are worthy of scrutiny, and how these texts in turn link with the process of historical enquiry. An openness to a range of textual material – to include, for instance, popular and high culture, imaginative and documentary material, novels or films and histories – may in turn open up questions of national identity and its construction, move us beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries, and posit a range of alternative, competing discourses as the focus of analysis. Thus an event like the quincentennial of Columbus in 1992 was contested by different interpretations of the meanings of the 'discovery/conquest' of America (see Chapter 1), or one might examine Hurricane Katrina (2005) in a similarly diverse way as competing versions of events unfolded around race, economics and political mismanagement (see <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/> for work in this area), or, to return to

David Simon's *The Wire*, with its layered histories of Baltimore told through different voices from within its various communities, to understand how 'capital has triumphed completely, labor has been marginalized and monied interests have produced enough political infrastructure to prevent reform' (Simon in Alvarez 2009: 30).

As Shelley Fisher Fishkin put it in her call to redefine the field, 'The goal of American studies scholarship is not exporting and championing an arrogant, pro-American nationalism but understanding the multiple meanings of America and American culture in all their complexity' and to 'provide the nuance, complexity, and historical context to correct reductive visions of America' (Fishkin 2005: 20). One approach to this was suggested in 2008 when Levander and Levine called for 'Hemispheric American Studies' that 'focuses on the complex ruptures that remain within but nonetheless constitute the national frame, while at the same time moving beyond the national frame to consider regions, areas, and diasporan affiliations that exist apart from or in conflicted relation to the nation' (Levander and Levine 2008: 2). From apparently 'local' materials, such as those dramatised in *The Wire*, we need to look for connections and networks that produce these economic, cultural and political conditions. As one character in *The Wire* says when trying to steer the young Dukie away from the crime and drug trade in his neighbourhood, the 'world is bigger than that'. With a tinge of hope that his life might be different, Dukie asks: 'How do you get from here to the rest of the world?' The response: 'I wish I knew.' These critical tensions of inside and outside, local and global, national and transnational are very productive areas of debate within any current discussion of American Studies.

USING THE BOOK

In what follows we have not used the same mode of analysis in each chapter, since investigations of different themes or topics clearly demand different approaches. As we have stressed, this book is not a survey or an attempt to write a textbook with all the answers. As Michael Fischer has written, 'the text is not hermetically sealed, but points beyond itself' (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 201) and this book points to many other areas of study, avenues of exploration and research. Thus Chapter 6 on 'the American city' takes what might be described as a poststructuralist approach to the city as a text whose meanings are constantly shifting and unfixable, whereas Chapter 7 analyses the ways in which gender has defined power relations at work in America. We have, however, developed a self-conscious and explicit description of the practices we have adopted in the various chapters, as part of those chapters themselves. We have also included selected discussions of texts in a little more detail than a conventional survey would allow, again in an attempt to suggest possible

approaches to a range of interdisciplinary textual material. The texts chosen for this purpose are not meant to be representative but, rather, to be helpful examples of what can be done through this kind of work.

At the end of each chapter and on the accompanying website for this book (see <http://www.routledge.com/cw/campbell/>), we have provided concrete suggestions for follow-up work that will allow students to develop their approaches to the topics concerned. Works cited in each chapter indicate a range of textual materials which might be used for further study. What we would encourage in these chapters, then, is open-mindedness and curiosity honouring and challenging a plurality of perspectives, relishing varieties of intellectual experience, while acknowledging the location and uncertainty of knowledge itself. At the same time, however, we also want to encourage students to explore some of the ways in which difference is connected to issues of power expressed through history, that 'the inherited notion of American culture is the product of historical struggles that have been won by some and lost by others' (Fox-Genovese 1990: 27) and that it is important to study the interaction between differing individuals and forces.

CRITICAL APPROACHES

For the remainder of this introduction, we will present, in more detail, some of the approaches and terms we see as informing the chapters that make up this book. It is our intention to begin with an overview of some of the concepts that structure and influence individual chapters, and provide a certain amount of explanation and context for these approaches. We have tried to explain them in the particular contexts in which they will be used in this book and we provide, through the notes and reading lists, ways of continuing the process started here through individual projects. It is important to emphasise, however, that individual chapters, with their specific applications of these critical approaches, will put the flesh and bones onto the skeleton assembled here.

Dream, myth and ideology

The American Dream was first defined by James Truslow Adams as 'that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement' (Adams 1932: 404). For all its faults as a concept, it does, however, express a dominant American national myth, a fundamental and long-held belief, like the promised land or Turner's Frontier thesis, which in different ways confirm certain qualities and attributes that function to define an 'American spirit'. These myths work to construct 'national character' and aspirations by suggesting that all people held these beliefs unanimously.

American Studies has often followed and explored, even helped to define, some of these mythic frameworks. Critical studies such as R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955) or Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950) are examples of texts that helped to enunciate American mythic sensibility by reinforcing specific notions of the nation as Edenic or as wilderness. In one sense, the purpose of myth is to make the world explicable, to magically resolve its problems and contradictions. 'Mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution' (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 224). Ronald Wright adds that, 'Myth is an arrangement of the past . . . in patterns [that] create and reinforce archetypes so taken for granted, so seemingly axiomatic, that we live and die by them' (Wright 1992: 5).

Thus myths are the stories we tell each other as a culture in order to explain complexities and to banish contradictions, thus making the world seem simpler and more comfortable for us to inhabit. For example, if America was a 'virgin land', a wilderness, it was 'free' to be civilised and occupied by the pioneers, irrespective of the indigenous population. Roland Barthes warns against such complacency and reminds us to be vigilant and willing to interrogate the 'falsely obvious' (1973: 11) because 'By myth Barthes also means ideology understood as a body of ideas and practices which defend the status quo and actively promote the values and interests of the dominant groups in society' (Storey 1993: 78). For Barthes, myths alter the past by endowing the shifting, complex processes of history with the appearance of something 'natural', 'eternal' and taken for granted. Thus myth is 'depoliticised speech' because it is as if the complexities that we recognise in speech (and history) have been hollowed out until all that remains is 'what goes without saying' – a simple version denuded of political debate and difference.

Thus myths are ideological because they are concerned primarily with the ways in which particular images of the world are conveyed and reinforced through texts and practices. Ideology can be explained as those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing that exist within and inform our everyday lives and connect us to wider structures of power in society in ways that contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of social power (Eagleton 1983). Such ideological myths exist everywhere in American culture, helping to shape the way people think and write about the nation, its history and its life, and they need to be interrogated and critiqued. Every time we use the phrase 'American Dream' we must be critical of it, asking, for example, 'whose dream?' and 'at what cost?' For example, the idea of America as a new Eden, a place of new birth, mission and promise, has been perpetuated in various forms throughout its history. Through interrogating these myths and ideologies we see the lines of power that have structured and given preferred meanings to

particular renditions of the past and privileged certain groups as a result. However, this is not a simple corrective, for that would imply that a 'myth' can be opposed by a 'truth' when, in fact, culture is more usefully viewed as a series of dynamic and contested ideological forces and interpretations. In this sense, these concepts need to be carefully related to that of 'discourse' (discussed later), as both myth and ideology contribute to the formations of discourse that construct 'America'.

Interdisciplinary Studies

The term 'Interdisciplinary Studies' suggests being at the boundary of the individual disciplines, where they begin to merge and intermingle, clash and jar, and relates to the condition of being at the margins of the normalised, accepted and official culture of America. These positions, both the abstract academic one and the real, ideological one, can be productive and invigorating. Being at these 'boundaries' or 'borders' can provide a new way of seeing a culture like the United States, because one is pushed beyond the centre where the world is defined, ordered and laid out, and permitted to see from a different perspective, through the decentred 'lens of alterity', as Paul Giles has termed it (2002: 255), including views from those excluded and marginalised by mainstream, dominant American culture. Here, a shift takes place giving a 'sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction . . . an exploratory, restless movement' (Bhabha 1994: 1) because the established, safe sense of the 'real' has been questioned and replaced by an 'awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world' (ibid.). At the boundaries of American culture, there is a multicultural, multiperspectival, transnational way of seeing, from where one might gain both these new perspectives and grasp 'the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy' (ibid.: 4). This latter concern with cultural hybridity will be discussed later with regard to ethnicity and pluralism (see Chapter 2).

As a meeting place or 'crossroads' (as Fishkin writes) of many cultures, systems of ritual and belief, America can be seen as a vast borderland or 'contact zone' where, in the words of Mary-Louise Pratt, 'disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other' and 'subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other . . . in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices' (Pratt 1995: 6–7). Interdisciplinary Studies, which interconnects *and* transgresses boundaries as a method of exploration, provides a suitable methodology through which to engage with and critique these dominant voices, and to appreciate and listen to other voices, recognising their mutual struggles to be heard.

Multicultural and multiperspectival

The development of critical Cultural Studies has been largely promoted by groups on the margins of power, excluded from the mainstream: women, ethnic minorities, gays, lesbians and others. Through their exploration of new critical approaches, old systems of representation and power have been interrogated and resisted, such as from within post-colonial studies (see Singh and Schmidt 2000; Madsen 2003). For example, multiculturalism – that is, the belief that a healthy culture is made up of many different people with diverse systems of belief and practice – has encouraged the analysis of relationships of control, oppression and social stereotyping, and focused on resistance to domination, the need for self-definition and the assertion of difference. Similarly, feminism has analysed the relations of power, finding many connections with the struggles of ethnic groups in America (see Adrienne Rich's work discussed in Chapter 7), but also contributed to the new critical voices that urge reconsideration, revision and the interdisciplinary search for new approaches beyond the simplistic 'either/or' mentality of thinking that suggests there are only opposites and no complex, negotiated terrains. Such terrains give voice to what Foucault calls 'subjugated knowledges' (1980: 81) – that is, to buried or marginalised cultural forms that have to be heard as part of the complex field of society. He emphasises the need to combine the 'erudite knowledge' with 'popular', 'local, regional . . . differential knowledge incapable of unanimity' (ibid.: 82), because in this mix there is a fuller picture of the multilayered cultural climate that we would associate with the United States. A multidimensional view of culture fostered by these new social movements has enabled approaches to texts that are challenging because they demand that we ask new questions about who speaks, who defines, who controls and who is included or excluded from this process. As Desmond and Dominguez put it, American Studies must 'move beyond a monocular [one-eyed] vision to one refracted by numerous simultaneous perspectives . . . as a body of scholarship on an "area" defined in dynamic relation to other "areas"' (Desmond and Dominguez 1996: 5).

A CULTURE OF MANY VOICES

For various reasons, certain powerful groups have sought to present America as a single nation and have played down its diverse components. This is exemplified by the significance of Noah Webster's dictionary and his call for a common American language in the 1790s. As Mikhail Bakhtin recognised, there are many voices running through language and literature, as in culture itself, and these must be acknowledged in an ideally 'heteroglossic' (many-voiced) formulation of society:

at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past . . . these 'languages' of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying 'languages'.

(Bakhtin 1990: 291)

For example, in watching a show like *The Wire* (discussed above and below), we are exposed to the 'heteroglossic' sense of Baltimore with its many competing voices, accents, communities engaged in complex struggles over power, place and meaning. As David Simon said of the show, in the end it was not about the characters, institutions, communities or crime, 'It was about the City' (Alvarez 2009: 3).

Poststructuralist thinking in particular (see Chapter 6 on the city) has recognised that texts are not closed, but plural with 'an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning' (Eagleton 1983: 138). To impose a single meaning or to attempt to find one is to misrepresent the complexity of the text itself (or nation in our case), for it is our contention that a variety of readings across the disciplines is one method of exploring the fullness of both the text and the nation, to hear the many voices that Bakhtin describes or Simon dramatises.

This reveals issues of power too: of whose voice is 'normally' heard in culture, what it enunciates and how it frames society in particular ways or as Simon put it earlier, 'capital . . . labor . . . monied interests' engaged in a struggle for authority (in Alvarez 2009: 30). These are the questions that emerge when we approach texts from outside their normal frame of reference. Diversity, difference, contest, dialogue are the watchwords of this approach, but crucially, too, a willingness to acknowledge the 'links and interrelationships' across what Bakhtin called 'the borderlines' (1984: 29) brings us back to our concern for the interdisciplinary method.

This book will pay attention to many voices and how they have recorded their lives, and recognise how history is always in a process of revision concerned with the analyses of power, ideology and representation. America as a nation of differences has to be examined with close consideration of the ways in which those differences relate to those who have the loudest voices, the most authority, status and wealth, and those who do not. Furthermore, such systems must be explored in order that such hierarchical structures are revealed and explained.

CULTURAL POLITICS/CULTURAL STUDIES

America, like all cultures, is multifaceted and ever-changing, and therefore it has to be constantly questioned and examined using the most

appropriate tools available. In recent years, Cultural Studies has provided new analytical approaches through which many traditional attitudes towards 'culture' have shifted, allowing a wider interpretation of the word. Rather than just 'high' culture – the best-thought and -written, with eternal values and authority – there has been a perceived need to include other forms of cultural expression, drawn from popular culture, mass media (referred to in the past as 'low' culture) and to broaden what could be studied to include not just traditional forms of expression, but new forms (film, television, graphic novels) and a fuller definition of the concept of text. In this definition, culture is 'the ensemble of social processes by which meanings are produced, circulated and exchanged' (Thwaites *et al.* 1994: 1), and all these 'social processes' can be 'read', interpreted and contested as texts. A useful way of envisaging this is to see culture as 'an assemblage of texts, loosely and sometimes contradictorily united' (Clifford 1988: 41) which constitute meanings, ideologies and subjectivities as they weave together, collide and merge.

This leads us through a series of vital questions about cultural formation, power, ideology and representation:

Whose culture shall be the official one and whose shall be subordinated? What cultures shall be regarded as worthy of display and which shall be hidden? Whose history shall be remembered and whose forgotten? What images of social life shall be projected and which shall be marginalized? What voices shall be heard and which be silenced? Who is representing whom and on what basis?

(Jordan and Weedon 1995: 4)

In American terms, such questions reveal how certain non-white cultures have been 'hidden', or women's histories have been erased in favour of the dominant male stories of the nation. Through the close study of cultural expressions, texts and practices we can raise these questions and begin to see the ideological positions that are registered socially in cultural institutions such as the family, education, the media, the churches, the law and language. These are termed *discourses* that constitute – rather than simply describing or reflecting – reality, and form our concepts about our identity and about what the world means. Discourses organize statements, define texts, promote meanings, representations and stories, position subjects and are endlessly in competition for our attention as they *construct* our sense of what is right and wrong, normal and abnormal, important or not worthy of our attention. These competing discourses can at any one time achieve greater authority within the cultural system, and become *dominant discourses*, carrying more status, power and social significance. For example, a discourse of American patriotism in a time of

war might be a gathering of texts such as the flag, emotional music, images of heroism and sacrifice and speeches of resolution and determination from the White House. Together these are discursive formations that construct patriotism as logical, acceptable and 'natural' – as if it is a timeless and eternal condition of all normal, good Americans. Anyone criticising these discursive elements would be seen as unpatriotic and threatening, as in some of the reactions post-11 September 2001.

The influence of such discursive formations within culture is immense, structuring power and influence, attitudes, beliefs and identity. After all, the effect of discourse is to *position us* in relation to a variety of social forces. It *subjects us*. So, using our example of patriotic discourse, Japanese Americans in the Second World War were imprisoned because they were perceived as a threat to the 'American' cause. They were 'subjected' and 'positioned' by this patriotic discourse and defined as dangerous outsiders as in John Sturges's film *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955) where the Japanese American Komoko is killed by the racist locals. This is precisely the contested terrain into which Cultural Studies goes in order to debate issues of and assumptions about identity, gender, class, the family, education, ethnicity, the environment, religion and technology. In so doing, it reveals how power and ideology work to legitimate social inequalities, but it also explores how forms of resistance emerge as part of this complex cultural contest. For just as dominant discourses emerge in culture, so can resistant, counter-discourses, struggling to be heard in the cultural arena and attempting to alter the received and dominant modes of expression and definition. This is a central interest in this book, as in much Cultural Studies, for it is through these resisting and contesting voices that new and interesting critical challenges are made to the centralised and established order.

POWER, POSITION, HEGEMONY

America is a powerful nation, some would say an 'empire', with immense wealth, military strength and global influence, politically, economically, militarily and culturally and this is how it likes to represent itself to the world. But how is this power achieved, by whom, for whom and at what cost to others? It is vital that such assumptions and representations are questioned since power exists in different ways throughout culture and can be seen in all practices and signifying systems. In their creation of meaning and our relation to that meaning, we are positioned, that is, we are 'interpellated' or 'buttonholed' (Barthes 1973: 124–5) into a position which includes (or excludes) us in the relationship. The effect of this is ideological, for it serves to orient people in social contexts towards accepting certain values as natural, obvious and self-evident, and

embodying these ideologies to such an extent that they appear to resolve contradictions and represent values which do not necessarily cohere with their lived experiences.

To modify an example from Barthes (1973) and Jordan and Weedon (1995), consider an image of an African American child, hand on heart, gazing on the Stars and Stripes at the beginning of the school day and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. The child is 'hailed' as one of the people and a part of an ideological system from which 'history evaporates' (Barthes 1973: 117), for the 'long story' of slavery, segregation and lack of civil rights has been emptied out and replaced by a simple 'myth' – 'a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, *indisputable* image' (ibid.: 118). This particular example stresses 'One nation under God' and therefore promotes and makes 'natural' the ideology of a united and coherent America, ordained by God, 'with liberty and justice for all'. We may feel comfortable with these myths and values, and may go along with the positions they appear to offer us, or we may resist them and their attempts to place and define us. The power of discourse can contribute significantly to the formation of powerful notions of 'Americanness' or national identity. To reduce the image of the child to a single meaning is to denude it of possibility and to ignore the contradictory and competing meanings that have constructed it (its 'histories'). Of course, in a particular situation the image could be read simply as a signifier of patriotism, loyalty and equal opportunity – with an emphasis upon racial harmony, unity and the American Dream. This could be the dominant reading of the meanings on offer, fixed by social circumstance, cultural background, education and so on, and reinforced through powerful institutions (school, family, the media, etc.). Such subject positionings are difficult to resist for they anchor the image's meanings in very specific ways, but by adopting alternative perspectives one can provide different ways of seeing, redefine identities and present new forms of resistance.

Cultural Studies as an approach seeks to listen to marginal voices and to the perspectives they bring to debates about power, authority and meaning. These forces are connected to a term used throughout this book – *hegemony*. This is a term that helps explain the way that power works within culture that is in itself 'free and democratic', like America. Hegemony refers to the ways in which a dominant class 'doesn't merely rule but leads a society through the exertion of moral and intellectual leadership' (Storey 1993: 119) so that a consensus is established in which all classes appear to support and subscribe to its ideologies and cultural meanings, incorporating them into the existing power structure. Hegemony's embracing of consensus means that any opposition can be 'contained and channelled into ideologically safe harbours' (ibid.), not through imposition, but through negotiation. So subordinate groups are not necessarily ignored, but rather given a certain 'place', a position within

the embrace of the dominant group, and their views articulated to a degree within the *master-narrative*. A master-narrative is the grand story told by the dominant groups to legitimate and justify their actions and policies. It attempts to encompass and totalise by a process of selection and exclusion of alternative, often critical, perspectives. For example, in the United States African Americans have been 'placed' within a dominant white cultural narrative, but through political struggle, cultural self-assertion and intervention they have developed an increasing role in the mainstream. Hegemony asserts cultural struggle and is best defined as 'a contested and shifting set of ideas by means of which dominant groups strive to secure the consent of subordinate groups to their leadership' (Strinati 1995: 170).

DIALOGISM

As we noted earlier, cultural anthropology and Cultural Studies have recognised the importance of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and in particular his call for dialogism. Based on the study of linguistics and language use, Bakhtin's work can be very useful in the analysis of American culture. As Reising commented, it 'provides the basis for a new appreciation of the heterogeneity of American [culture], a heterogeneity often blurred or denied by the polarization of canonical/non-canonical, major/minor, aesthetic/social' (Reising 1986: 234; see also Lenz 1999; Giles 2002). Language is dialogical, interacting self and other in a constant process of 'intermingling of diverse points of view' (Reising 1986: 234), and culture can be seen as functioning in a similar manner, as 'an open-ended, creative dialogue of subcultures, of insiders and outsiders, of diverse factions' (Clifford 1988: 46). In adopting this approach to American Studies, 'the intention is to dialogize dominant monologues, indeed, to show that dialogue is not an abstract ideal . . . but that it is everywhere' (Krupat 1992: 237) and that in examining this dialogue we can move closer to 'a textured sense of being American' (Fischer 1986: 230). Dialogues are not, of course, necessarily equal but in recognising their existence we see culture as always in a process of negotiation, with positions and identities shifting, with official voices being parodied and satirised, with power being contested and realigned.

To summarise, we would agree that American 'culture is contested, temporal and emergent' (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 19) and through Cultural Studies we can examine these elements, both to identify patterns of power, inequality, domination and resistance, and also to see the possibilities for change and development in the future. America has always been a place of invention and of dreams, and this book will attempt in various ways to explore the possibilities that still exist within American culture. Some might argue that the emergence of Barack Obama is

testament to this continuing power. To borrow from the anthropologist James Clifford, there is still a 'persistent hope for the reinvention of difference' within America (Clifford 1988: 15) which takes a variety of forms in its cultural life and energy. These 'histories of emergent differences require other ways of telling . . . there is no single model' (ibid.: 17), but as this book examines its various topics there are recurrent concerns about new forms revealed in interdisciplinary ways. The recognition and awareness of America as a still-emerging, creative and dynamic place in which new, hybrid identities are ever possible remains a prominent belief; but they are seen in the context of the histories and stories already told and often hidden, revealing a darker reality that has created the present from which anything new must emerge.

TRANSNATIONAL AND HEMISPHERIC AMERICAN STUDIES

Gunter Lenz has called for a 'dialogics of International American Culture Studies' (1999: 18) and Paul Giles writes of the need 'to rearticulate the . . . field dialogically and comparatively' (2002: 284). At the core of both arguments is the need to view American Studies as part of a complex, transnational dialogue that breaks down older, persistent notions of exceptionalism and essentialism by drawing on the disjunctions and similarities between cultures, challenging mythic unity with diversity and critique. Dialogues across and between cultures transform how America is viewed, decentring and rupturing the seamless 'cultural insiderdom' often associated with old school 'consensual' American Studies, whether from the 'borderlands' perspective of the US southwest as shown by Gloria Anzaldúa's or José David Saldívar's work, or from the 'transatlantic' perspectives of Paul Gilroy or Joseph Roach, or the Latin America perspectives of Walter D. Mignolo. This 'transnational turn' traces alternative spaces and modes of belonging that are not defined by the nation-state and reconceives immigration as diasporic, multidirectional movements (see Kaplan 2004; Fishkin 2005; Levander and Levine 2008; Fluck *et al.* 2011). In breaking out of the 'charmed circle' of representation from within the US, transnational perspectives work 'to reveal the circumference of national formations and thus to empty out their peremptory claims to legitimacy' (Giles 2002: 2, 17), raising important questions about established myths, values and hierarchies through redefining America as part of a global 'exchange'. In other words, it is not enough, as once thought, to simply incorporate more voices to the grid of American national identity and expand the canon, for this simply maintains the tradition of inclusiveness and 'unity'. Instead, one utilises external points of reference to relativise the whole field and to interrupt this circle of national representation. One consequence of such transnational (or postnational)

thinking is to continually re-examine the idea of nation and its romantic attachment to 'roots' and essential, fixed identity, and supplement it with a sense of 'routes' – the multiple, fluid formation of identity through contact, motion, diaspora and hybridity. And perhaps in this, as Amy Kaplan has stated, American Studies can be engaged in the important work of 'translation', to 'contest the universalism of American exceptionalism and to participate in the "strain and stress of the world", which is interconnected in many more complex ways than through the military reach of empire' (Kaplan 2004: 15–16).

A further example of these ideas at work can be seen in the idea of 'Hemispheric American Studies', not as a distinct, defined methodology, but as a relational process by which 'nation-time' is interrupted in order to see 'the intricately intertwined geographies, movements, and cross-filiations among peoples, regions, diasporas, and nations of the American hemisphere' (Levander and Levine 2008: 3). Importantly for a revised American Studies, this would mean seeing nation as emergent, through 'constant collaboration, dialogue, and dissension' and its culture the product of 'subordinations, alliances, and cross-fertilisations that make the nation a richly suggestive but hardly an autonomous entity' (ibid.: 5, 6). Importantly, this re-places 'America' within its true hemispheric relation – that is, as not the only version of nation, but rather as one part in a complex web of relations called the Americas. We will examine some of these ideas in Chapter 2 when discussing the film *Frozen River*. Of course, in searching for new approaches and to continue this relativisation of American Studies, a further emphasis has been placed on the idea of 'worlding' or viewing American culture as intrinsically linked to wider flows of meaning and identity. 'Worlds' emerge in different places – on the streets of Baltimore in *The Wire*, on the border of El Paso and Juarez, in the rural backwoods of Montana – and 'remap relationships of power at different scales and localities . . . by opening up new channels or reconfigure[ing] new social universes' (Ong 2011: 12). In this sense, as Dimock and Buell's 2007 collection argues, American literature might be seen as 'a constituted domain' within 'world literature' (2007: 1) contributing not to a single, unified vision, but rather to 'a living shifting network' (Ong 2011: 12).

LONG-FORM TELEVISION AND AMERICAN STUDIES

One emergent trend that has a huge influence on aspects of 'worlding' and the circulation of American Studies globally is the rise of new epic television shows that are now watched in different ways than the conventional weekly slots in a schedule. Streaming, 'catch-up' and 'box set' culture has altered the way television is produced and received, and

therefore, has some significance in the transmission and discussion of all things American. Robert J. Thompson's *Television's Second Golden Age* (1996) argued for a significant change away from 'network fare' towards 'more sophisticated and more artistic' television epitomised by the rise of cable network Home Box Office (HBO) and its slogan, 'It's Not TV, It's HBO', signalling its belief in what some have called 'quality television'. He had in mind shows like *Hill Street Blues*, *St Elsewhere* and *thirty-something*, which helped to blaze a trail for later series such as *Oz* (1997–2003), *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001–5) and, probably most significantly, as we discussed earlier, *The Wire* (2002–8). In recent years other companies like Netflix have entered the market to produce forms of television adapted to the new ways of both watching and accessing serial television (see *Orange is the New Black* in Chapter 7). There is no longer the need to wait for weekly showings when the show can be streamed or watched as 'catch-up' or as a box set, the viewer becoming immersed in the world constructed by types of television with high production values, crafted scripts and famous Hollywood stars. Serial, 'long-form' television gave writers and directors opportunities to work with extensive ensemble casts to explore broad narrative arcs across episodes and even seasons and allowing complex character development just not possible in the two hours of a typical feature film. Suddenly shows like *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2009–13) told intricate, multiple-layered stories evolving across the luxury of twelve-episode series with a powerful sense of place (Albuquerque, New Mexico) and time, and surprising plot twists as well as quirky experimental styles of camera work.

What emerges from such serials is a new form of epic television telling more detailed social tales of the USA, whether historical, like *The Pacific* (2010), *Band of Brothers* (2001) or *Generation Kill* (2008) or cultural political, like *The Wire*, *Mad Men* (2007–15) or *Breaking Bad* in which long-form stories unravelled demanding narratives that engaged viewers in a television experience that tested their memories and their patience with alternative and unusual approaches. As Chris Bigsby has commented, such shows are novelistic and interested in 'social context more fully realised' (Bigsby 2013: 227), allowing, as in *The Wire*, alternative, often ambiguous perspectives to emerge to challenge 'the American comfortable' based on paradigms of 'good and evil, of heroes, villains, and simplified characterization' (in Alvarez 2009: 1). Mythic American narratives are cross-cut and interfered with by long-form television and demand more of the audience: 'to slow themselves down and pay attention, to immerse themselves in a way that the medium had long ago ceased to demand' (ibid.: 3).

These shows impact on American Studies, offering new challenges for myth-creation as well as critique, and above all immerse their audience in deep, layered experiences that provide time and space for more complex

stories about a complex nation and its multiple identities to find their ways onto our screens wherever we are in the world. Hence, David Simon in *The Wire* used this format politically and provocatively to show not good and evil, like the mythic Western might have in the 1940s, but rather to dramatise a heteroglossic community, 'an America, at every level, at war with itself' (Simon in Bigsby 2013: 223).

THE CONTINUOUS 'PLAY' OF CULTURE, HISTORY AND POWER

This book will examine these heteroglossic identities, their constructions, their representations and their relationships to power and authority and show, through the attention to specific events, themes and texts, how and why the United States of America is 'historically evolving and contingent – rather than already formed' (Levander and Levine 2008: 6–7). If one of the central functions of historians is to 'lock up and unlock memory' (Appleby *et al.* 1994: 155), then this book is involved in the latter part of this process, engaged in the unlocking and 'dethroning' of long-held versions and myths of American culture and the 'simplified story that was told about the nation's past' (*ibid.*: 3, 294). Hence, the Wild West has given rise to immensely influential national myths and, through their interrogation, we can unlock relations of power that excluded women and ethnic minorities, attempted to erase the Indian and ravaged the land. We are concerned with ideologies, representations, power, discourse, hegemony and identity as constant factors in the construction of America as a broad, multifaceted and 'imagined community' whose cultural identity is:

a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' . . . [and] belongs to the future as much as to the past . . . not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture . . . fixed in some essentialised past, [but] subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power.

(Hall 1990: 225)

It is within these contexts that this book will show 'a living mix of varied and opposing voices' (Bakhtin 1990: xxviii), constructed of many stories, told by many people from different positions and for different purposes. They change in value, worth and power, are argued for and against, are denied, hidden or celebrated, become official or remain unofficial, but taken together, in all their multiplicities, they construct and represent the United States of America, and it is this 'living mix' of stories that is the concern of this book. American Studies might, therefore, resist exceptionalist, imperialist perspectives and instead through such diverse

narratives imagine a different relationship across cultures and between individuals based not on 'self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty' but on different forms of 'interdependency' and mutual acknowledgement of 'vulnerability' (Butler 2004: xii–xiii, 42). As Judith Butler explains, for America to alter its relations with the world it 'will need to emerge from the narrative perspective of US unilateralism and, as it were, its defensive structures, to consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others' (ibid.: 7). What American Studies can do in the future through deep questioning, comparative work and constant revision is to contribute to this critical process and ultimately be 'open to narration that decenters [America] from [its] supremacy' and produces, in Butler's words, a "'we" traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against' (ibid.: 18, 23).

NOTE

- 1 A very helpful and wide-ranging guide to recent work relevant to the interdisciplinary approach to American Studies may be found on Cultural Politics.net (2011) at <http://culturalpolitics.net/>.

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