

Ethnography and American Studies

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I want to thank Michael Fischer for this opportunity to “Rethink American Culture” with George Lipsitz at a moment when we certainly hope the U.S. electorate and the Democratic Party will do so as well. We were also invited to place our comments in the broad context of the speaker’s work—and in this case it is a remarkable array of writings. George seems to write books faster than most of us can read them. These range from Lipsitz’s early and ongoing interest in labor history and working class life (Lipsitz 1991, 1994, 1995) to his wonderful and enduring work on his love affair with, and deep understanding of, American musics and popular culture, which he regards as an arena of hope, possibility, criticism, and even resistance for millions of ordinary people (Lipsitz 1990, 1997). As one critic wrote—giving a wonderful sense of Lipsitz’s style and why there is such a strong sense of kinship with anthropology: “What really separates Lipsitz from earlier critics of popular culture is that he got his rock diploma from the high-school gym, not the Frankfurt School. Lipsitz knows the color of the labels, the B-Sides, the cover versions.”¹

Finally, most recently, are books that fall under the umbrella of cultural criticism-at-large: his important 1998 deconstruction of the myths of identity politics, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, and his landmark 2001 book that no doubt motivated Michael to organize this event, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*.

Many of the themes of his earlier writings—as well as his clear-sighted analysis, remarkable optimism, and generosity of spirit—are present in the eloquent article we see in this forum. I read George Lipsitz as a fellow traveler who invites anthropologists working in the United States and beyond, both in and outside of the academy, to join him in his journey, asking how symptomatic events of the 21st century—from September 11, 2001, to Hurricane Katrina—and their aftermaths might provoke us to reexamine the purpose of our own practices, reiterating the brilliant call to intellectual action that he articulated so forcefully four years ago in *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (2001). Fundamentally he asks us:

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How can our work help us better grasp analytically the complex transformations of everyday life around us and their theoretical as well as political significance? Is it possible to produce research and scholarship that simultaneously expand the intellectual scope of the field, while also entering productively back into the lives of those we study and providing interventions into the broader public sphere(s) that we share with our subjects?

Although these kinds of concerns may be newly underscored at this historical moment, clearly they are not new for Lipsitz. Moreover, I would argue that, based on the work of colleagues and graduate students I have been working with in anthropology and American studies at New York University for the last decade, these concerns are also not new for an emerging generation of ethnographers who launched their research in the United States over the last two decades, hoping both to understand and contribute to the efforts of people in local communities—organized along a range of vectors—to transform their worlds through collective action. Increasingly, these are anthropologists who have decided to work in the United States as their first commitment rather than as a second project after a first fieldwork stint “elsewhere,” as had typically been the case in the past, as was the case with Sherry Ortner, who after working in Nepal, turned to the graduates of her own high school as ethnographic subjects, to write *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58* (2003). Luckily, the choice of research in the United States is far more acceptable for anthropologists than it was in the 1980s when I was in graduate school and told not to be “too creative.”

The choices of contemporary anthropologists working in the United States seem to be strategic in two ways that reflect the concerns that George Lipsitz articulates. First, they pay attention to situations of cultural transformation “from below,” enabling them to include, as part of their analysis, a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of what is driving certain kinds of social change, as well as the dilemmas that are facing social actors in these circumstances; Kath Weston’s *Families We Choose* (1991), a breakthrough book on queer kinship practices, or Gelya Frank’s deep investigation of living with disability in *Venus on Wheels* (2000) both come to mind. Importantly, these include a range of styles of social action from children’s consumption patterns, to the daily lives of progressive movements, to multicultural initiatives as imagined (if imperfect) programs for community building, to the impact of conservative religious practices on people’s daily lives. In many of these studies, the researchers share the concerns and even the identities of the people they are studying—while also attending to inherent fault lines in their projects, as in Paul Stoller’s moving account of West African men in New York City *Money has No Smell: The Africanization of New York City* (2001). Others have chosen to study groups that are more challenging to the subject position of the researcher, in an effort to understand what attracts people to the other side of the so-called culture wars—assuming the answer is not false consciousness—such as conservative Christian megachurches attracting middle-class congregants, the religiously based “ex-gay” movement (Erzen 2006), or Hasidic Jews whose insistence

on insular cultural practices in the racially charged neighborhood of Crown Heights reveals the contradictions in superficial efforts at “multicultural exchange”.

Second, they have made self-conscious decisions to work in the United States as an empirically, theoretically, and politically productive area for ethnographic work. Although anthropologists have often committed themselves to ongoing support for communities they have worked with abroad, as researchers “working at home,” we are far more complicit in the worlds we study as citizens who have a stake and a say in the cultural policies shaping our own and our informant’s lives; and as writers whose work will enter into their discursive world as well as that of the academy.

For anthropologists, discussions about working in the United States and the possibilities that presented for greater dialogue with one’s informants began at least three decades ago, breaking a dichotomous deadlock of a prior era in which work was either “scientific” (and therefore significant primarily to a community of scholars, but not necessarily of more general interest) or “applied” (and therefore meant to be of practical use to the community being studied, but assumed to be of lesser intellectual value).

In the 1970s, for example, the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, after many years of work with Huichol Indians in Mexico, began her research with elderly Jews in southern California, work that resulted in her prizewinning book, *Number Our Days* (1980). She defended her (at that time unusual) choice to carry out research in the United States based on her existential relationship with the different worlds of her subjects. “I will never be a Huichol Indian, but I will become a little old Jewish lady,” she told filmmaker Lynne Littman in the documentary on her work, also called *Number Our Days*, which won an Oscar in 1977 (although Myerhoff’s untimely death in 1985 lends a posthumous tragic irony to her statement). In the book, Myerhoff elaborated on the obligations this kind of identification with a community entails for a researcher. She describes the ongoing claims members were able to make on her as a Jew and as a “lady professor” whose work eventually rendered them visible and significant to the world, while also helping to raise badly needed resources for these people living in financially marginal circumstances.

I mention Myerhoff’s work as setting a precedent for work in settings where the boundaries between “here” and “there” and “us” and “them” are ever more permeable. Clearly, this can have a salutary effect, rather than compromising the objectivity of researchers, as was the common disciplinary wisdom until recently. At the same time, anthropologists (and others) studying American culture are simultaneously engaged (along with their subjects) in constructing it, in part because of the rapid circulation of writing back into the communities being studied. Indeed, this kind of research raises to a new level of self-consciousness questions about its impact on the lives of those we study and who will inevitably “read what we write” (Brettell 1993), sometimes far more quickly than we could have imagined. This, of course, raises questions about the burden of representation carried by ethnographers.

In the 1980s, American anthropology was preoccupied with experimentation with ethnographic writing as a stylistic intervention into modes of imagining other cultural worlds, a prosodic tendency that has been enlivening but also, at times, has made ethnographies inaccessible to even highly literate informants (Clifford and Marcus 1986). More recent work, following the lead of scholars such as George Lipsitz, pushes this experimentation into the realm of the social, asking not only about the possibilities of writing and different modes of address but also about potential impact of representations created by the objectification of people's lives in texts; what happens when our work renders visible and significant the everyday reality of the lives we study in ways that contribute to broader arenas of cultural production and analysis.

Certainly, this current work expands on the tradition of cultural critique that has characterized American anthropology for the last century, as George Marcus and Michael Fischer argued compellingly in their 1986 book *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. This strategy used the authority of social science to demonstrate the value of alternative possibilities to those of the dominant American system through the empirical realities of other cultural lives. One can track this approach from the 19th-century writings of Lewis Henry Morgan (2000) on the Iroquois, people he admired for their "natural democracy;" to Boas's (1995) efforts to use scientific measurement of the crania of recent immigrants to contradict racist claims about their intellectual abilities in the early 20th century; to Margaret Mead's (2001) popular efforts to use the insights of cultures "elsewhere" to argue for more relaxed and sensible approaches to childrearing and adolescence in the United States. Other predecessors, such as Robert and Helen Lynd, were more direct in the ways that critique and research came together. Beginning in the 1920s, they used Americanist ethnography to engage directly with public debates on the impact of consumer capitalism on daily life in their seminal and widely read books *Middletown* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition* (Lynd and Merrill 1937), both of which were ethnographic studies of Muncie, Indiana, considered the quintessential "middle American" city at the time for its supposed homogeneity. By 1939, Robert Lynd wrote *Knowledge for What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (1939), an indictment of the increasingly insular and quantitative scientific discourse in social science, which he felt removed such work from the realm of public debate. There are many more examples of this legacy; this skeletal sketch is simply meant to show how questions about the possible critical engagement of ethnographic work with contemporary concerns in American studies are perennially present. This is particularly the case in the United States where the relationships and commitments established by fieldwork are accompanied by the reality of "natives" looking over our shoulders as we fashion our representations of their worlds.

This happens in particular when we focus on cultural activism, a distinctive reframing of the legacy of "cultural critique" by recognizing the productivity of the cultural imagination of social actors themselves, as Lipsitz does in so many

of his studies, although he terms such activity as a *new social warrant*, by which he means “a change in both self-perception and social expectations.” As heuristic tools, the language of social warrant or cultural activism calls attention to the way that people engage in self-conscious mobilization of their own culture practices to defend, extend, complicate, and sometimes transform both their immediate worlds and the larger sociopolitical structures that shape them. Examples are all around us, from the creation of institutions such as The Studio Museum in Harlem, to the activist indigenous filmmakers with whom I have been working, to the world-changing activism of Christian evangelicals. These kinds of culture-making activities are especially characteristic of American social life since the 1970s—what some have called the post-civil rights era, a period strongly associated with the emergence of identity politics, consumer capitalism, and the rise of neoliberal politics and, as Lipsitz points out so compellingly, mass mobilizations from the right in the form of what Sidney Plotkin and William Scheurman (1993) call “Balanced Budget Conservatism,” which calls, fundamentally, for the privatization of public services.

Differing from more overtly politicized forms of activism that characterized much of the 1960s and 1970s, in these formations, “culture” increasingly has been objectified and deployed as both a tool for furthering consumer capitalism and a powerful vehicle for collective self-production in an era when “the politics of recognition” (Fraser 1997) shapes the claims of people who find themselves rendered marginal by an exclusionary public sphere. In a classic Foucauldian manner, certain groups have been able to claim and shape those forms of identification that had been used, in some cases, to contain or stigmatize them. Instead, they are used to assert their presence in the politics that encompass them by entering into broader movements for recognition, human rights, and social transformation. (As an exemplary case, the resignification of the term *queer* is illustrative of this kind of semiotic transformation of a negative category into a positive one through activist efforts).

Many anthropologists working in the United States are simultaneously studying communities and working on behalf of them, either as at least partial members or as sympathetic fellow travelers, as in Maureen Mahon’s ethnography of musician-activists in her 2004 book, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race*, John Jackson’s *Harlemworld* (2001), Arlene Davila’s recent *Barrio Dreams* (2004), or Melissa Checker’s *Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Struggle for Social Justice in a Georgia Town* (2005). Others work in settings with those with whom they differ, despite their sympathetic engagement with and analytic comprehension of the worlds of their subjects, as in my own work right to life activists in the 1980s, Susan Harding’s ethnography, *The Book of Jerry Falwell* (2001) and recent work by young scholars such as Omri Elisha’s (2004) study of mega churches or Tanya Erzen’s (2006) study, *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Religious Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement*. Although not always relying on such extrasensory techniques, many of these

researchers find themselves playing a kind of translational role, helping those outside these worlds to understand what motivates these kinds of social actors. Indeed, one of my students described Kathleen Stewart's (1996) poetic and provocative study of life and talk in Appalachia, as deploying a unique methodology: "channeling" Because of these cross-cutting identifications and commitments, as well as the strong interest in the cultural possibilities represented by the social worlds we share with our subjects, many of these scholars work both in and outside of the academy as policy makers and consultants and, occasionally, as journalists and even as political representatives.

What about the analytic effectiveness of the ethnographic method? Does it keep us alert to the complexity and diversity within different categories of identification? As with good social history, the inductive openness of our research strategy has the capacity to reveal the fault lines in communities, social movements, and institutions, which frequently run along class, race, and generational lines, and that might easily be missed by more deductive and quantitative methodologies associated with contemporary sociology, for example. This is owing to the intimacy and length of time typical of anthropological work, as well as the fact that this method requires reflexivity: the self is, in fact, the site of knowledge production, often produced by the fabled generativity of "mistakes" in the field.

Let me end with a quote from Bruno Latour, in which he urges us to move from "matters of fact" to "matters of concern":

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather . . . the one for whom if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution. [Latour 2004:246]

Latour's words seem to me to describe what Lipsitz has long been doing, as well as the project that brings many of us to deploy the ethnographic. Ethnography is also particularly well suited to track the impact of global capital in everyday life, the increasing flows of bodies and information, and the accelerating transformations in biomedicine, media, and information technologies. In the subtle interactions of the quotidian as the site where these forces take effect, one sees how the production of cultural identity—and of social life itself—is a highly contested process. The project of building both narrative and theory out of everyday life, in turn, produces rich, compelling, and deeply contextualized stories that reproduce in some dimension the way that knowledge arises from "being there."

Note

Editor's note: Faye Ginsburg is the author of *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (1989); and coeditor of *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender*

in *American Culture* (1990), *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction* (1995), and *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (2002).

1. This phrase is quoted from the back cover of Lipsitz's book (1990), which can be accessed online at http://www.upress.umn.edu/Books/L/lipsitz_time.html (accessed May 8, 2006). It was originally from a review that appeared in the *Boston Phoenix Literary Supplement*.

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ABSTRACT *“Rethinking American Culture” was a forum featuring the work of George Lipsitz in a dialogue between American Studies and anthropology about the ways in which “new forms of commercial patterns and practices, new movements*

of people and products, and new communications technologies are producing new ways of studying culture.” This dialogue addresses the struggles over the social warrants of U.S. culture in the 21st century and how historians and anthropologists might best describe and analyze such warrants and reconstitute these fields, both of which are under pressure in a present “moment of danger” made all the more visible by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana. [social warrants, American Studies, Hurricane Katrina, media, class]