Prismatics, Multivalence, and Other Riffs on the Millennial Moment
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WE MEET AT AN INTRIGUINGLY APPROPRIATE TIME TO BE EXAMINING THE PAST, present, and future of a protean field of study in a dramatically changing world, for we meet near the liminal middle of a liminal year, suspended between our own fin de siécle and the opening of a brave new millennium. Having survived the apocalyptic prognostications of the late, unlamented Y2K moment, and not yet overwhelmed by the predictable onslaught of launch-pad punditry, we lift off into the magical year 2001, the real beginning of the new millennium.

Though many of us may be savoring the respite, I wish to disturb the delicious calm between these two storms of millennial self-consciousness. I want to suggest that this turn of the century, this unique millennial moment, may have special uses for our work in ASA in spite of—and more precisely because of—the already shopworn, clichéd, and seemingly pedestrian-by-nature quality of almost anything that can be and has been said about this passage.¹

The turn of a century is an arbitrary point, not a line or a space. Though we tend to extend such a point backward and forward to approximate a fin de siécle or a “bridge to the future” era, it is hard to get around the artificiality of the central conceit that one specific point in time has any more inherent meaning than any other. But perhaps the

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superficial nature of the century turn presents its most useful quality as a tool of analysis. This is because such a vacuous conception does so much to subvert narrative, grand or otherwise—no particular story, theme, or frame is necessarily privileged, at least initially, because inquiry starts, rather, with a point that can be imagined as a lens through which the entire spectrum of historical change must necessarily pass. A myriad of dimensions, from politics to technology or real estate or artistic expression or domestic roles, ethnic identity, and social space—all are in motion on distinct trajectories with distinct determinants and rates of change; all necessarily crowd through the lens of any particular moment.2

My angle of approach, then, is to see the turn-of-the-century moment as a kind of prism, the opposite of today’s laser. Instead of focusing diversity into the laser’s concentrated and powerful stream, the prism deconstructs a beam into its constituent spectrum, allowing us to inquire into the composition, distribution, and relationships of its various components. This is the imaginatively liberating “prism” of the past, rather than the imaginatively controlled and controlling “prison” of the historical narrative. Sensing the limitless complexity of history in this way may prove useful as we confront the future before us—whether in general or for American studies as a field, a future at once deeply contingent and even over-determined, yet also wholly and resolutely unpredictable.

I have been much involved with these notions in my own work of late, in projects considering, from the vantage of our millennial moment, a world’s fair at the dawn of the last century. I will draw on this tonight, in the first half of this talk, to propel broader reflections, in the second half, on the work before us in American studies.

The Fair was the Pan-American Exposition of 1901, held in my own city of Buffalo, New York (Fig. 1). Worlds’ fairs in general have been multidimensional prisms more than singular narratives, and this particular prism within the turn-of-the-century prism embodied, quite transparently, all that was in motion in American culture and society at the dawn of the twentieth century, and all that was contested and complex in the project of resituating the U.S. in relation to the hemisphere and the world.3 As such, it speaks very directly to our meeting’s theme, “American studies in the World, and the World in American studies,” and to our presence in the very real world city of Detroit, whose provocative complexity we have sought to mobilize as a resource.
Let me begin with four structures that give “the Pan-Am” legibility as a text. For oral shorthand, think of these as “the name,” “the frame,” “the game,” and “the shame.” First, “the name”: the Pan-Am emerged out of the 1890s expansion of American trade and business, and the growing interest in the dominant U.S. role in a western hemisphere, which it took no great prescience to see as emerging from the final collapse of Spain’s once vast empire. In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, the Expo took on a necessarily broader geo-political and cultural gravity in no way reducible to its parochial local and prosaically economic business roots.5

If Pan-Am was the name, electricity was the frame—from the dazzling dramatic four-hundred-foot electric tower, chief icon of the Exposition, to the bulbs that profiled each building, dim glowing to bright as sunset deepened into evening (Fig. 2). Alternating current’s newly developed ability to move power over long distances made Buffalo, twenty miles from the source at Niagara Falls, a perfect spot for electricity’s dramatic annunciation as the transformative force of the twentieth century.6
Name and frame came together powerfully in the exposition’s intricate architecture: The central buildings (actually shells with surfaces sculpted in the equivalent of papier maché) were in an ornate Spanish Renaissance style, the most prominent feature of which was the overwhelming use of color, with rich pastel and earth tone hues everywhere. Notwithstanding the curious contradiction of a tribute to Spanish culture symbolizing liberation from Spanish hegemony, the scheme served its purpose, presenting an intentional contrast to the “White City” classicism of 1893 and positing a hemispheric reorientation rich in unleashed energy, raw power, and even sensuality—all under the controlling romantic vision of a unified, cooperative, U.S.-dominated hemisphere.7

Explicit in this palette and landscape were litanies of progress, hierarchy, and evolution; endlessly didactic statuary and a progression of color from the “primitive” dark to the “civilized” pale announced the triumph of a new civilization led by America’s democracy. This celebration of “color” only to imply its subordination to the power of whiteness suggests the most blatant contradictions. But these are prismatically repositioned when we realize how uncertain it is that the
throng of visitors—more than eight million—paid much attention to messages so elaborately encoded, or even noticed them at all in their transport over the emotional power of the sights, lights, and colors. As this suggests, thematization could be insufficient for controlling and shaping representations, engagements, and popular receptions, a point especially striking when we shift from the “name” and the “frame” to the fair as “game,” or entertainment—specifically, the dazzling Midway, a more integral dimension of the exposition than at Chicago in 1893 and the point of entry and focus for most visitors.

It is tempting but misleading to see a simple and stark polarity between the formal industrial exhibits and the commercial entertainment zone of the exposition. Much of the Midway at Buffalo was more didactic than playful—offering historical and ethnographic concessions redolent with the period’s ideology and assumptions, “object lessons” for popular education. The mobilization of pseudo-scientific racism and instrumental ethnography made these lessons explicit—as in the Midway’s popular “Darkest Africa” attraction, for example, or the “Old Plantation,” with “genuine Negroes” enacting the nostalgia of the slave south so crucial to fin-de-siècle racial retrenchment and brutally imposed white supremacy (Fig. 3). In the Indian Congress, the imprisoned Geronimo was on display while Thomas Edison’s movie cameras captured daily Wild West “sham battles”. There was the Filipino Village, showcasing America’s newest neo-colonial quasi-subjects; when Aguinaldo was captured in 1901, it was immediately proposed that he be added to the show in Buffalo. From today’s vantage, certainly in a local community hungry to celebrate past glories, such images inspire embarrassment and even—my fourth signifier—an immobilizing shame, in the face of contradictions painful to confront.

Such emotions were, in fact, present at the time, though far more palpable in connection with the tragic denouement of this World’s Fair, the shooting of President McKinley by Leon Czolgosz at a reception in the Fair’s Temple of Music, an event that still reverberates locally because of stories attributing McKinley’s unexpected death eight days later to botched emergency surgery by an ob-gyn who had operated in many bellies, but none quite like William McKinley’s. That the malpractice charge turns out to be untrue—McKinley’s wounds would have been fatal even with the best trauma interventions of that day—has not diminished its signifying power, even now. Similarly indelible is the ideologically useful image of Leon Czolgosz as a Polish
immigrant anarchist. This immediately took on, and retains today, a “Voltaire’s Holy Roman Empire” quality—for Czolgosz was known even then to be not definitively and fully Polish, not at all an immigrant, and in no serious sense an anarchist. ¹¹ Such stories suggest the even broader resonance of Pan-Am as a complex, prismatic moment. The curiosity about electricity, technology, and invention at this precise moment, for instance, was enormous (it was linked to Czolgosz, of

Fig. 3. Illustration taken from Thomas Fleming, Around the “Pan” with Uncle Hank: His trip through the Pan-American Exposition.” NY: The Nutshell Publishing Co., 1901.
course, through his quickly subsequent execution at Auburn prison, an event memorialized in a bizarre Edison film re-enacting the electrocution—among the world’s first narrative movies and certainly its first snuff film.)

But there was more to the technological impact than that, in ways that quite outran the Exposition’s narrower ideological script. Individual exhibits connected to this curiosity—such as the pay-for-view infant incubator Midway concession (complete with live premies)—attracted sustained attention, directly connecting to multiple discourses about women and children, cities and slums, social work, public health, immigrant labor, technology, science, and so on.

The implicit “live links” in the thematic presentations, that is, (to appropriate today’s web term, not that inappropriately) could and probably did regularly subvert the narrower scripts themselves, making the experience of the exposition unpredictably open-ended and interactive, whatever the intent of its planners. This is true even in the most problematic areas. Buffalo’s African American community protested the Old Plantation’s representations and worked hard to bring to Buffalo elements of W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous 1900 Paris exhibit on Negro life and contributions. The Indian Congress concession was also, in fact, a tribal congress to which a wide spectrum of indigenous leaders brought their own serious purpose in their dealings with each other and amplification of their own messages through the circuitry of a world’s fair. The “natives” on display in the African village were professionals careful about how they presented African crafts, traditions, and arts; many had traveled more extensively and were more internationally sophisticated than those gazing at them in their enclosure. And among the surviving artifacts of the village are carved tusks on which these artisans inscribed their impressions of the Victorian crowds coming to see them—“returning the gaze” in the most literal sense.

As these examples suggest, there is value in seeing the Exposition as a more complicated and contested field of interaction—beyond a text to be read, beyond expression or reflection—through which a great deal may be learned about the forces at work at the turn of the century, and how they were understood and engaged. But what are its uses beyond that—what can it tell us more dialogically, about our own relationship to our own turn of the century? How can unpacking the dense interactions of history inform a prismatic approach to our own no-less complex and contradictory circumstances?
My involvement in the Pan-Am, in fact, has its roots in these last questions—as a public historian concerned with history’s capacity to shape our interrogation of the present and imagination of the future. Over the past few years, I have been excavating a kind of imaginative Pan-Am-anian Canal that might help Buffalo connect past and present to a future less constrained by the crushing burden of deindustrialization and decline. This work has taken two forms that I can sketch briefly; both can help turn our discussion to a prismatic, millennial-moment take on American studies.

In the broad form, my colleagues and I have been intrigued with Pan-Am as the frame for a centennial that might broaden historic commemoration into a pro-active platform for framing parallel, linked, and resonant issues for the turn of the twenty-first century. We have, to this end, offered a kind of simple model of the “energy field” of the world’s fair, every historical aspect of which can be referenced and explored in activities focused on the present and future. In this conception, the world’s fairs of that era can be imagined as a diamond with four points: 1) the explicit historical and thematic focus and content; 2) trade and business promotion; 3) a unique blend of public entertainment, education, carnival, and festival; and 4) a public platform for academic, cultural, artistic, scientific, and public policy activities, here termed—with apologies for the civic shorthand—“high end” (Fig. 4). If all four dimensions are not present, you don’t have the complex energy field of the world’s fair, which was defined not so much by any of these points as by the charged space they—and the tensions they constructed—define. If, in contemporary space and terms, all four dimensions of activities can be linked and made similarly resonant, some of that recalled historical energy might be available for charging civic reimagination and even contestation in the present.

In this spirit, we have been seeking to mobilize an ambitious web of self-standing activities, a diamond in which centennial historical evocations; business and economic development and debates, such as NAFTA and the WTO; academic congresses, scientific, artistic, and public policy programs; neighborhood and community mobilizations, festivals, and sports and entertainments—can be woven into Pan-Am 2001, a programmatic exposition without walls embodied in people, places, and activities across Buffalo, western New York, and southern Ontario. Some of this will indeed be visible in Buffalo in 2001, though limited resources and the difficulties inherent in looking beyond the
constraints of a very difficult present will mean there is more going on at each of the points and not as much as I had hoped in the more generative space in between.14

I am more actively involved in a more particular project focused on that space—a collaboration among university, historical society, our public television station WNED-TV, and Azar & More, Inc., a private media firm. Together, we are producing an unusual television documentary that tells the Pan-Am story from the vantage of a community interrogating the present. To this end, the film confronts three documentary challenges: the first challenge is spatial frame and context—how to tell a story both local and international. The Pan-Am is in one sense Buffalo’s fair, but it is more significant as a moment in popular culture, national and international politics and power, science and technology, and social relations—not a local story at all.

The second challenge is more temporal and imaginative: how, if we are to bring this history to the present, to evoke the kaleidoscopic energy of a fair that was so exciting then but seems so dated and prosaic
today? How can we represent the experience fairgoers had gazing at dazzling symbols like the Electric Tower or the Infant Incubators—when these very images today, in romantic paintings, grainy old photographs or primitive early movies, seem so quaintly old-fashioned?

The third challenge links past and present through dilemmas of perspective and attitude: How can we convey a story that is in some ways inspiring and celebratory, while also facing up to its deeply disturbing qualities? And, how can we explore all that without inviting the opposite tendency—smugly condemning the politics, racism, prejudices, and stereotypes of the past, as if we did not face our own contradictions and challenges in dealing with each other as Americans and with the other peoples and societies of our changing world?

To get out from under the controlling narrative voice that flattens so many historical documentaries, our approach makes use of technology that challenges imagination now as dramatically as electricity did in 1901, by a three-dimensional computer model of Pan-Am, based on the historical documentation: thousands of black and white photographs, oil paintings and watercolors, and the Edison films. This modeling project is reconstructing the exposition’s buildings and grounds in 3-D digital form through which viewers can move spatially through the fair, and back and forth between past, present, and exotic future—mirroring the experience and wonder of the world’s fair environment.

To set these structures in dramatic and expository motion, we will follow “story-seekers,” contemporary individuals who serve as proxies for the modern audience. One seeker may be a descendant of a major Pan-Am organizer who returns to Buffalo to explore his family’s role in a peak moment of community history. A second is likely to be an inner city schoolteacher, for whom the dubious legacy of Pan-Am in terms of racial stereotypes and the arrogance of elite spokesmen for progress represent obstacles to celebration, especially as set against the challenges facing her students in a very different city, community, and nation today. Through such story-seeking and the story-telling it propels, and through the dialogue of past and present that the combination of computer model and historical documents makes possible, we hope to collapse, for the purpose of contemporary dialogue and engagement, the distance between the 1901 experience and our own collective walk along the future’s edge in 2001.

* * *
Let me now turn from this context, grounded in work in my local community, to the broader American studies community I am so honored to serve as president. For me, the connections are in fact anything but abstract. My Pan-Am interest began, in fact, with an effort to bring the ASA 2001 convention to Buffalo in order to kick start a centennial propelled by the questions and concerns American studies can crystallize. And that linkage traces, in part, to my encounter with a remarkable project on the Pan-Am Expo developed at the University of Wyoming, of all places, by Eric Sandeen and Bill Bryant, in which American studies students—far in advance of the software and web technology now available for such work—created a hypertext exposition for studying turn-of-the-century American culture, for which the Buffalo fair provided an organizing metaphor and foundation.

And finally, as we have followed this impulse several compacted technological generations later, crucial seed support came from entities—NEH and the Imagining America, Scholars and Artists in Public life project based here in Michigan—committed to linking the academy and the real world as a crucial civic priority. It is no coincidence that these same organizations, quite independently, stepped forward to support and advance the quite resonant theme of our Detroit ASA meeting, as you will see at tomorrow’s late afternoon plenary session featuring Bill Ferris, and the “community commons” reception and Jawolle Zollar performance and poetry reading at the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Museum of African American History. There is thus, for me, enormous personal, intellectual, and political resonance between my own work and the work we have undertaken in this convention. In this spirit, let me now bring the perspectives and imaginative tools I have been discussing to bear on our own very first prismatic turn-of-the-century moment in American studies.

I do this because I have some concern that the tradition of self-reflection in American studies tempts us to conceptualize and represent our work in ways that drift towards simplified narratives belying the insights of the scholarship actually comprising the field. We ask where the field of American studies has been, assess where it is, and debate where it should, or should not, be going. For all our sophistication in a scholarship that has so productively explored, for example, the multiple meanings of border, the selective and situational plasticity of hybridized identities, and the complex dialectics of hegemony and agency in public and private spheres, our reflexivity seems too often to invite
narratives presuming a sequence of stakes and milestones along a very particular road, a zero-sum either-or binary road going, say, from social history to cultural studies, from exceptionalism to balkanization, from national to transnational.

I want to urge us to suspend this reductive directionality in order to appreciate a more diverse and diffuse weave of tendencies at the core of American studies scholarship, at this moment and in fact at almost all moments. In describing our field through a kind of prismatic spectography, I will be identifying a complex of dynamics at work, dimensions discrete individually but constellated in constantly evolving ways over time. After marking these out briefly—they are individually familiar to everyone here—I will offer a few suggestions as to how these constellations might speak to an American studies conceptualized and organized on a basis appropriate to a new millennium.

Consider American studies as a field mapped over time on four related but distinct axes—each differentiated, but even more complex in relation to the others. The first is the most basic: the interdisciplinarity at the heart of any definition of American studies from its inception. It has always been easier to invoke than to mobilize and organize this effectively; it has resisted conceptualization as well. The unstable relationship between the interdisciplinary, the multidisciplinary, and the trans- or post-disciplinary aspects of American studies scholarship (and academic organization, not incidentally) has been repeatedly noted; meanwhile, the vectors of creativity in diverse disciplinary fields—from cultural studies to material culture to folklore to performance to public history and media—have defined, in their interaction in American studies, much of the trajectory of the field—not only now, but over its entire history.17

A second axis close to the heart of the current moment is the contested discourse of nation—national identity and exceptionalism whether cultural, institutional, political, or characterological; comparative and trans-nationalisms; hemispheric connections, and global enmeshment. Here too, note how consistently over time American studies has involved efforts to locate, interrogate, and transcend the problematic of nation, in a process by no means uni-vocal or uncontested, as in American society and culture itself. Appreciating the provenance, weight, and multiple sources of this interrogation will be an important resource for an American studies movement—in the U.S. and internationally—deliberating how best to respond, intellectually and organizationally, to the very different international order that is emerging.18
The third axis is the transformative exploration of multiculturalism, ethnicity, race, class, and gender that has been recasting for several decades now the most basic outlines of American history and culture as a contested, interactive field of forces. It almost goes without saying, but not quite, that this has not simply altered our understanding of things “within” American culture and society, but has been leveraging our capacity to re-imagine the connections of the U.S. and its peoples to everything and everyone else in the world: what our threatened right wing likes to picture as a fragmenting balkanization is just the opposite, recasting American exceptionalism as the true fragmenter, and resituating the dimensions of American experience in a far richer and integral explanatory web of regional, global, and trans-historical understandings.19

The fourth and final axis is a trans-methodological orientation to engagement, praxis, activism, ethnography, and embodiment as a propelling dimension of American studies scholarship over the years. If we appreciate that ethnography and documentary and ethnomusicology and performance all share something important with a politically engaged activist American studies practice and pedagogy, even though neither the politics of the former nor the intellectual or analytic content of the latter can in any way be assumed, and if we understand that all of this work may, conversely, share very little with intellectual production that stands at an imperious remove from any sustained, organic connection to the people and experience theorized so broadly, however resonant the political vision or the postures of engagement — then we understand what I am getting at here as a persistent, defining dimension of American studies.20

Now each of the four I have mentioned is almost self-evident as an organizing axis over the years. What is much less evident is one’s relation to the other and the ongoing implication of each in the other. It is a measure of the teleological pull of disciplinary narrative that these tend to collapse and flatten into a kind of casual linear meta-history of the field. Thus, we understand a national project informed by a limited literary-historical interdisciplinarity then transformed by the radicalism, activism, and social-historical ascent of the 1960s, flowering into a more richly multidisciplinary multiculturalism that begs a range of theoretical and political questions to which, by the late 1990s, cultural studies and trans-national reconceptualizations provide new answers, leading directly to—to Detroit, perhaps, or at least to the battle of Seattle.21
I don’t find this kind of narrative very helpful, or even descriptive. It is more accurate and useful, I think, to see these as ongoing, contemporaneous dimensions of American studies scholarship, all always there. I prefer the dynamic image of the cat’s cradle web, a space created and defined by the tension lines cross-connecting the points surrounding it.

In a simplified two-dimensional representation, of course, this is—ta-da!—the diamond with which I represented the prismatic Pan-Am as both history and contemporary engagement (Fig. 5). Perhaps this model has resonance for American studies—the points marking a space through quadrilateral tension, with American studies being the space in-between, the space defined by the complex resultant of this diamond of forces, not by the nominal character of the particular points themselves.22

I’d like to enter that interior space now, and visit a few suggestive points of cross-connection. In this, I’ll be making a more directive argument about the shape of that quadrilateral field at the current moment, and the shape I think it needs to assume. In particular, I’ll be arguing the crucial importance of the fourth axis I noted, the dimension of fieldwork, praxis, engagement, performance, and activism, of learning from and in the real world—a diverse dimension in which, to resuscitate and re-direct one of Marx’s best observations, the point is to understand the world and to change it—and to see the way these are necessarily interdependent. This is what we meant to suggest in our conference theme, which not only invokes the transnational grounding of American studies but also brings the real world into the work of American studies and vice versa, the aim being a scholarship of American life that can matter—a scholarship with the intellectual capacity to both describe and engage the world more usefully.

For this perspective, I’ll be shifting from what I have learned from the Pan-Am to what I have learned through long-term work at the juncture of oral history, documentary, narrative, and social-historical urban engagement; in so doing, I’ll also be shifting to the second major riff in my title, which for reasons presently made clear, I insist on pronouncing “mul-ti-valence.” Let me frame this by first extending somewhat anecdotally the point of my prismatic model—that rather than substituting one emphasis for others, we need to appreciate their implication in each other as a basis for adjusting the proportions and directionality of this implication. I start, appropriately enough, with my very small part in the fiftieth anniversary celebration of American
Quarterly—Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline, edited by AQ’s Lucy Maddox—a remarkable collection of seventeen classic essays from AQ reprinted with retrospective comments. My assignment was to comment on one of my graduate school favorites, Warren Susman’s “History and the American Intellectual”—later positioned as the lead essay in Susman’s great legacy compendium, Culture as History (1984). There seemed few initial reasons for not regarding the article as an American studies chestnut, not the least because of the intellectual terrain that Susman explores—with modern search engines, a student today would be led directly to the article through a “hit” parade comprised of Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, Cotton Mather, Emerson, Thoreau, Bancroft, Prescott, Parkman, Turner, Beard, Becker, Henry and Brooks Adams, Eliot, Pound, Crane, William Carlos Williams, Toynbee, Niebuhr, Morison, (Samuel Eliot, not Toni), Schlesinger Jr., and Nevins. Similarly dated is the sweeping anthropological typology of “status societies” and “contract societies” in which Susman

![AM. STUDIES DIAMOND, OR “ENERGY-FIELD”](image)

Fig. 5. American studies diamond.
locates contrasting orientations to change that he calls the “mythic and utopian” as opposed to the “historical and ideological.”

But the subtle argument connecting the anthropology to the chestnuts is incredibly resonant today. Myth, Susman tells us, is utopian in function in that it explains the present and imagines a future without seeing any process connecting the two. But history involves rationalizing the social order in terms of the processes that produce it and that project it towards the future. The function of history, in contrast to myth, Susman calls ideological in the sense that it imagines a connection between past, present, and future, and makes understanding the past a means for effecting change.

This leads to the second part of Susman’s title, “The Uses of a Usable Past”—how history, conceived as something usable, is actually engaged and mobilized, by whom, and to what ends. And, it is this that generates the essay’s power today, for it speaks directly to hyperbolic debates about the relation of historical (and American studies) scholarship to broader representations of history in American culture and contentious claims on historical memory itself. These are debates that have grown more shrill, stale, and predictably one-dimensional with each new attack on a museum, each new textbook controversy, each jeremiad about political correctness, multiculturalism, or the easy-target excesses of narrow specialization and obscure theorizing in academic practice, including our own. But more deeply, these all concern uses and usability, among diverse users, of American history and American studies. They are struggles in the public and civic realm that validate Susman’s observation that “there is a special meeting ground between history and myth that frequently provides a key to the central tensions within a culture.”

Susman helps us see these conflicts as something other than Manichean struggles between intellectual integrity and what are imagined to be its anti-historical opposites. And he challenges us today by embracing tensions and contradictions, by reminding us of the inevitable implication of these tendencies to myth and history, utopianism and ideology, in the very nature of perceiving history in the present and in imagining the possibilities of change. He imagines a continuum on which to think about the past is to think about the present and future, and vice versa. And he places scholars where they belong—as part of a meaning-making continuum linking intellectuals and ordinary citizens in the struggle to make sense of their lives, communities, and the world.
around them. The choice is not whether to do this, but rather how, and to what ends.

Susman closed his essay with a stark challenge: American intellectuals can retreat farther from engaging intimidating changes, as he feels they had in the mid-nineteenth century. Or, perhaps, he suggested “there will yet be a reawakening, as there was in the 1890s, to the other real need and function of history in our kind of society. Perhaps there will even be another kind of social order.” And perhaps, I would add, we can be bolder today in moving beyond the diffident passive tense of these prescriptions—something easier if American studies is placed and pursued in the charged center of the diamond of all the forces I have described—exactly where Susman’s argument is in fact located, notwithstanding the tonalities of its chestnutian examples.

If this offers one perspective on how more traditional American studies scholarship has been and remains energizing through its connections to other points of the diamond, I encountered another at a recent conference in Bergamo, Italy, entitled “Different Equalities—Rights, Subjects, and Social Complexity: A Reflection Starting From the United States.” It was organized by Acoma: a Journal of Northamerican Studies, itself a product of a remarkable Italian collective of scholars, artists, and activists. Everything about this suggests the re-positioning of American studies in an open-ended, sophisticated international discourse—the conference title’s yoking of political philosophy, cultural theory, and social description, its open-ended and provocative “starting from the United States,” and the journal’s own pueblo name taken from the first city in a broader America figured by “northamerican” studies.25

The conference thus stood at an intersection at once transnationally contemporary and quintessentially American (and American studies)—especially in how its title evokes the paradoxical tension between equality and difference, which is to say freedom, in the constituting of American culture and society—which goes back to Tocqueville and beyond, yet echoes powerfully in a contemporary moment characterized by dramatically widened structural inequality in American life and consequently enormous cognitive dissonance between social values and stubborn social facts. Of particular note in the Acoma conference statement was the observation that where equality was once asserted and embraced through the denial or suppression of difference, contemporary politics feature sustained efforts to mobilize differences as the
defining base of a more meaningful social equality—thus introducing remarkable cultural complexity into a discourse already complicated enough by the contradictions of postmodern political economy.

The burden of this effort has been imposing, and the tensions at its heart have tended regularly, across the political spectrum, to collapse into unhelpful extremes, as illustrated, for example, by the temptations of multicultural essentialism, on the one hand, and on the other an increasingly cranky Left critique seeing cultural particularity as an impediment to a politics of equality. The conference struggled mightily to avoid resolving into one or the other position, postures that achieve intellectual comfort at the considerable cost of becoming unable to describe the real world.

Indeed, the conference discussions sounded a note encountered with increasing frequency in modern discourse, the call to resist false binaries, to embrace what Rosie Braidoti called “the simultaneity of opposites” as essential if we are even to describe, much less understand, fluidities of identity at once existential and strategic, or figurations of citizenship and agency in volatile, globalizing political space. Escape from the prison of either/or, in this view, stands as a requirement of contemporary change.26

It is also, of course, a requirement for truly describing, understanding, and critically engaging the cultural history that has brought us to today. This is a point understood even back when people wrote in simple sentences, as is demonstrated, again, by that other century’s Mr. T—our first exemplar of the notion that standing outside the U.S. is a resource, not a handicap in American studies.27

But the links between either/or thinking and insufficiencies of social description remain powerful and proved so at that very conference. Take, for instance, the seemingly irresolvable furor over multiculturalism and its discontents, and especially the charge from right and left, that the focus on diversity invites—or even constitutes—a corrosive, balkanizing essentialism, as if assertions of difference were necessarily claims of an encompassing, defining, difference in fundamental identity.28 I have watched the bubbling over of the overheated multicultural pot with a sense of curiosity and dismay, since the controversy on all sides seems to me so detached from the actual core scholarship that fuels it. The problem, I think, is the “ism” of multiculturalism, which implies an “it,” an exclusive defining orientation that one either embraces or rejects. And yet, in the serious intellectual practice at the
core of the best American studies scholarship, I detect very little “ism” at all. Polemics and postures aside, I see a scholarship that over quite a long while now has in anything-but-uniform ways been trying to describe the real world of an American culture and history that conventional categories and foci have not permitted us to see.

And I think the same has been true of the rapid internationalizing of this approach. The essential engine has been a reaching more for descriptive than analytic power, much less for a coherent ideological position. I suspect this impulse has become controversial in recent years less because of the sweeping claims and positions attributed to it (usually mistakenly) than because its descriptive capacity has been converging with the increasingly manifest implications of recent social change that need to be made visible, whether these be the accumulations of internal demographic change in the U.S. or the globalization of capital and labor that have had such inescapable social consequences in, for only one example, European nations that no longer even pretend to describe themselves in other than complex, multicultural, and increasingly—in this sense—Americanized terms.29

It has, of course, been convenient for those threatened by this pincer-like convergence between scholarly capacity and manifest social realities to see it in other terms, and by this I don’t simply mean the assault from the right, a too-easy target, after all. In some deeper senses that go to the heart of the practice of American studies today, the tension between theory and practice, between analysis and experience, is one that we need to embrace and engage, not resolve—and to ground in the soil of our own real-world lives.

This is not easy, as was demonstrated by the response at the Acoma conference to a paper by Janet Zandy, one of the key figures in an important new working-class studies caucus within our ASA community. Zandy focused on the painful illegibility of class in the discourse of contemporary cultural identity and the consequences of its inaccessibility as a legitimate ground for the assertion of difference.30 But her request that a progressive-left academic conference confront the problematic, contradictory invisibility of the working class in our own subjectively experienced academic lives and structures seemed to make the tension between values and social facts too uncomfortable to confront. Her challenge was received as a romantic prescription leading to further “balkanization” rather than as a call to accept class as a component of social experience and description that needed to be
“brought home” and engaged reflexively, especially considering how class has been experienced within teaching, within the academy, and within scholarship itself as a persistent and painful marginalization—including, I might add, in the tonalities of intellectual privilege at our own ASA meetings in recent years.

To me, these reflections connect the frame I have been discussing and trying to broaden here, to intriguingly parallel efforts encountered over many years in my work in oral history, and in our American studies program at Buffalo—efforts in which the problem of transcending unhelpful either/ors has been presented in the often prosaic problematics of an oral history interview or the bureaucratically problematic line between academic programs and social involvement, in arguments about why American studies academic credit might attach to drumming and dancing in social space, in the even broader tension, in scholarship itself, between research and activism. This is a realm in which discourse has meant sustained conversation among people, in which narratives are stories sought and told, in which interviews are dialogical in ways it does not require (though it certainly benefits from) Bakhtin to imagine, in which “the subject” is a human being one talks to, in which bodies dance and party and mediate actual voices, in which the public sphere is a space for prosaically concrete practice and involvement.31 To explore all this, as a final way to explore what it might mean to bring the real world into American studies and American studies into the real world, I am brought, finally, to . . . multivalence.

Let me frame my remarks by speaking as an historian who has been working with the meaning and uses of oral history in documenting the recent structural economic changes unhelpfully termed “de-industrialization.” One approach to oral history has always resisted any notion of special claims and qualities for the evidence it produces: I once called this the “more history” approach, as if the point were to shine a flashlight into an otherwise dark corner of the basement or attic, and retrieve data—with the privilege of analysis and interpretation reserved for the retrieving, synthesizing scholar. A contrasting approach inverts this emphasis, seeing the “voice of the people” as self-explanatory and self-empowering, embodied in oral history as an “anti-history” that subverts or at least circumvents the interpretive power of historians and what they are presumed to represent.

Much of the energy in oral history as a field has come from the effort to work between the rock and the hard place that these poles repre-
sent—to see oral history as evidence in a broad sense going beyond data, and to read interviews as interpretive dialogues, however implicit, in which we can hear, learn from, and engage actively the ever-present narrative perspective of the interviewee, in a process that returns us to a more basic meaning of their “subjectivity,” a term which until recently had only a pejorative meaning for many historians. But it has remained hard to represent this complexity—what Jacquelyn Hall has called the “interpretive authority of ordinary people” has often been obscured on the one hand by the seamless historical narrative “illustrated” by vivid oral history excerpts, or on the other by unmediated oral history documents presented as if meaning and implications were self-evident, which tends rarely to be the case.

Recent trends in scholarship have made this old dilemma worse. A new generation of cultural studies and social history has centered on the complex social construction of identities, on the culturally embodied intersections of race, class, and gender, on the complexity of social memory, and on understanding the profound tensions between hegemony and agency. And yet we have paid a heavy price—in the form of scholarly discourse so relentlessly theorized as to lose touch with the people and the narrative realities it deals with, much less with any readership beyond those already invested in highly restrictive vocabularies and questions—for these insights. Recent op-ed polemics—PC and otherwise—aside, there is an emerging consensus that for all its accomplishments, too much contemporary scholarship, ours included in American studies, risks what could be called a “discursive disconnect” from the very people, issues, and interests it presumes to intersect. More prosaically, we risk a terminal case of “paralysis from the analysis.”

There is a striking irony in this for those of us who have been involved in oral history and documentary work, since the very issues contemporary scholarship has spotlighted with great intellectual huffing and puffing are issues presented, in oral history, in the form of lived experience and living conversation, where they must be dealt with in highly concrete decisions about the conduct, editing, presentation, and interpretation of interview narratives. Here, the abstractions of theory cannot so easily get away from the stubborn corporeality and materiality of real people and real lives, and it is harder to reduce narrative to simply another form of raw data for interpretation. Once this is appreciated, I think, it becomes easier to appreciate the capacity of narratives and testimonies to inform, challenge, complicate, and shape
our own categories and questions—especially if we are willing to share with interview subjects the authority of interpretation, to read narratives as offering an interpretive dialogue implicit in the relationships producing ethnographic or documentary evidence in the first place, and often explicit, if we stop to listen, in the texts generated in the process.35

In collecting and editing a book of narratives based on life-history interviews with Buffalo, New York steelworkers in the aftermath of the evaporation of a once-mighty steel industry, I was struck repeatedly by how regularly and easily interview subjects moved around the convenient categories presented to them—frequently of an either/or nature—when asked to describe industrial work, family, and community before, during, and after job loss. They both liked their jobs and hated them. They identified with the union and/or the company yet felt betrayed by either or both. They saw themselves as victims of the plant closings yet refused to act or feel victimized. They were deeply nostalgic and yet fully engaged with moving on. They resisted the very notion that their lives were defined by their work situation, past or present, offering instead a more seamless web in which worlds of family, neighborhood, and community were woven together with work and workplace in their own identities.36

This is what I have come to call “multivalence”—a locution, and pronunciation, meant to echo but contrast with “ambivalence.” Ambivalence stands at a moral distance and inevitably suggests uncertain feelings or a confusion of values. But multivalence evokes the very different quality that we often hear in narratives: multi-valents, many values, the holding of different values at the same time without implying confusion, contradiction, or even paradox. Multivalence implies a way of being in the world—one that may be particularly characteristic of the experience of “others,” challenging and complicating a dominant culture’s categories and asking us to think about things in very different ways. As in the provocative quote from Linda Lord, a displaced poultry worker in rural Maine, that folklorist Alicia Rouverol and photographer Cedric Chatterley chose for the title of their wonderful recent book, “I was Content and Not Content” : The Story of Linda Lord and the Closing of Penobscot Poultry.37

For me, this work has come to stand for a broader point about intellectual authority and dialogue, and about learning from the world we engage. To draw out the point, I hope it’s not too indulgent to offer a personal story from a world that may seem even farther a field—if
Anton Chekhov and his fin-de-siècle Russian aristocrats seem to stand a long way from both a Belfast, Maine chicken factory and from the Detroit Renaissance Center on the eve of the millennial moment. A number of years ago, my then Buffalo American studies colleague Dick Blau dragooned me into a community theater production of The Three Sisters. I played Kulygin, schoolteacher and cuckolded husband of Masha, the most tempestuous of the sisters. I needed a lot of coaching, particularly in delivering one crucial line: In the face of every humiliation and disappointment that is his lot, Kulygin repeats, “I am content, I am content, I am content.” The trick was to say these words in a way that was not pathetic, that made clear how determined the man was to keep on going on, to avoid the self-pity immobilizing the other characters in the play.

This all came back to me when I encountered Alicia Rouverol and Linda Lord. Consider that beyond poor Kulygin, The Three Sisters involves a family of fin-de-siècle aristocrats in the twilight years of a Russian nobility soon to be swept away by modernization and revolution—by the then-looming twentieth century. They are stranded in the provinces: “Moscow, Moscow, Moscow,” the sisters sigh in their different ways. They, their lovers, and their friends spend most of four long acts complaining about boredom and bemoaning their fate. Linda Lord throws all this into sharp perspective. Here are Chekhov’s aristocrats who for all their wealth and privilege insist, “we are not content.” Here is Kulygin, the middle-class professional who insists, “I am content”—when he so obviously, painfully, is not. And here is Linda Lord, a working-class woman from Belfast, Maine who when asked whether she liked her poultry job says, well, “I was content and not content”—and goes on to offer her story in her own voice. We need to notice that Linda Lord’s comment was not a free-floating “expression” of her existential take on her job so much as it was a dialogic parry, a deflection of an either/or question whose assumptions she did not wish to legitimize through responding. In her multivalence, she suggests how deeply functional is the capacity to hold and to deploy strategically seemingly contradictory values, each of which can be true and real in different ways, and all of which in sum represent the terrain of complex experience.

For another example, consider the story (or rather stories, since she actually told it twice) in my steelworker project that Doris McKinney tells, a story about almost losing her steel mill job. Ms. McKinney tells
us first that she had been a single mother on welfare when given an opportunity to work at Republic Steel. Towards the end of her probation, the foreman told her that she wasn’t cutting it, that she would be fired if she didn’t do better with the heavy burning torch. She describes what happened then:

And you say, going from two—let’s see, I think how much I was making, maybe three hundred a week, and the thought of going back to the welfare and making three hundred a month—the whole weekend I cried and I cried. When I walked in there Monday, I could pick the torch up and walk with it and anything else. Because it was psychological, you know. I knew that I did not want to go back to living like I was. And if there was any ounce of strength within me, and if other women could do it, I can’t see why I couldn’t, and so I did.38

But later, in a long interview, she re-tells the story. She describes how welfare had enabled her to complete a community-college certification as an occupational therapist’s assistant, but that on graduation she could not afford to take a low-paying job in that field and only reluctantly took the job at Republic instead:

It was a step forward because it was a good, high-paying job; it was a step backward because it was not the kind of job I wanted to do. So it was very depressing for me. . . . [But] we had been deprived a long time, and the money outweighed the experience. And who was to say that the other job was going to work out? So, once I took the job at Republic, you know your whole mentality has to change in order to keep a job, you can’t continue to see yourself doing something else, just doing this temporarily. No—you got to be all or nothing. I thought you could keep up with reading, and keep up with your AJOTs, Journal of Occupational Therapy, you know. But you can’t keep up unless you’re actively participating in it. So then you finally make up your mind, you way, “Well, as long as I’m going to be at the job I’m going to do my dammedest to keep it, and get some of the things I want, and if the time comes, then so be it, I’ll go from there.”39

It took me a while to realize that these two stories were the same story—that the welfare mother terrified of returning to poverty and the college-trained para-professional who conquers her disappointment about being in a manual-labor job, are the same woman, facing the same moment of truth. It’s a good example, I think, of multivalence in action, of identity so complex and nuanced as to be apprehensible only through the unfolding layers of expression in a complex narrative.

* * *
What do such stories suggest for American studies, for the prismatic, quadrilateral map I have offered, for the project of bringing the world into the work of American studies and vice versa, in the complex of ways intended by Sharon O’Brien, Neil Foley, and Brenda Dixon Gottschild when they framed the theme for this convention? Although intellectuals often presume we are unfolding and unpacking the meaning of experience through broader conceptualizations and theoretical frames, a strong case can be made that the process is the reverse: our generalizations and abstractions flatten the particularities of experience in ways that prevent us from apprehending precisely what people are expressing, and trying to tell us.

To me, the lesson lies in the importance of genuine dialogue, engagement and exchange—actualized in all directions. I have no illusions about this being a shortcut to some sort of pristine consciousness, of agency somehow outside the orbit of the same powerful cultural and political structuring forces that have produced the very paradigms we seek somehow to get out from under. At the same time, there is encouraging ground for this belief in the power of real world engagement and dialogic—seen, for instance, in the destabilizing surprises that history can throw in the path of what can seem the most fixed intellectual assumptions.

Consider the quite incredible improvisations surrounding the WTO meetings in Seattle a year ago—which amounted to the enactment in public space of a remarkable, transnational, truly inclusive and cross-class American studies teach-in on the very issues so prominently featured in our conference program. Could it be a coincidence that these events occurred only a year after a controversial ASA conference in that very same city raising what turn out to be some of the same issues? (We are, surely, the only group of people in the world tempted to associate the “Battle in Seattle” with the aftermath of an ASA Presidential Address. 40) No, we must confess—such spontaneous ground-level mobilizations (as opposed to theorized prescriptions) were as unanticipated by most of our scholarship as was the evaporation of Soviet communism by any conclave of international affairs experts as late as 1988.

So where did they come from? Such surprises suggest that there is always, in the experience of people, however mediated and however much internalizing of the dominant culture, an experiential basis and capacity for alternative constructions. We might see this, to torture
another riff, as a kind of DNA—the generative basics of insight and understanding embedded in the cells of life experience and inherently capable of activation and replication, even if this does not occur spontaneously or easily. Theory itself, in this view, remains a necessary, crucial part of dialogue—since it is only through generalization and abstraction that a concept defined by one experience or situation can be transported meaningfully into another; throwing in theory is something like throwing in the clutch, helping us all to shift gears and move smoothly and meaningfully through a sequence of contexts.

But most people drive automatic transmissions these days, which is to say that both the metaphor and the working of these connective/transmissive relationships are too easily mystified in practice. Here, as elsewhere, it seems to me that for an American studies wishing to both understand and change the world the answer lies in a deeper and more sustained dialogue, of talking and really listening across diverse realms of experience, informed by a belief in the possibility that experience as well as expertise—the two words have the same root, I like to observe—each provide tools for the creation of a new discourse of possibilities. For beyond narrative as illustration, and narrative as appreciation, and even narrative as instruction, it is narrative as dialogue—which however implicitly is embedded in all narrative—that may be most worth our attention.

And these notions point, once again, to the usefulness of recognizing how important engagement, and mutual interrogation have always been to the force field of cultural and intellectual practice in American studies. These help nourish the energizing tension and provocative instability of “both/and” responses to “either/or” questions, responses American studies at its best has always embraced. Multivalent intellectual issues and embodied institutional postures, that is, have characterized our organization and work for some time now in one form or another, at every level from scholarship to pedagogy to community engagement to international involvement and activities—and are needed now more than ever.

This has been instructive and defining for me—to close where I began—in my own program in Buffalo, which began decades ago, with Larry Chisolm’s prescient vision, joined by Charlie Keil, Bob Dentan, Liz Kennedy, Dick Blau, and others, of an American studies re-situated in a global perspective and grounded in the centrality of cross-cultural fieldwork, of activist scholarship, of music, dance, and literally em-
bodied praxis. And it is no coincidence at all that this orientation became the generative ground for a multicultural constellation of programs focused outside the academy and never seen as inconsistent with this broader, inclusive vision—Native American studies developed by Barry White, John Mohawk, and Oren Lyons; Women’s studies as built by Liz Kennedy, Lillian Robinson, Ellen Dubois, and more recently Masani Alexis DeVeaux; a cosmopolitan Puerto Rican studies led by Francisco Pabon and Alfredo Matilla; and an African American studies program propelled, at the start, by Jim Miller, who has gone on to be so important in this work in ASA.

The many-dimensioned multivalence of this approach was never really appreciated by our university, or perhaps it was apprehended too clearly—in any event, a once-substantial department has now been restructured and absorbed within a broader, vaguely constituted umbrella “Center for the Americas.” This makes perfect and even admirable intellectual sense, on many grounds, even if it has been more problematically imagined from above as a way to retain the prestige of cutting edge scholarship without the pesky intrusion of the actual people, issues, problems, agendas, and agency to whom our space has been open, and by whom it has been shaped. This is a complex, painful transition, but the new Center, initially shaped by the Americanist literary critic Mark Shechner and about to be led by the remarkable combination of John Mohawk and Dennis Tedlock, may yet surprise administrators bent on deconstructing precisely the kind of energizing constellations I have been invoking tonight. They may yet be surprised by the durability of dialogue and engagement, and their indispensability to currently cosmopolitan constructions. This will depend, I expect, on whether the kind of generative tensions suggested by my models tonight can, on the programmatic level, be sustained, nourished, respected, and embodied in engaged community—both within and leading beyond the program and the university.43

This the broader politics of the academy renders quite uncertain. As it is here, in Detroit and in ASA, which is why we have sought—in constructing the conference program, in the community based pre-convention collaboratives, and in the plenary, “community commons” and performance tomorrow evening—to emphasize the centrality of engagement beyond the Renaissance Center, and beyond the circle of our own academic discourse. Seen in the prismatic array or in the quadrilateral of forces I have described (physics in the hands of an
historian, I have surely demonstrated, being no more constraining than history in the hands of a physicist), I see the current moment as one of extraordinary dimensionality, not usefully reduced to any particular intellectual posture or organizational model and requiring connections and resources beyond our intellectual work as such. For only in the most demandingly inclusive interrogation of our mutually implicated world will we be able to mobilize the power of a fully deployed diversity—as we move, together, through this necessarily dialogic, infinitely prismatic, and relentlessly multivalent millennial moment.

In Memory of Lawrence Chisolm

Larry Chisolm, the founder of the American Studies program at SUNY Buffalo, died of cancer in April 1998. The program and his inspiring vision are discussed towards the end of my address. For a fuller appreciation of Larry’s unique presence and significance in the field, see Charlie Keil, “Obituary: Lawrence Washington Chisolm,” American Studies Association Newsletter (Mar. 1999).
I deeply appreciate the many discussions with friends, colleagues, and students, especially at SUNY Buffalo, who have for so long shaped my understanding of the issues discussed in this address. For particularly helpful feedback as the address took shape, I want to thank Charlie and Angie Keil, Dick Blau, Erik Seeman, Debra More, David More, and Mark Shechner. My greatest concrete debt is to the two graduate students who assisted me on this project and became trusted and highly valued colleagues in the process: Judith Weiland, who has worked with me on various dimensions of the Pan-Am Exposition project and research, discussed in the address, and who masteredmind the multimedia presentation that broke some new presentation ground in Detroit, and Christine Zinni, whose extraordinarily thorough research in the related literatures referenced in my notes has been of inestimable value to me and, I know, to her own rapidly crystallizing emergence as a scholar, filmmaker, and theorist.

1. Among the more thoughtful and concise commentaries on this moment, see Peter N. Stearns, Millennium III, Century XXI: A Retrospective on the Future (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996).

2. There has been considerable recent interest in synchronicity lately, much of it coming in works examining diverse developments compacted within a single year. These, however, generally rely on claims for the special significance of the chosen focus. See, for instance, Scott Heller, “What a Difference a Year Makes,” Chronicle of Higher Education, 5 Jan. 2001; and Louis P. Masur, 1831: Year of Eclipse (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001). In contrast, my interest here is in the value of an arbitrary point, as such, for exploring the insights of synchronicity.


4. Beyond the substantial coverage of this fair in the various works by Rydell, there are a number of useful works focused exclusively on the Pan-Am. For a sophisticated overview in a popular audience format, see Thomas E. Leary and Elizabeth C. Sholes, eds., Buffalo’s Pan-American Exposition (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia, 1998). This volume is comprised of a marvelous collection of illustrations accompanied by a narrative in the form of extensive caption commentaries. There is also an excellent overview in the opening chapter of Mark Goldman’s spirited history of Buffalo, which presents the Pan-Am as both a story and a metaphor for the city’s nineteenth-century rise and twentieth-century struggles. Mark Goldman, High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York (Albany, N.Y.: State Univ. of New York Press, 1983). The most important of the new works occasioned by the fair’s centennial is Kerry S.
Grant, *The Rainbow City—Celebrating Light, Color, and Architecture at the Pan-American Exposition, Buffalo 1901* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Canisius College Press, 2001), a lavishly illustrated “coffee table” book with a comprehensive scholarly commentary. The book illustrates, as well, the serious uses of this much-patronized form, given the visual significance of the fair and a rich documentary record that has, among other things, never been presented in the color renditions crucial for understanding the Pan-Am’s particular impact and meaning. The fictional treatment in Lauren Belfer, *City of Light* (New York: Dial Press, 1999), sets the Pan-Am against an evocative portrait of turn-of-the-century Buffalo; the national and international best-seller success of this historical novel has been both gratifying and surprising to Buffalonians steeled to expect media and popular condescension. A vast array of Pan-Am and related historical websites are most conveniently accessed through the portal site for the overall Pan-Am Centennial, http://www.panam2001.org.


7. As noted above, this central theme lends particular importance to both the illustrations and commentary presented in Grant, *The Rainbow City*.

8. Discussion of the ambiguities encountered when moving from fairs as text to fairs as experience and contestable space is one of the most notable differences between Rydell’s earlier synthesis and his new popular history of U.S. fairs, Rydell, et al. eds., *Fair America*.

There is a quite apposite discussion of the evolving representations of the Buffalo Bill show in this era in Jonathan D. Martin, “‘The Grandest and Most Cosmopolitan Object Teacher’: Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and the Politics of American Identity, 1883–1899,” Radical History Review (fall 1996). Among other things, Martin traces the show’s shifting content, focus, and denomination from the American Wild West to a presciently multi-, trans-, and post-national International Exposition of Rough Riders. It is likely that this is one of the origins of the term soon linked, indelibly, to Theodore Roosevelt and San Juan Hill, an interesting example of life appropriating art and an interpenetration of theatrical and historical representation fully reflected in and projected from the Pan-Am exposition just a few years later.

10. Myths die hard, even one that is usually deployed as an implicit explanation or even excuse for broader civic decline and failure. Yet the inevitably mortal nature of the wounds at that point in medical time and their quite certain treatability today is the clear conclusion of a definitive forthcoming work by an eminent surgeon who has closely explored the forensic record and evidence in the context of trauma treatment assumptions and understandings in 1901. See Jack C. Fisher, “Stolen Glory: The McKinley Assassination” (forthcoming), which sets the medical analysis within an overview narrative of the entire assassination story.


12. This film, the overall Edison company filming at Pan-Am, and the broader meanings of early film are explored in a fascinating recent article, Jonathan Auerbach, “McKinley at Home: How Early American Cinema Made News,” American Quarterly 51 (Dec. 1999).

13. Stories about resistance to the Pan-Am’s racism and the “Old Plantation” concession and the efforts around the Du Bois exhibit have been items of local folklore for some time; in a more general sense this theme is a prominent feature in the fictional rendition in Belfer, City of Light. See as well Leary and Sholes, Buffalo’s Pan-American Exposition. Only recently, however, has solid evidence been discovered documenting the development—this is being publicly presented for the first time in an exhibit at the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library as part of the Pan-Am 2001 centennial, and information about it will be reachable at http://www.panam2001.org. The Buffalo Museum of Science, in the meantime, is at work on an ambitious international traveling exhibition planned for 2003, setting the Pan-Am’s African artifacts against the complex history of representations of African culture.


15. This project is conveniently presented in Patrick Klink, “Imagining the Pan-Am Exposition,” UB Today (winter 2000), a SUNY-Buffalo alumni magazine article accessible at http://www.buffalo.edu/UBT/UBT-archives/13_ubtw00/features/feature1.html. This project received crucial seed support in a national competition seeking examples of creative university/community partnerships organized by Imagining America: Scholars and Artists in Public Life. For an introduction to this innovative initiative, see http://www.ia.umich.edu. This Imagining America public scholarship grant was awarded by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, which has itself been at the forefront of a range of initiatives focused on the importance of real world engagements for the future of higher education, and graduate education in
particular. For an introduction, see http://www.woodrow.org. The National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a Consultation Grant to WNED-TV for the development of the documentary’s themes and of course has recognized the resonant focus of the Detroit ASA meeting through the participation of Chairman Bill Ferris in our keynote plenary session.

16. See Bill Bryant, “Webs of Significance: Approaching American Studies through Hyperspace,” Odense American Studies International Series [Denmark] (Apr. 1996), a fascinating discussion which, among other things, reflects on how the world’s fairs can be imagined as a kind of anticipatory website equivalent—non-linear constellations through which visitors “surfed” in ways and with consequences beyond the reach of scripted narrative messages and pathways. In this sense, Bryant argues, they prove especially appropriate historical subjects for hypertextual exploration today.


19. Let me focus, in a note that could otherwise run on for pages, on some sources that explore the interface between this broad movement and American studies as a field. A good starting point, again noting how *AQ* has served as a site for such intersections, is John Higham, “Multiculturalism and Universalism: A History and Critique,” *American Quarterly* 45 (June 1993); and a forum discussing it: Gerald Early

Newfield and Gordon, eds., Mapping Multiculturalism is among the most provocative and useful collections of essays on these developments and their broader transformative and imaginative implications.


21. This note affords me an opportunity to redress an evident misperception reported by some in the audience in Detroit. In this and the comments that follow, I really meant to reference (and did, more explicitly, in the longer version painfully compressed for delivery) the heated controversy that erupted around Janice Radway’s presidential address—not the address itself. A great deal of commentary, much of it in e-mail exchanges among those who had not, at that point, heard or read Radway’s address, seemed propelled by Manichean fears about the linear directionality of American studies and the dominant cultural studies destination some held Radway to be embracing. But many, especially when the text became available, did not at all hear or read the address in this way. Indeed, I find Radway’s assessment of the multiple possibilities in the field, her appreciation of their deep roots throughout its history, and her sense of the importance of mobilizing the tensions among them, to be quite consistent with every dimension of the frame I am offering here, and much worth the closest, continuing reflection. See Radway, “What’s in a Name?”


29. This powerful convergence is evident, for instance, in the first results of the 2000 census, detailing demographic changes so extensive as to inevitably impact the mainstream discourse surrounding diversity, race, and multiculturalism. Similarly, the clearly non-transient “Seattle effect” has created a quickly changing context, politically and intellectually, for reflections on globalization. But the implications of such developments, especially politically, are by no means self-evident, as witness the ongoing discussion of the need for “strategic essentialism” in the face of manifest hybridizations of every sort. See, for example, Saldivar, Border Matters; Frederic Jamson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., The Cultures of Globalization (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1998); and Chatterjee, Nation and Its Fragments.


33. See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2000), xx. This is a reissue of the original 1987 publication with a new, very thoughtful retrospective reflection by the authors. Some of my commentary here originated in a foreword I wrote for this edition, xi–xv.


39. Ibid., 190–91.
40. See the caveat in note 22, above. My point is only partly tongue in cheek: as I read it, the resonance between Jan Radway’s perspective on directions in American studies scholarship and the way the unfolding WTO debates have begun to re-center American politics in a global frame is quite striking. See Radway, “‘What’s in a Name?’”; See also George Lipsitz, “Sent for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today: American Studies Scholarship and the New Social Movements,” *Cultural Critique* 40 (1998).
41. See Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (summer 1991), which takes this observation in a somewhat different direction, exploring experience as a competing claim to authority on issues of identity. My interest, in contrast, is in the possibility of ongoing dialogue from these diverse bases. Such a possibility was the propelling curiosity behind a recent conference, organized by Frank W. Munger and the Baldy Center on Law and Policy at SUNY Buffalo, on the contribution of narrative and ethnographic perspectives to contemporary discourses about low-wage labor in the global economy. The conference papers and commentaries are soon to be published: Frank W. Munger, ed., *Laboring Below the Line: The New Ethnography of Poverty, Low-Wage Work, and Survival in the Global Economy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, forthcoming). My remarks here are developed further in one of the volume’s “intervention” commentaries, “Taking Dialogue Seriously.”
42. I am indebted to Charlie Keil for these marvelous lines from Blake, suggesting how long and deeply rooted the struggle has been: “Now I a fourfold vision see/ And a fourfold vision is given to me/ ‘Tis fourfold in my supreme delight/ and threefold in soft Beulah’s night/ and twofold always. May God us keep/ From single vision & Newton’s sleep.” See Charles Keil, Angeliki Keil, and Dick Blau, “Polka Theory: Perspectives on the Will to Party” (paper presented at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting, Detroit, Michigan, October 2000). The paper’s title hints at the revisionist linking of Nietzsche and Blake, speaking of transcending dichotomies. See also Charles Keil, Angeliki V. Keil, and Dick Blau, *Polka Happiness*, (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1992).
43. Let me cite, again, the essay that has done so much to help me locate this experience in a broader frame that helps explain the importance of our model, and its vulnerability: Erkkila, “Ethnicity, Literary Theory, and the Grounds of Resistance.” See also Kerber, “Diversity and the Transformation of American Studies”; and Washington, “Disturbing the Peace” for relevant discussions of American studies programs at precisely such intersections.