If you prefer not to exaggerate, you must remain silent, you must paralyze your intellect and find some way of becoming an idiot.
—Ortega y Gasset,
The Revolt of the Masses
Where Is the “America” in American Cultural Studies?

I want to talk about the geography of cultural studies and about the politics of the increasingly common use of geographical adjectives to modify cultural studies. Let me make clear how I am using cultural studies, for I have come to realize and accept (if not happily) that there are two distinct uses of the term that have to be acknowledged. On the one hand, the term is applied to a large and varied body of progressive and critical work in the academy. Perhaps this is unavoidable and even necessary; and perhaps this is what Fred Jameson (1993) had in mind when he recently described cultural studies as “mass culture plus identity politics,” although the umbrella is certainly broad enough to cover those who show not the slightest interest in mass culture. On the other hand, there is a narrower sense of cultural studies as a distinct set of intellectual and political practices (which I have characterized elsewhere; see Grossberg 1995). This more specific sense is not so narrow as to be identified with a particular school or national tradition or discipline; rather it is characterizable as an alliance or loose network or, to use Dwight Conner-good’s felicitous term, a caravan. Over the years, my own work has been described as “British cultural studies in the United States” and as “American cultural studies.” I would now reject both of these apppellations, not only for my own work, but for my fellow travelers as well. And for the rest of this paper, it is the spatiality of the latter sense of cultural studies that I want to interrogate.

DIS-PLACING CULTURAL STUDIES

Let me begin by asking what is at stake in attempting to link cultural studies to particular geographical places—for the phrase “American cultural studies” can be used to mean many different things. First then, consider those articulations of cultural studies to geography to which I am fundamentally op-
posed: that there can and should be a “more American” or properly American version of cultural studies. This seems to presuppose that there is some uniquely American experience, unique not only to America, but somehow constitutive of the Americanness of all Americans as well. This seems to fly in the face of current “deconstructions” of both national and regional identities where, as Ghassan Hage (1994) describes it, people struggle in and over the field of “national belonging.” It also seems to presuppose that there is something wrong with the “strong European inflection” of much of cultural studies, something that can only and must be rectified by building an American cultural studies upon the unique contributions of American theorists. Such assertions form a prescriptive call for the spatial specificity of American cultural studies, a specificity defined by the “being there” of America.

What then are my objections? First, they are political: I am in fact suspicious of this attempt to introduce a kind of identity politics (so typical of the United States) into the discourse about cultural studies itself. I cannot help but wonder what such a desire—to name our own discourse by placing it within the “local” space of our national affiliation—signals. I fear that such calls are too easily articulated into and participate in the revival of ethnicity that Stuart Hall calls “cultural fundamentalism.” But at the same time, there is something strange about this project of self-nomination, for it is usually the subordinated, the minority, that finds it necessary to name their own culture, to have their existence and worth recognized. Why would American academics want to do this? Is there some as-yet-unnamed threat? Are we engaged in a struggle within the global academic power bloc? I can’t help but feel that there is something ironic about the U.S. academy’s having to name itself as if it were beleaguered, as if it were in a subordinate position, or even as if, somehow, its domination were being challenged. Of course, there is another possibility: by naming and thus locating itself, American cultural studies relinquishes its claim to universality. But this simply denies both the power of the American academy in the global circulation of intellectual work and the diversity of cultural studies in the United States. Moreover such a claim would be disingenuous, since there is little ground for assuming that cultural studies is being defined globally through some universalization of American norms. It is more likely readable as analogous with a conservative backlash in which the dominant fractions name themselves as the oppressed.

Kuan-Hsing Chen has taken an even stronger position. He argues that such national nominations are the dominant form of “transnational global cultural studies,” and that they are all (whether subordinate or dominant) “in complicity with economic neo-imperialism and the neocolonial politics of the nation-state structure.” Instead he proposes to interrogate the “unchallenged epistemological boundary of the political nation-state, as a ‘local context’” of cultural analysis, without taking into account the increasingly uneven process of globalization and economic and political power“ (1996, 40). Furthermore, he argues that regionalism is but “an upgraded ghost of nationalism,” that it potentially remains part of an imperialist project grounded in nationalism. And the issue is not simply that the crucial question—Who is the articulating subject of any regionalism?—is rarely asked. For it goes deeper than that. To put it crudely, Chen might lead us to wonder whether calls for a (regionally bounded) American cultural studies are merely reproducing NAFTA within the discourse of cultural studies itself.

Second, my objections to such spatializations of cultural studies are theoretical, although I do not mean to separate politics and theory so easily (and in fact, my “theoretical” objections could be derived from what I have already said about the “geonationalist” presuppositions of such a project). The problem is not the attempt to articulate theory and geography, but the way it is done. For whatever the scale of the spatial identity that is offered in such calls, however one moves up and down the scale—from local to national to regional—such identifications assume that culture (in this case, critical discursive practices) is essentially linked to place, even while they reify the concept of place itself. Too often, discussions of American cultural studies represent places as if they were coherent, bounded, and settled, as if identities were always constituted through identifications with or against such fixed places. “Place” is made to act as a guarantee of cultural belongingness. When applied to our own work, this can only be described as a failure of our own critical distance. Or, to put it in a more active voice, we seem to have abandoned our own critical discourses in favor of our own deeply felt nationalisms. Daniels has pointed out that “National identities are coordinated, often largely defined, by ‘legends and landscapes,’ by stories of golden ages, enduring traditions, heroic deeds and dramatic destinies located in ancient or promised homelands” (cited in Hall 1995, 182). Calls for American cultural studies are similarly built upon such legends and landscapes, upon imaginations of golden ages and enduring traditions, and so forth.

Stuart Hall has argued that “the ways in which culture, place and identity are imagined and conceptualized are increasingly untenable in the light of
the historical and contemporary evidence” (1995, 186). To put it simply, neither cultures nor theories necessarily depend on place. This is not to deny that cultural practices have a geography, that they are spatially articulated. Cultural practices are always in place or, more accurately, em-placed. But such relations cannot be understood as a matter of origins or identities. For places do not exist independently of the ways they are articulated and invested in. Consequently we need to reject the commonsense view of place and re-place it with what Doreen Massey (1991) has called a “global sense of place” that would “match community and security with the kind of openness that can stimulate a positive sense of challenge and contestation” (Robins 1991, 17). As Massey (1992) has described it: “spatial movement, interaction, influence and communication have become so extended, so fast and so available, that the borderlands and boundaries which once used to define places as distinct and in some degree separable from each other are so often crossed that the notion of place which was previously viable has to be rethought ... The changing social organization of space has ... disrupted our existing forms of, and concepts of, place” (1992, 83).

According to Massey (1994), we must begin to think of places as intersections of influence and movements, relations and forces, “stretched” over space. Or, echoing Hall and Gilroy, we must stop thinking in terms of roots and start thinking in terms of routes. This is the power of a theory of diaspora as more than (without denying) its historical referent, as an alternative framework for thinking about imagined communities, tradition, and culture. If places are constructed out of wider sets of forces and relations, and if identities exist in terms of interconnectedness rather than counterposition (Massey 1994; I would prefer to say that identities exist in the structural possibilities of mobility and stability) then we need a sense of place that is complex, permeable, and flexible. Certainly we cannot begin to understand the specificity of a place by looking at that place (or its history) in isolation.

Perhaps the strongest example we have of such a theoretical shift is Paul Gilroy’s brilliant treatise, The Black Atlantic (1993), which is too often read only as an argument against the nation as the appropriate unit of analysis in cultural studies. While this is an important point—cultures cannot be equated to nations— I want to foreground Gilroy’s own more radical sense of the “Black Atlantic” as “a nontraditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable and asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the manichean logic of binary coding” (1993, 198). I would take it even further, as a fairly radical attempt to spatialize culture and history. For what Gilroy is analyzing is not merely the relations among places, but constitutive movements across a space. That is, space is no longer merely the empty gaps between places. It is not merely the Cartesian space of directionality; it has a dimensionality of its own that is constituted by the trajectories that move across it. It has a density and a thickness of its own that is productive as well as produced. Thus I take it that Gilroy is arguing that the space of the North Atlantic is already race-d, that the race-d movements of the various circulations (of communities, commodities, capital, and culture) are part of the constitutive being of the space of the North Atlantic. It follows that culture is inseparable not from place, but from a distribution and movement of space, a distribution and movement in space.

My third objection to the spatial nomination of cultural studies—to the project of prescribing an American cultural studies—is analytical. That is, it seems to me to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of cultural studies itself. I have argued many times that cultural studies is a radically contextual practice. However, it is important to emphasize that the context of cultural studies is always and only defined by its project, its question (which is always political), not by its place (although of course places may be implicated in different ways in different questions). Consequently its theory and analyses are always hybrid and strategic. Its theory is “cheap” in the sense that you use whatever works, whatever gives you a better understanding of the context so as to open up new political possibilities. Cultural studies is about trying to do something that has not been done before without knowing ahead of time what resources will work. Cultural studies is never about British or French or American theory; it is not about theory at all—although theory plays an absolutely necessary role in its analyses. It is not about high theory or theoretical debates; it is not about marking theoretical differences or staking out theoretical positions. It is about finding theoretical resources that allow you to re-describe the context that has posed a political challenge. The fact that the context may be part of the United States, or the United States itself, or even the region of the Americas does not guarantee that a theory that has been locally articulated will provide the best resources. As David Morley puts it, “The local is not to be considered as an indigenous source of cultural identity which remains authentic only insofar as it is unsullied by contact with [the other]” (1992, 282). The local cannot be separated from the global, and so any attempt to understand the local cannot close its eyes to the power (and the resources) of the global.

Cornel West has taken a similar position regarding cultural studies: “The
traveling of [British] cultural studies to the U.S. must be met with a critical reception and by critical what I mean is an appropriation of the best: acknowledging where the blindesses were, while discussing to what degree British cultural studies can be related to the U.S. context” (1992a, 693). But we need to unpack this in order to avoid two possible errors: first, the assumption that there is a single homogeneous body of work that is called British cultural studies; and second, that there is a U.S. context defined independently of particular political projects and struggles. Obviously, there are various assumptions and absences in various British authors. David Harvey is correct to point to Raymond Williams’s “situatedness within the structures of feelings that were associated with working class support for the British empire” (1995, 74). This may help us understand a significant absence in Williams’s work; it does not tell us whether that absence is constitutive of Williams’s theoretical position—that is, whether the fact of empire is absent or necessarily erased in that theory. Nor does it tell us, in every instance, the pertinence of that absence.

Similarly many critics have argued that British cultural studies places too much weight on class (and hence locates itself too strongly in marxism) and not enough on race for it to be appropriate to the American context; in particular, the constitutive fact of the Middle Passage and slavery demands something other than the model of British cultural studies. There are many answers to this objection: First, it is simply not true to say that British cultural studies has ignored race over class, unless one takes a particular moment in its history as paradigmatic. Second, the commitment to marxism in British cultural studies was never about class per se but about a particular materialist practice and about a particular contextual politics. And finally, of course, if nothing else, recent American history should convince us of the absolute centrality of class articulations (cutting across other social differences) in American politics and culture. Again, the issue is not what the political question is—that must be taken as the starting point of any cultural studies project—but rather what theoretical resources can be mobilized to say something new and useful about the political context in relation to the question that is being posed.

None of this negates the need to understand diverse intellectual histories, including “our own,” however that might be taken. But why should we privilege national identity and belongingness over ethnic or religious or racial identities as the content of “our own”? After all, West does not claim that such contributions, whether understood as American or as something else, can or should be taken to constitute their own cultural studies. This would be to fall into an “Americanism in the life of the mind … [an] atavistic patriotism in intellectual matters” (1992a, 694). Rather West’s sense of the importance of such histories is precisely that they help us to understand the ongoing practice of theoretical criticism and appropriation. Pragmatism did not develop ex nihilo; it came out of an engagement with various European philosophies and it took place in the context of particular historical and political demands. In fact, West’s broader view of the theoretical grounds of cultural studies seems to be: You go where you need to:

If you’re an Afro-American and you’re a victim of the rule of capital, and a European Jewish figure who was born in the Catholic Rhineland, by the name of Karl Marx, provides certain analytic tools, then you go there. You can’t find too many insightful formations in Marx about what it is to be black; you don’t go to Marx for that. You go to Marx to keep track of the rule of capital, interlocking elites, political, banking, financial, that’s one crucial source of your hybridity. You don’t care where you get it from, you just want to get people off your back.

If you want to know what it means to be black, to be African in Western civilizations and to deal with issues of identity, with bombardment of degrading images … For what it means to be politically marginalized, you go to a particular tradition that deals with that. (1992b, 330)

Perhaps part of that tradition is American, perhaps part is African, perhaps part is diasporic. You go where you need to. But one need not create an “American tradition” that enforces a singularity on the notion of American-ness, or which takes for granted the spatial articulation of discourse. Such constructions are not only politically suspect, they hide the political context in which they themselves had been called into existence, for such a move can only hide the fact that such a closure poses its own political problematic per se unless it is contextualized.

In fact, it seems to be that when one begins to talk about traditions of American thought, the interesting question is quite different. For there have been, at least in North America, a number of possible openings for cultural studies, especially in the twentieth century, including a tradition of black criticism and thought; the Chicago school of social thought; a Canadian media theory extending from Innis (perhaps to McLuhan); the postwar mass culture debates; the work of Kenneth Burke, and so forth. While all of these have been influential, and have even influenced various trajectories of cul-
cultural studies, the interesting question is why none of these openings actually gave rise at the time to a viable practice and tradition of cultural studies. Recently some people have tried to suggest that such work was, in and of itself, cultural studies, and hence those who are reproducing it have been doing cultural studies all along. This seems to me nothing but self-delusion and self-promotion. The Chicago school perhaps created the intellectual conditions for a version of cultural studies (and perhaps some of its work should now be understood as cultural studies), but the traditions to which it has given rise (such as symbolic interactionism or pragmatism) are not cultural studies, any more than the rhetorical or literary-critical projects that have emerged out of the work of Kenneth Burke (whose own work may have some claim to cultural studies) are cultural studies.

What has been given up is precisely the sense of radical contextuality, of developing the theoretical resources and the critical practices that would enable one to respond to the concrete challenges of a specific social and political context. And with that contextuality, the interdisciplinarity implicit in such openings has been sutured back into disciplinary matrices that permit one to study only that which is within their intellectual boundaries. This is not to say that such openings have, then, been entirely closed. On the contrary, in the work of James Carey and Cornel West, the possibilities opened by the Chicago school have been taken up precisely by being “hybridized”; similarly, in Canada, writers such as Jody Berland have taken up the challenge and the legacy of Innis. Such hybridizations of American discourses have produced important contributions to the discursive caravan of contemporary cultural studies. But these hybridizations were absolutely crucial: the contextuality and interdisciplinarity of cultural studies do not come cheaply. They demand—at least thus far—that cultural studies be built on a certain ambiguity, an undecidability, about culture: culture is both the representation of reality and the reality we live in; culture is both the creative and the mundane; culture is both the set of signifying practices and the whole way of life. Or, as I have put it elsewhere, cultural studies is built upon a conflicted and conflictual theory of culture.6

RE-PLACING CULTURAL STUDIES

Is there then no sense in which we might speak of an American or U.S. cultural studies? Of course there are a number of different ways in which it might be appropriate and perhaps even useful. First, there is a descriptive sense. One could describe what is done here and now under the sign of cultural studies, but one is likely to be struck by the truly enormous diversity of that work. In fact, even narrowing down the here and now to something smaller, like Champaign-Urbana, does not help much given the diversity of “Illinois cultural studies.” Much of what might be included in either of these descriptions would even be unique in some ways, in a variety of ways, to the determinations of the American (or Illinois) context. We might even find that the diversity, the distribution of cultural studies practices, will vary across space. But does that mean that we should move, in some normative way, to a judgment about which of these ways, which determinations, which practices, constitute an “authentically” American (or Illinois) cultural studies?

Part of the problem is, of course, that the field and the name (cultural studies) are too contested at the moment to allow us to say much that is useful without staking out our own claim to the term. But even with such a claim, I think it is impossible to find any consistency or commonality in politics, theory, or methodology that might enable us to cut across the diversity to find the “truly American inheritance.” I suppose, if pressed, one could say that, for the most part, work that claims the name of cultural studies in the United States is dominated by:

- the problem of identity (and, more specifically, it tends to walk a thin line between essentialism and anti-essentialism)
- the mantra of gender, sexuality, and race (the convergence of feminist, queer, and antiracist politics)
- high theory (especially literary poststructuralism, media postmodernism, and anthropological postcolonialism)
- a communicational model of culture (as encoding-decoding, or production and consumption)
- textual-interpretive methodologies, supplemented with a weak sense of ethnographic research
- the vague shadow of an apocalyptic postmodernism, whether celebratory or pessimistic
- an ambivalence about its orientation and relation to already existing political constituencies
- disciplinary definitions of intellectual problems, projects, and standards

However, there is a second and more interesting possibility for describing the geography of cultural studies and foregrounding the relations of (national) place and critical practices. Such a geography is interested in a relation not of origins, but of the conditions of possibility. That is, we can inquire into the conditions for the emergence and appropriation of cultural studies in...
particular (national) contexts, conditions that determine in some ways its particular shape and articulations, determine where and how it is inserted and toward what it is aimed, conditions that at least determine the strata and territories in which the struggle (to define cultural studies as a theoretical, political, and empirical project) is located.

Recently two volumes have appeared that claim to present and make sense of Australian cultural studies, and we might compare the two models to see what help they can give us. Graeme Turner's primary claim in Nation, Culture, Text (1993) seems to be that what characterizes and distinguishes Australian cultural studies is its hybridity: it "speaks explicitly from a local position while drawing on a range of theoretical influences." Obviously, I do not think this distinguishes any local versions of cultural studies. Frow and Morris, in Australian Cultural Studies (1993), take a very different tack, one more in line with what I have in mind. For if the object of analysis in cultural studies is always a "context" that is determined in the first instance by a political question already posed to the researcher, then there is some sense in which cultural studies is always geopolitically constituted and articulated. Interestingly, much of Frow and Morris's description of cultural studies as an intellectual practice—its theory of cultural practices as multidimensional and relational sites—is not place specific. Actually, this is not entirely true, for while Frow and Morris recognize that the hybridity of theory ("a kind of rigorous mixing") is a general feature, its particular Australian form has to be understood institutionally. Consider the following examples of the sorts of determinations they describe:

—where its "roots" (such experiences must be understood not as origin but as enabling conditions) might be traced, at least biographically, to the Workers Educational Association (and the teaching of specific individuals)

—where its social basis is partly academic, but also partly based in the constituency-oriented work of journalist-critics; this helps to explain the power of the model of the organic intellectual in Australian cultural studies

—where its social-historical models were often feminist bureaucrats who took the notion that "the personal is political" to be a demand for state resources

—where feminist historians were often the most important intellectual precursors

Frow and Morris use these specific conditions to provide partial explanations for particular intellectual appropriations in Australian cultural studies.

Thus, for example, Foucault was taken as a more institutionally anchored model of discourse and a microsociological mapping of power, and Baudrillard's concept of simulations was often used "to rethink the contradictions of colonialism and creativity in an import culture" (Eric Michaels, quoted in Frow and Morris 1993, xxvii).

On the other hand, Frow and Morris point to the economic internationalism implicit in Australia's position in global relations (and the subsequent "geo-economic insistence on location" [1993, xii]) to account for the intense and explicit discourse of nation-formation in Australia and Australian cultural studies. This, they claim, helps to explain why doctrinal disputes (between competing theories of culture, for example) "have not long remained the focus of debate." Rather the most interesting work "examines the political conflicts at stake...articulates the historical struggles occurring in the gaps between competing narrative programs [i.e., particular moments of cultural practice] and the complex social experiences these aspire to organize" (xii).

They go on to argue, perhaps most importantly, that "In this context it is not simply a conceit of cultural studies to claim that people can contest and transform the meanings circulated by the culture industries of a media society. On the contrary, the fact that people actually do this is a given of contemporary politics, and one determinant of the social context in which cultural studies is practiced" (xiv; emphasis added). Finally, they claim that this social and institutional context helps to explain the emphasis on policy and industries, rather than text-audience relations per se: "Australian cultural studies has not only been a response to the political and social movements of the past three decades (this much can be said of cultural studies as a project in general) but has also derived many of its themes, its research priorities, its polemics and, in some ways, its theoretical emphases and privileged working methods, from an engagement with these movements—and the 'worldly historical frames' in which they operate" (xv). Yet even so, there is a reluctance, at least on the part of Meaghan Morris, to reify this nationalist nomination of cultural studies work. As she put it to me recently, talking about "Australian cultural studies" is largely "a matter of publishing our books." But understanding this statement requires us to think about the nature of the contemporary circulation of scholarly discourses, in which the United States is "the only Western English-language market that can afford an ex-nominated national mode of address."

The trajectory of this circulation (which has determined the ways cultural
studies is being globalized) has been determined in large part by the changing
context of the economics of publishing in the 1980s. Recently Maeghan and I
met with a sympathetic publisher to propose a book series that would address
the question of how cultural studies should be globalized by publishing con-
crete examples of cultural studies from distinct national and regional tradi-
tions of cultural studies other than those that have emerged from within
North Atlantic academic communities. We argued that the flow of such work
into the international discourse has been severely limited because publishers
are often nervous about studies of cultural forms or events that are distinct to
specific marginal or non-Western societies. Thus they commonly impose two
requirements that undermine much of the power of these distinct articula-
tions of cultural studies: either examples must be chosen from “Western”
culture (often disguised as “global”) or from events that would be both famil-
lar and significant to Western readers, or the examples must be so totally
submerged below the theoretical argument as to be rendered invisible. Insofar
as such work operates at the purely theoretical level, it is, of course, accept-
able to Western readers, or at least that’s what publishers seem to assume.
While Western writers are allowed to address Western audiences on the
assumption that this defines the “global” audience, non-Western authors are
told that they must address Western audiences as well. One of the most
important ways this has manifested itself is the current domination of “post-
colonial” and diasporic theories and authors over indigenous voices.

The publisher’s response was edifying. Basically he said that we were
using the wrong frame of reference since the relevant dichotomy was no
longer “the West and the rest,” but the United States and everything else. That
is, according to the bottom line in publishing, the United States is the only
academic market large enough to sustain a serious academic publishing effort
in cultural studies. Thus even the British—for all the claims that they domi-
nate cultural studies—must take into account the demands of an American
audience. Understood in this light, Morris’s view of “Australian cultural
studies” as a marketing category is not as cynical as it might sound at first, for
the category attempts, in the first instance, to create a market within Australia
for Australian work. The existence of such a market could of course be used to
persuade publishers to support Australian work. Whether the strategy has
worked is a different question.

If we take our lead from Frow and Morris, rather than approaching the
question of American essentiality, either experientially or in terms of a
uniquely American cultural studies tradition, we might ask about the condi-
tions that are shaping the reception of cultural studies in the United States.
Here we can point to a number of active determinations:
— the key role of communication and education in the initial reception of
cultural studies, counterbalanced by the increasing domination of literary
and anthropological studies
— the key role of public universities in the formation of cultural studies,
counterbalanced by their relative lack of prestige
— the capitalization of the academy and of academic publishing, but in a
way that has not challenged their relative isolation from the American public
— a particular set of crises facing the humanities: one the result of particular
routes of high theory and other self-indulgences; another the result of the rise
of the New Right
— the reassertion of multiple forms and sites of racism and sexism, calling
forth an increasingly fragmented and fragmenting form of popular identity
politics
— the expansion of a capitalized media culture and the shrinking of an
already meager space of public intellectual life
— the dominance of the baby boomers in university faculties (and the spe-
cific conditions of their political experiences in the 1960s)
— the real distance between cultural studies and other political interdisci-
plinary projects (African American studies, women’s studies, etc.)
— the Left’s traditional suspicions of mass culture, counterbalanced by a
long-standing popular anti-intellectualism
— the professionalization of the university and the social strength of disci-
plinary boundaries, especially insofar as these are represented by such orga-
nizations as the Modern Language Association
— the estrangement of the intelligentsia from the government bureaucracy
We can even talk about the American contributions to the discursive re-
sources of contemporary cultural studies, including a particular identity-
based version of critical race theory, an anthropological postcolonialism
(institutionally rooted in and yet based on a critique of area studies), pragma-
tism, performance theory, and so forth. But are Americans the only ones able
to use such contributions? Obviously not. Is there anything necessarily Amer-
ican about them? Obviously not. We can talk about the particular political
tendencies of cultural studies in the United States, and we can talk as well
about the tendencies toward particular critical practices (e.g., radically sepa-
rating political economy and cultural studies). But again, these are more likely to be accounted for institutionally than by any essentially American identity or any essentially American intellectual tradition.

CONCLUSION

Some time ago, a close friend asked me how a generation born after the Second World War could develop a cultural studies appropriate to contemporary America by beginning with British cultural studies. My inclination at the time was to say that it could not, even while acknowledging that British cultural studies had provided me (and others) with the best starting point I could find. But today I would challenge the very notion of “British cultural studies” as anything other than a marketing category which, like any nationalist appeal, covers over differences within an imagined unity. I would also defend its influence as both a model of “cheap theory, expensive politics,” and as a perfectly appropriate—but certainly not the only—starting place. I would, like Cornel West, argue that the key question is not where you begin but what you do with the resources you find there, how you inflect them into specific contextual politics and institutional histories in order to end up somewhere else.

However, it seems to me that my friend was asking—and I was answering—the wrong question, for there are more important issues to be discussed. How should cultural studies be globalized (given that it is already happening)? How does one do cultural studies in the current spatial conditions of global economic and cultural relations, conditions in which we are implicated, at the very least, by the circulation of our bodies and our work as commodities through the circuits of global culture and capitalism, conditions in which, as Meaghan Morris puts it, “European-American culture can no longer experience itself as the sole subject of capitalism or as co-extensive with it” (1990a)? How can the dialogue already taking place in cultural studies be enhanced and empowered? Where and how is it appropriate to do cultural studies about the United States? from within the United States? in a global context?

In this way, the geography of cultural studies opens up the need for cultural studies to rethink its own implicit geography. It brings us back to the question of space and of the relationship between places and spaces and the local and the global. We have to begin to confront, both theoretically and politically, what David Harvey describes as “the acute problems of political identity depending upon the spatial range across which political thought and action [are] constrained as possible” (1995, 82). For we are necessarily involved in

“the battle between different levels of abstraction, between distinctively understood particularities of places and the necessary abstractions required to take those understandings into a wider realm, the fight to transform militant particularism into something more substantial on the world stage of capitalism” (85). The issue is how we begin to “negotiate between and link across different spatial scales of social theorizing and political action” (93). Rather than thinking about the proper places of ideas, and the proper ideas for places, we need to begin to think about the ways in which ideas are articulated spatially, and spaces articulated theoretically. Is it enough, as contemporary geographers would have it, to think of the local and the global as flexible and strategic relations? Is it enough to follow Neil Smith’s argument (1992) that contemporary events (his example is Tiananmen Square) can be local, regional, national, and global? Is it enough to think about the different ways in which events can be local, or regional, or national, or global?

It seems to me that this is the challenge posed to American cultural studies, speaking as it does from one of the centers of power in an increasingly dense space. What we need are better analyses and better strategies that might be articulated to a progressive politics, one that would speak into and from contemporary America. What we need is to understand how the politics of commitment, alliance, and agency are already being rearticulated in a very real struggle with very high stakes both for the United States and the world. And to develop that, I am willing to practice any kind of cultural studies I can find that may have a chance of succeeding. In that struggle, like so many other things that are absolutely necessary for survival and success, theory is cheap; its space is rather obvious and its places numerous. And like so many things necessary to transform the conditions of survival, politics (and the politically strategic articulation of theory) is costly; and unfortunately its space is rather circumscribed and its places are rare. That is, cultural studies is not about theory; it is about getting a better understanding of what’s going on—the only political/academic question worth asking—especially in a context in which appeals to the possibility of a humane existence are apparently ineffective. It is, as Foucault knew all along, about the complex relationships between knowledge and power.