

THE POLITICS
AND PLEASURES OF
POPULAR CULTURE

HENRY JENKINS,
TARA MCPHERSON,
& JANE SHATTUC,
EDITORS

HOP ON POP



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EDITED BY

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HOP ON POP

I. INTRODUCTION

THE CULTURE THAT STICKS TO
YOUR SKIN: A MANIFESTO FOR
A NEW CULTURAL STUDIES

*Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson,
and Jane Shattuc*

In the 1985 *Mirrorshades* anthology, cyberpunk writer Bruce Sterling issued a call for a new form of science fiction, one less invested in the monumentalism of “the great steam-snorting wonders of the past,” and more invested in the technologies of everyday experience (“the personal computer, the Sony Walkman, the portable telephone, the soft contact lens”). Like the other cyberpunk writers, Sterling responded to these emerging technologies with a mixture of exhilaration and dread, unable to shake his impression of “tech [that] sticks to the skin, responds to the touch . . . pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us.”¹

Sterling’s description of the cyberpunks seems oddly appropriate for *Hop on Pop*, which brings together a group of writers representing an emergent perspective in cultural studies. Like the cyberpunks, we are interested in the everyday, the intimate, the immediate; we reject the monumentalism of canon formation and the distant authority of traditional academic writing. We engage with popular culture as the culture that “sticks to the skin,” that becomes so much a part of us that it becomes increasingly difficult to examine it from a distance. Like the cyberpunks, we confront that popular culture with a profound ambivalence, our pleasures tempered by a volatile mixture of fears, disappointments, and disgust. Just as the cyberpunks intervened at the point where science fiction was beginning to achieve unquestioned cultural respectability, we are the first generation

of cultural scholars to be able to take for granted that popular culture can be studied on its own terms, who can operate inside an academic discipline of cultural studies.

We confront that phase of institutionalization as a moment of freedom, but also one of danger. The hard fights of the past have won us space to reexamine our own relationship to the popular, to rethink our own ties to the general public, and to experiment with new vocabularies for expressing our critical insights. We have found our own voices and we see this book as a chance to show the world what we can do. It is possible to do work on popular culture now that would have been unthinkable little more than a decade ago, work that doesn’t have to bow and scrape to establish the worthiness of the objects of study. The unstable position of the academy in the postindustrial economy, on the other hand, causes uncertainty, as many of the individual contributors to this collection struggle to find jobs. The establishment of a stable base within the academy, if such a base can be called stable when so many can’t find employment, threatens to isolate cultural studies from the larger public sphere, to cut it off from its long tradition of engagement with the open universities and the popular press.

This anthology represents an attempt both to play with our newfound freedom and to secure ground for a new approach. For that reason, we are writing this introductory manifesto first of all for ourselves and for other writers in this emergent tradition to try to articulate what we are doing and to explore both the continuities and breaks we represent with the earlier history of cultural studies. We also write this introduction for those who will judge us on the basis of this work. As we struggle with mentors or with tenure committees, we must explain what it is we are doing and why it looks and feels different from what has come before. And as we think about the future of our respective discipline(s) we must ensure its

continued popular outreach, committing it to the core principle that knowledge about popular culture must recirculate within the popular.

Manifestos are often written in the heat of battle, with a certain anger toward the past, as part of the process of clearing the ground to make way for new constructions. In practice, they often leave only scorched earth in their path, intensifying the intergenerational battles within the academy, rather than bringing about any clear understanding of how what is to come relates to what has come before. We see this manifesto as doing a somewhat different job, explaining what we borrow from our mentors and what we are offering back in return. What this anthology signals is not anything so dramatic as a paradigm shift. This isn't timidity on our part, simply a recognition that there is no need to burn old bridges when what we really need to do is forge new ones. The essays in this volume show (and, we hope, repay) strong debts to previous work in cultural studies. We have inherited a foundation of core insights and a rich vocabulary of methodological approaches. Many of the founders of cultural studies are still with us and are continuing to grow, continuing to watch changes in their intellectual fields and changes in the popular, and continuing to make fresh contributions to our understanding of politics and pleasure. We have also watched the battles over the creation of cultural studies and we have sought new tactics for responding to long-standing criticisms and new reformulations of old binarisms. If change in the academy has often been likened to an oedipal conflict in which the sons and daughters kill their parents in order to make room for their own accomplishments, we are hoping for something closer to a family reunion, where squabbles may surface but where a strong sense of community and tradition is reaffirmed over potato salad and barbecue. The title of this collection, after all, is *Hop on Pop*, not "stomp on pop." If we do our jobs right here, most of the founders

of cultural studies will still be speaking to us after this book comes out, and that is more than can be said for their relations to the generation that came before them.

Despite the title, we don't necessarily see this essay as a traditional-style manifesto for a future theoretical project. For one thing, we think there have been too many manifestos promising things in the abstract that have never or could never be realized in the concrete. The developments we are describing are already taking place and have been taking place for quite some time. The support for this manifesto's claims can be found by reading the essays in this collection. Many of our contributors do not devote their time to proclamations about what cultural studies should be. They are more interested in defining cultural studies by example through their work and in the end, the work in this book speaks for itself. Many of our contributors would be unlikely to sign onto a single ideological or theoretical project. They have been working independently, doing scholarship within varied traditions, disagreeing among themselves as often as agreeing. Many of them would not even recognize each other, since they come from many academic disciplines and from several different national traditions.

Yet we would assert a "family resemblance," a series of traits, some methodological, others stylistic, that define our work. In this introduction, we sketch the contours of a new direction for cultural studies. Of course, the field has already been moving pretty decisively in that direction the whole time we've been editing and putting together this anthology and we are already starting to see the more mature works in this tradition. Not all of the work we reference or include in this anthology clearly embodies all of the traits we will identify. Some are written in a very personal style and others adopt a more distanced voice. Some are more heavily theoretical than others. Some are historical, others take ethnographic approaches, and still

others stay pretty close to textual analysis. Cultural studies is not reducible to a single methodology you can outline, download into your laptop, and take out with you into the cultural arena.

To borrow a concept from Raymond Williams, we speak for an emergent approach to cultural studies. We are not yet dominant and our appearance does not reduce earlier work to residual status. We aren't going to try to turn young Turks into old farts simply with a slip of our pens. However, we are a force of change, a challenge to old ways of thinking and writing. Others can stake out the past and present of cultural studies; we claim a role in its future.

The changes this book commemorates are significant enough that it no longer makes sense to treat our work as a footnote to the Birmingham tradition, yet our ties to the past are firm enough that we don't want to be slid into a new chapter altogether. The temptation is always to understand change in generational terms, and to some degree, the most significant steps toward this new direction have been taken by younger scholars whose intellectual interests reflect different life experiences and cultural backgrounds than those of some of the founders of cultural studies. Yet these changes are being embraced by cultural scholars of all ages, many of whom have been working their entire lifetimes to build bridges beyond the ivory tower to various popular constituencies and are still trying to complicate their understanding of the place of popular culture in their own lives. You will find established names in this collection, alongside scholars whose reputations are still being built. We hope you will see the continuities across these various theoretical, historical, and critical projects.

The goal of rewriting cultural studies extends to the title of this collection, which seems to trigger immediate emotional sparks of passionate pleasure or equally intense discomfort. Some have felt that the title was infantilizing; others that it

represented too crude a reference to oedipal struggles, incest, or opportunism, depending on what meanings get ascribed to "hop" and "pop." Some worried that it would not carry sufficient dignity when they wrote it on their vitae. This anxiety is very real, one challenge of transforming academic language during a phase of disciplinary strength and institutional instability.

The multiplicity of the title's potential connotations, and the intense yet often ambivalent responses to it, make concrete our theoretical and methodological goals. The title reflects our own playful, appropriative engagement with the popular, especially those forms of culture that become a part of our everyday life. Our title pays homage to the formative role that Dr. Seuss's books and popular culture in general played for the postwar generations. More than any previous group, we grew up in an environment steeped in the anarchistic pleasures of popular culture. Our childhoods were fun and we have maintained some of those simple childish and childlike pleasures as we have entered adulthood. We still enjoy the dadaist playfulness of the alliteration of "hop on pop." There is also the irreverent pleasure in using such a name for a serious academic anthology. We wanted the title to challenge the boundary between academic and popular discourses, between work and play, between politics and pleasure, much as the various essays in this collection do. We wanted a title that reflected the diversity of cultural forms and traditions referenced in this book, while at the same time evoking a specific, concrete, and memorable image.

The language of academic titles emerges from a tradition of high culture; we wanted to challenge the ideological hold of that tradition on how we do our work and how we address our audience. Our title thus fuses the playful (which precedes the colon) and the academic (which follows it). One way you can tell we are at a point of transition is that the two still remain separated by that most

scholarly of punctuation marks: remove our colons and we probably wouldn't be considered academics at all.

At one time, we considered calling this collection *The BIG Duke Book of Fun*, yet somehow that seemed just a little too silly—even for the most playful of our contributors. Perhaps that's the spirit with which to take the current title—as a cheeky attempt to teach old dogmas new tricks without feeling that we have compromised the seriousness of our own goals or of our political and intellectual commitments. We are hoping for a cultural studies that can assume the immediacy and vibrancy of its objects of study, that can draw productively on models from vernacular theory and fan criticism, and that can claim new freedoms in the ways it engages with the political. In the end, we know that writing and reading cultural theory is serious work. We also hope it might be fun.

How will you recognize this emergent cultural studies? We think that there are a series of traits or characteristics that, collectively, help to set it off from earlier work on popular culture. Some of these traits build upon much older traditions in the field; some of them reclaim cultural studies' relationship to popular traditions of criticism and debate; some reflect new directions or new locations from which cultural theory might emerge. Most reflect the powerful influence of feminism, queer theory, and other traditions derived from identity politics on the ways that we conceptualize ourselves and our culture. You might think of these traits as distinguishing features—sometimes birthmarks reflecting our parentage, sometimes scars from our painful brushes with academic authorities, and sometimes tattoos with which we adorn ourselves to set us apart from what has come before. When we spot some of these distinguishing features across a crowded conference room, we recognize the writer who bears them as one of our own. We wink. And

we wait for a safe time and place to conduct the conversation.

Defining Characteristics

IMMEDIACY

A long tradition of writers, especially in the American tradition, have acknowledged that the “immediate experience” of popular culture demands our passionate engagement and active participation. Gilbert Seldes and Robert Warshow, for example, saw the immediacy and liveliness of the popular as its defining trait, what set it off from the bourgeois cultural refinement of the nineteenth century that they felt had stifled a more vital American vernacular tradition.² Seldes saw popular culture as liberatory in the ways that it invited intense feelings that he felt were repressed in the sanctioned space of high culture. Perhaps too broad a term, immediacy shorthands several interrelated concepts, such as intensification (the exaggeration of everyday emotions to provoke strong feelings or a release from normal perception), identification (strong attachments to fictional characters or celebrities), and intimacy (the embedding of popular culture into the fabric of our daily lives, into the ways we think about ourselves and the world around us). If “immediacy” is what, according to Pierre Bourdieu, distinguishes the popular from the bourgeois aesthetic, then we should be suspicious of attempts to write about popular culture from a distance. Writing about popular culture requires new epistemologies and new modes of expression that preserve rather than ignore this “immediacy.”

The ease with which academic critics have embraced the ideal of a rational, political, emotional, or “objective” distance reflects their own intellectual histories. Some of the founding figures of this critical tradition were exiles critiquing a culture not their own. Some were working-class intellectuals who saw high culture and high theories

as avenues of escape from their origins. Others struggled to establish a respected intellectual discipline based on the study of the popular. The price of admission into the academy was that we shed our fannish allegiances and enthusiasms at the door, policing our writing for signs of the journalistic and abstracting from our own experiences.

The challenge for our emergent perspective is to write about our own multiple (and often contradictory) involvements, participations, engagements, and identifications with popular culture—without denying, rationalizing, and distorting them. The best cultural critics speak as “insiders” as well as “outsiders.” Writers like Ellen Seiter and Marsha Kinder discuss the place of children’s media and consumer goods within their own families.³ Cathy Griggers describes her own fantasies surrounding *Thelma and Louise*, actively rewriting the film as a fan might.⁴ Tricia Rose speaks of melding what she learned about rap growing up in the Bronx and what she learned as a graduate student at Brown.⁵ They write about the places where popular culture touches their own lives as fans, consumers, thrifters, and parents, provoking a range of emotional responses. In some cases, this relationship may be passionate without being fannish, as represented by recent attempts by writers to explore their conflicted feelings about regional identities or to examine the conservative aspects of popular culture. We can draw on our personal experiences and subjective understandings to critique the popular as well as to embrace it. Even fans are far from uncritical in their relations to cultural producers. However, skeptics have often reduced subjective modes of writing to the “academics as fans” question. We need to start there if we are to understand the perceived opposition between “immediacy” and institutionalized modes of academic writing.

The scholar and the fan, as Joli Jenson notes, remain too closely related to allow for a clean separation: “The Manilow fan knows intimately every

recording (and every version) of Barry’s songs; the Joyce scholar knows intimately every volume (and every version) of Joyce’s oeuvre.” Yet we constantly police the boundary between the two, not simply in terms of the objects of their interest, but also the forms of their attachment: “The obsession of a fan is deemed emotional (low class, uneducated) and therefore dangerous, while the obsession of the aficionado is rational (high class, educated) and therefore benign, even worthy.”⁶ As academics, we are told that our affective relations to popular texts must be cast aside so we may more fully understand how “they work on us.” Romanticizing the fan as engaged in “semiotic guerrilla warfare” simply reverses the polarities without really bridging the gap.

As Lawrence Grossberg has argued, “The collapse of critical distance and the crisis of authority is not epistemological but a concrete historical dilemma called into existence by the fact that, as critical intellectuals, we are inextricably linked to the dominant forms of popular culture; we are fans writing about the terrain, if not the objects, of our own fandom. . . . My existence as a fan, my experiences . . . are the raw material, the starting point of critical research.”⁷ We must embrace our immediate engagement with popular culture as the source of our knowledge and as the motivating force behind our projects.

Writers like David Morley and Michael Schudson are critical of recent efforts to blur the boundary between academic and fan, insisting that our access to educational capital, our ability to shift between multiple cultural codes and move up and down the cultural hierarchy, makes academics fundamentally different from popular audiences.⁸ This warning encourages us to reflect on the differences, as well as the continuities, between our own participation within popular culture and that of other consumers. Yet they make too much of those differences. Contemporary popular culture is consumed as avidly by those of the professional

and educated classes as by those of the working classes. The line that separates an academic writing about comic fandom and a corporate lawyer collecting comics may be less real than imagined. Insisting on those differences may be another way of denying that we, as academics, are implicated within the popular culture we critique.

Moreover, this argument devalues the centrality of popular culture to our cultural identities. Claiming to be a “fan,” for Morley, seems to mean little more than expressing an arbitrary preference. For many of us, being a fan represents a collective cultural and political identity that links us to other cultural communities. Our cultural preferences and allegiances, no less than our racial, sexual, and political identities, are difficult to shed when we write.

In literary studies, the “intimate critique” has been recognized as an important mode of analysis.⁹ In “Me and My Shadow,” Jane Tompkins called for feminists to escape from the “strait-jacket” of “rational” academic language and to draw on powerful feminist traditions of autobiographical and subjective writing. In this important essay, Tompkins adopts a double voice, speaking both in the abstract discourse of theoretical debate and in the more personal voice of someone who “wants to write about their feelings.” The academic “disdain for popular psychology” and passionate language, Tompkins argues, reflects historically gendered splits between public and private, splits that assign women the task of dealing with emotions and men the tasks of dealing with ideas.¹⁰ Norms of academic writing, Tompkins argues, have often denied women their most effective critical tools, forcing them to perform on grounds already defined in masculine terms. A powerful example of subjective criticism, Annette Kuhn’s *Family Secrets* discusses her own relations to family, nation, and popular culture. Kuhn’s rumination on memory and family life is at times shockingly honest and open about her troubled relations with her mother, while offering sophisti-

cated critical insight into family photographs, British melodramas, and news coverage of Queen Elizabeth’s coronation.¹¹

Literary criticism is, of course, not the only traditional discipline to rethink the value of “insider” perspectives. In philosophy, feminists have challenged the “rationality” of distanced and abstract discussion, insisting on the value of the “situated knowledge” that emerges when social agents write from the “standpoint” of their own experiences.¹² In anthropology and sociology, powerful critiques have been launched against the “imperial gaze” of traditional ethnography. Instead, anthropologists are adopting new models that value “local knowledge” and acknowledge the complex social relations between researcher and researched subject.¹³

By adopting these new approaches, philosophers and anthropologists struggle with two challenges: on the one hand, there is a common assumption that only those who live within a culture can meaningfully write about it; on the other, there is the pervasive assumption that only trained academics can meaningfully theorize their cultural practices. Writing from an insider perspective about one’s culture solves neither problem, since our social identities are forged along multiple vectors. We will always be insiders in some senses and outsiders in others. We can participate in cultural communities in many different ways and as participants we may understand involvement on multiple levels. The challenge is to be honest about how we know what we know about popular culture, while at the same time avoiding having our arguments completely swallowed up into narcissistic solipsism.

Some of the earliest works in the Birmingham tradition, such as Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*, emerged from the writers’ own experiences of class mobility and cultural hierarchy.¹⁴ Stuart Hall’s essays have powerful autobiographical passages.¹⁵ Yet many cultural scholars write a deadening BBC standard prose, which seems to speak from no place in particular. Angela Mc-

Robbie challenged the way that early theoretical and scholarly discourse about subcultures wasn't owning up to scholars' own involvement in the subcultures they were studying. In general, academic cultural studies has displaced more personal voices from its core project.¹⁶ As cultural critics become dissertation advisers and tenure review judges, they often insist on traditional standards of rigor and decorum, which are enforced rigidly due to our "colonial cringe" over our chosen objects of study. As a result, we often find ourselves struggling with the same "straitjacket" Jane Tompkins tried to shed. Even in its most abstracted forms, theory can never allow us to fully escape our own subjectivity, the play of our emotions, the tug of our lived experiences. When we deny those vital forces, we are most likely to get the wrong answers or even to ask the wrong questions.

Writing about popular culture from an "up close and personal" perspective has brought new issues to the foreground, such as the place of mass culture within personal and popular memory, the sentimental value attached to melodramatic representations, the complex political valiances of erotic fantasy, or the roles that "camp" or "gossip" play in shaping the queer community's responses to mainstream media. We can not ask or address these questions from the outside looking in; they require the knowledge of our guts, our hearts, and our longings. Only then can we fully account for the complex tugs and pulls of the popular, the way it fits into our lives, the way it "sticks to our skins," and thus explain its contradictory relationships to politics and pleasure. Only then can we produce writing that has the passion and intensity to make our ideas accessible to a broader public. John Hartley, whom we consider a fellow traveler in our emergent cultural studies, has still expressed reservations about this more immediate engagement with the popular, claiming that it "defers too much to informal, experiential knowledge and belittles too much the practice of formal

knowledge production with its attempts to be scrupulous, testable, and open." Hartley urges us instead to reclaim and revalue the "art" of scholarly writing, to take responsibility for our craft and our skills in using certain technologies for analysis and communication. He writes, "It ought to be possible to do justice to and to learn from popular readerships without de-skilling intellectual culture."¹⁷ We certainly agree. What we are calling for is not a rejection of the academy but rather a new relationship between academic and popular modes of engagement that takes the best of both worlds, recognizes and values alternative forms of knowledge production, and seeks to better map the continuities and differences between them. What we are proposing might better be described as the "reskilling" of intellectual culture or perhaps we simply hope not to be deskilled of what we know as members of a popular audience before we are thought to be adequately prepared to enter academic life.

MULTIVALENCE

The major challenge to "academic distance" has come from groups, such as women, queers, blacks, and other minorities, whose relationship to popular culture could never simply be labeled in "insider" or "outsider" terms. These writers express a core ambivalence about popular culture through writing that speaks from multiple vantage points at once. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty write, "Many gay and lesbian popular culture producers and consumers have wondered how they might have access to mainstream culture without denying or losing their oppositional identities, how they might participate without necessarily assimilating and how they might take pleasure in, and make affirmative meanings out of, experiences and artifacts that they have been told do not offer queer pleasures and meanings."¹⁸ Such projects cannot be meaningfully described within a vocabulary of "distance" but require an active, even playful appropriation of cultural materials.

At the same time, these modes of inquiry cannot be simply labeled as “proximate” or “insider” perspectives, since these groups have historically been refused access to cultural production and often have been excluded from representation. Frequently, popular culture has been directed against them, framing their identities in stereotypical and harmful terms.

Their engagement with popular culture cannot be dispassionate, disinterested, or distanced. The stakes are simply too high. Their writing acknowledges the pleasures they have derived from engaging with popular culture as well as their rage and frustration about its silences, exclusions, and assaults on their lives. These writers express contradictory responses to the materials of everyday culture and their own dual status as avid consumers and angry critics.

Laura Kipnis’s “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*” is a textbook example of such analysis, honestly exploring the writer’s contradictory response to contemporary pornography. Far from a “fan” of Larry Flynt, Kipnis explains, “A large part of what impels me to write this essay is my own disgust in reading *Hustler*. In fact, I have wanted to write this essay for several years, but every time I trudge out and buy the latest issue, open it and begin to try to bring analytical powers to bear upon it, I’m just so disgusted that I give up, never quite sure whether this almost automatic response is one of feminist disgust or bourgeois disgust.”¹⁹ In struggling to understand (and contain) her own outrage over *Hustler*’s images, Kipnis creates a more complex analysis of its ideological content. She sees “disgust” as a powerful weapon directed against traditional standards of taste and the class politics that holds them in place. She combines a feminist critique of the magazine that holds it accountable for its misogyny and racism with a class analysis that recognizes that *Hustler* provides a powerful “counter hegemonic” voice for some groups excluded from the cultural mainstream. In confronting her own

ambivalence about *Hustler*, she complicates the either/or judgments so often directed against popular culture, refusing to simply celebrate its transgressive qualities without acknowledging its reactionary politics, refusing to condemn it according to the terms of antiporn feminism without conceding the dangers of policing culture.

Writing about the culture that touches our own lives complicates standard clichés. Writing from high places flattens the phenomenon being examined, treating it in one-dimensional terms; writing closer to the ground gives us a stronger feel for the contours of our culture. As we have adopted these new vantage points, the result has not been an uncritical embrace, nor has it been repulsion, horror, or “disgust” over the ideological complicity of popular texts. Rather, writers increasingly recognize the ways we live with and adjust to contradictions. Texts sometimes do and sometimes don’t control their meanings. Viewers sometimes do and sometimes don’t resist the dominant ideology. People working within the culture industries often compromise but do not always abandon their progressive impulses.

Compared to the old dogmas they are replacing, these new and more qualified claims may seem too hesitant and wishy-washy, yet their power comes precisely in displacing either/or claims with a more multivalent account of how popular culture works. We can neither engage in meaningful conversation with other segments of our society nor can we act with political responsibility until we have a realistic understanding of the culture around us. Complicating previous accounts of popular culture is not an empty academic exercise. In a world where the power to evaluate and rank forms of culture carries tremendous ideological weight, challenging the dominant framing of popular culture has political consequences. Simple univocal accounts of popular culture can be comforting; they can stir us into radical fury; they also are wrong-headed. Insofar as they motivate our political activities, they gen-

erate simplistic, feel-good solutions unlikely to have desired long-term effects. The result is a world where reforming the video-game industry substitutes for confronting the economic and social roots of violence in children's lives.

In *Barbie's Queer Accessories*, Erica Rand offers a political economy of Mattel's Barbie franchise, exploring how its production and marketing decisions shape the meanings attached to the popular fashion doll. Yet Rand also explores the meanings that arise when the doll is integrated into children's lives, especially adult memories of their "queer" and unconventional uses of the toy. She is interested in both the "possibilities" and "limitations" of "cultural subversion"; she is interested in both the power of media producers to constrain meanings and the ability of cultural consumers to escape from those constraints.²⁰ The same consumer may sometimes embrace and sometimes reject, sometimes work within and sometimes think around the ideological construction of femininity, whiteness, and straightness Mattel markets along with Barbie. Even in her account of Mattel, she sees the corporation as something more than a group mind; its decisions are often themselves ideologically contradictory; people at various levels resist or transform corporate ideology through the microdecisions behind cultural production.

For Rand, it is precisely those variable choices, and their complex political implications, that determine how and why popular culture matters. As she explains, "Political battles are fought over and through the manipulation of cultural symbols. People use them to signal political identities, to effect political coalitions, to disrupt and challenge beliefs and connections that have come to seem natural. . . . The world will not change if Brandon and Dylan become lovers and join ACT UP 90210 but it matters that we already know they won't, no matter how often they look soulfully into each other's eyes during the first few seasons."²¹ Rand's vantage point acknowledges the uneven forces in these cultural struggles, even as she also recognizes

the pleasures (and political effectiveness) of fantasies that take us beyond what textual ideologies might allow. She avoids both the fatalism of some Frankfurt School-informed writing and the naive optimism of some work on audience resistance. Popular culture promises us no easy victories.

The complexity of Rand's account reflects her theoretical and methodological eclecticism, her willingness to fuse modes of cultural analysis (such as political economy and audience research), which historically have been opposed to each other; part of the complexity comes from a persistent internal criticism that circles around and around the same objects, finding new vantage points and new frames of reference. Such work refuses stasis, moving back and forth across high and low (as when Kipnis compares the self-portraiture of transvestite porn with the playfulness of Cindy Sherman, or when Lynn Spigel invites us to consider the relative value placed on women's crafts and male pop art appropriations of Barbie, or when Wayne Koestenbaum discusses the connoisseurs of opera as if they were another fan subculture).²² Such work refuses to close off ideological struggles, teaching us new modes of critical thinking rather than offering conclusive judgments. Popular culture matters, for these writers, precisely because its meanings, effects, consequences, and ideologies can't be nailed down. As consumers and as critics, we struggle with this proliferation of meanings as we make sense of our own social lives and cultural identities.

ACCESSIBILITY

Following each year's MLA convention, newspapers in the host city often run articles gently lampooning titles of papers given during the conference. One way to read these jibes is simply as anti-intellectualism on the part of the press, as mean-spirited attacks on academics and their snooty jargon. Certainly, academics have long been misunderstood and misrepresented by the

press, and surely we are not the only field that has developed a specialized vocabulary. Yet what else might we learn from these yearly newspaper articles? Might they also lead us to question whether or not the discursive practices of academic cultural theory have limited its viability and use outside of the university? In an era when the university is increasingly under attack as an out-of-touch and archaic institution, being able to explain what we do (and why we do it) to a larger audience is less a luxury than an imperative. Thus, our emergent approach to cultural studies favors the concrete over the abstract and seeks to translate critical insights about popular culture back into popular practice. We are also interested in modes of scholarship that can move beyond the confines of the academy, modes that the popular press might recognize as parallel to their own.

Accessibility does not mean eliminating complexity or abandoning difficult ideas. It does mean taking responsibility for knowing what your reader will need to know in order to understand your writing. Accessible prose is self-contained, providing the context and explanations that the reader requires to make sense of what she's encountering. This may mean defining buzzwords or footnoting background. It also means clarity, but clarity is not the same as triviality. The demands of teaching also encourage attention to accessibility, helping us to rethink some of our professional practices. Students come to our classes with a broad range of experiences and self-expression that does not always match the privileged languages of theory. The new cultural theory recognizes the value of engaging our students in productive dialogues that begin by also valuing their languages.

This move to explain ourselves in accessible terms is not a pandering to market forces (no matter how often our deans and administrators invoke the "bottom line"). Rather, it represents a serious engagement with the notion of the organic

intellectual, a figure important both in the work of Antonio Gramsci and in the formation of British cultural studies, where the organic intellectual was tied to labor politics.²³ Through these traditions, organic intellectuals have come to be defined as those able to articulate the knowledge, interests, or experiences of their own class or social group within wider social and political fields. This version of the organic intellectual within cultural studies has come under attack for encouraging intellectuals to speak on behalf of others, but despite the challenges such a role presents the academic, it is useful to retain the notion as it applies to work that moves beyond the confines of the academy.²⁴ The organic intellectual not only speaks for her own social group; she also translates the work of the academy for larger publics. Our signaling of the organic intellectual as a key element of the new cultural studies suggests another link between previous forms of cultural studies and our own emergent approach. We herald the emergence of new forms of organic intellectuals tied to new publics and newly organized communities in both "real" and "virtual" spaces.

Today the figure of the organic intellectual often resurfaces as the public intellectual, particularly in discussions of a group of contemporary African American cultural critics, an aggregate that includes bell hooks, Michael Eric Dyson, Gerald Early, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Patricia Williams, Cornel West, Todd Boyd, and Tricia Rose. These critics move beyond the academic in both their writing styles and publication venues, addressing and engaging a wider audience, reaching different publics. They strive, in the words of Tricia Rose, to merge "multiple ways of knowing, of understanding, of interpreting culture and practice, . . . to use theoretical ideas in enabling and creative ways and . . . to occupy as many subject positions as possible."²⁵ In his *Am I Black Enough for You?*, Todd Boyd compares his critical method and style to both rap's sampling and jazz's improvisation, citing the idioms of the black ver-

naacular as at least as central to his work as the insights of Marxism or postmodernism. His work also highlights the degree to which scholars learn from communities and individuals outside the traditional academy.²⁶

Others have also stressed the value of the vernacular to cultural studies. For instance, in his *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*, Thomas McLaughlin claims that to privilege theory as an academic enterprise overlooks the fact that “individuals who do not come of the tradition of philosophical critique are capable of raising questions about dominant cultural assumptions.”²⁷ His work underscores the capacity of a wide range of individuals (fans, cultural practitioners, activists, visionaries) to ask questions about contemporary culture and suggests that we have as much to learn as critics from their questions as these individuals have to learn from our theories. This idea is put into practice in a zine like *Thriftscore*; edited by a nonacademic, this publication produces knowledges that shape academic theory, including an essay in this anthology.²⁸

The vernacular is not the only style of this emergent cultural studies. Rather, we embrace multiple styles of scholarship and of teaching. These might include the pro-sex manifestos of Susie Bright published in trade press volumes like her *Sexual Reality* or in magazines ranging from *Elle* to *On Our Backs*. Or they might take the form of the personal, yet still theoretical, writing and poetry of Eve Sedgwick. Umberto Eco’s translation of structuralism into the novel *The Name of the Rose* also fits the bill. Certainly we embrace the theoretically informed graphic art of Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, works that suggest new forms cultural criticism might take. While we don’t reject what is often termed “high theory,” our approach requires the scholar to think carefully about how such work facilitates cultural or political intervention; we understand that these interventions occur on many fronts, both in and out of the classroom.

This support of varied, more user-friendly styles of writing is a political issue that affects our own thinking, teaching, and influence outside the university. The emergent cultural studies challenges what theory can look like. It brings theory to new spaces.

Theory, for instance, might look like journalism, and journalism can look like theory. In fact, the relation between journalism and cultural studies has a long history, shaped differently under different national traditions. To cite one example, John Frow and Meaghan Morris describe the history of Australian cultural studies as being comprised to a great degree of “the partly academic but primarily constituency-oriented work of journalist-critics.” They urge us to consider “the actual practices developed by real intellectuals in Australia” and understand that the popular media can be open to “exchanging ideas, rhetoric and research images.”²⁹ They sketch quite a list of scholars they would include in this tradition, and pay particular attention to the careers of adult educator and radio critic John Flaus and of feminist critic Sylvia Lawson. British cultural studies has also benefited from the close relationship between scholarship and journalism and from the development of the Open University. Richard Dyer’s career is marked by frequent publication in nonacademic venues, and, as a critic, he moves easily between the ivory tower and less hallowed venues. Indeed, the wide draw of a rack magazine like *Marxism Today* in Britain or of *Ms.* in the United States suggests that the division between the academic and the journalistic has never been firmly drawn (nor need it be.) This insight is shared by a generation of younger cultural critics.³⁰ Faced with a dwindling market for “traditional” academic jobs in the United States, many of these theorists have turned to other publication sites. Hank Sartin, John Corbett, Rick Wojcik, and others blur the lines between academic and “popular” writing and do much of their work outside of the academy. Other university-based critics like Cindy

Fuchs, Judith Halberstam, Elayne Rapping, Susan Douglas, bell hooks, and Todd Boyd write regularly for non-academic magazines and papers. While their “popular” writing may be stylistically different from their more academic work, the former is no less important or theoretically savvy than the latter. Following the events of September 11 the practice of staging teach-ins has also reemerged in many universities and locales, allowing interaction between community activists, students, and professors.

Borrowing a term from computer lingo, Sandy Stone has written about the importance of the cultural scholar’s ability to “code-switch,” meaning that it is important that we learn to speak to diverse audiences about our work and why it is important. Her own scholarship and performances reach a wide range of constituencies, including social scientists, media scholars, computer programmers, visual artists, web surfers, and technocrats. Code-switching also gives the scholar an opportunity to interact with communities and enterprises outside of the academy. Cultural scholars consult and work for computer companies and TV shows, speak on talk radio, influence national and local policy decisions, work with web designers, write zines, liner notes, and museum catalogs, and play in bands. These activities are not “more real” or more political than traditional academic scholarship and should not replace it, but they do broaden the cultural spheres from which cultural studies can challenge the dominant ideology.

Finally, a greater focus on accessible language can also affect how cultural studies impacts the academy. One of the great strengths of cultural studies has always been its independence from any one discipline, which has allowed cultural studies to bring together scholars from many fields. A commitment to a more accessible style of scholarship is also a commitment to a cultural studies that can remain interdisciplinary, encourage new forms of pedagogy, and perhaps reach our more resistant colleagues in the natural and applied sci-

ences. If we are not content simply to preach to the converted, cultural studies must take seriously attempts to broaden its reach and appeal.

PARTICULARITY

Details matter. In a far-reaching study, Carlo Ginzburg traces how the theoretical traditions of the humanities and social sciences emerged from a need to explore and interpret fine details of our cultural environment with the same precision with which earlier humans could trace patterns in the natural environment. Ginzburg links hunter-gatherers’ attempts to develop a primitive “science of the concrete” from their study of “tracks on the ground, broken branches, excrement, tufts of hair, entangled feathers, stagnating odors” with the science of “clues,” represented by Giovanni Morelli’s contributions to art history, Sigmund Freud’s contributions to psychology, and Arthur Conan Doyle’s contributions to criminology.³¹ In each case, knowledge emerged from our study of concrete details and method centered around the ways we scrutinized and formed deductions from particulars. Our initial assumptions and global theories are tested against the materiality or particularity of found objects.

Ginzburg’s essay helps us to better understand how different methodological traditions relate to details. Some traditions in cultural studies start with broad theoretical generalizations, seeking concrete details only as examples that will neatly confirm their more abstract analysis. In their worst cases, the only proper nouns will be the names of theorists. In the emergent cultural studies, particular examples motivate theoretical and historical inquiry, posing questions or challenges to the critic’s initial perceptions and forcing a search for more appropriate models. In these cases, the concrete details of popular culture resist easy assimilation into prefabricated theories.

The dominant form of writing within this tradition is the case study, which makes modest theoretical claims but details a particular example

of popular culture at work. Scott Bukatman, for example, takes as his starting point the odd observation that William Gibson wrote *Neuromancer* on a manual typewriter, unpacking this anecdote throughout an essay that circles around the history of the typewriter and its impact on American culture.³² Ellen Seiter analyzes the physical layout of Toys 'R' Us and contrasts it with the space of more elite toy shops, using this analysis of retail space to explore how class differences shape patterns of cultural consumption.³³ Of course, the case study hardly originates with this emergent tradition. Rather, the closely detailed analysis of particular moments in the production, circulation, and reception of popular culture was a cornerstone of the early Birmingham School writers, who made deft use of particular examples to help untangle the more obscure and abstract formulations of European theory.

In promoting the case study as an analytic tool we should be attentive to its larger history. We might well seek models in foundational work in the disciplines from which cultural studies has emerged, in the "thick description" in anthropology or the New Historicists' elaborate use of the anecdote.³⁴ Exemplars might include Clifford Geertz's account of the Balinese cockfight or Robert Darnton's exposition of the "great cat massacre," works that bridge the divide between archival research and textual analysis, between ethnographic investigation and cultural critique.³⁵ These rich, multivalent essays are sparked by the discovery of a telling or surprising detail—Darnton's confusion over why a particular group of French printshop workers found the idea of burning cats funny or Geertz's stumbling upon a cockfight. Their need for a fuller understanding drives them to ask fresh questions that might not have come readily from preexisting theoretical positions. As Darnton writes, "Anthropologists have found that the best points of entry in an attempt to penetrate an alien culture can be those where it seems to be most opaque. When you realize that

you aren't getting something—a joke, a proverb, a ceremony—that is particularly meaningful to the natives, you can see where to grasp a foreign system of meaning in order to unravel it."³⁶

Those of us who write about our own cultures have discovered similar points of entry, looking for places where theories chafe against the skin of our own bodies and don't fit the shape of our own experience. Trying to bridge that gap between theory and experience can lead us to more nuanced theories of how popular culture works. This impulse has shaped the best contemporary work on popular culture, work which might adopt a range of models (close textual analysis, ethnography, historical research), either singularly or in combination, and which forces a dialogue between abstract generalization and particular details.

In the case of popular culture, this attention to the particular takes on special importance. If popular culture is always already the site of commodification and alienation, of ideological manipulation, or of cultural resistance, the particulars matter little. Yet the best contemporary essays explode with details, offering exceptions, qualifications, and complications for such master theories. Understanding the particularity of popular culture alters our glib assumptions that it is formulaic, that it always repeats the same messages, that it always tells the same stories and serves the same interests. Looking at concrete moments of cultural production, circulation, and reception helps us to understand the range of possibilities within popular genres and the complex struggles that surround any cultural text.

This attention to details reflects not only the academic's search for "clues," but the fan's celebration of the particular object of his or her fascination. The shift in television studies might be understood in terms of the move from totalizing claims about television as a cultural system toward attention to local shifts within specific series. Marc Dolan's account of the "peaks and valleys of serial creativity" in *Twin Peaks*, for ex-

ample, explains shifts in network programming that emphasize serialization and a more acute sense of program history, tracing how David Lynch's series recognizes or fails to achieve its artistic potential, episode by episode, season by season.³⁷ Dolan's essay merges a fan's attention to individual episodes with an academic's understanding of larger social and cultural contexts. Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for TV* examines the representation of early television across different genres of programming, advertisements, advice literature, and popular magazine stories.³⁸ Spigel's book suggests not one but many different ways that these discourses helped consumers negotiate the anxieties and utopian fantasies surrounding the introduction of this new media technology into the home.

As writers like Virginia Nightingale and James Kincaid have argued, the challenge is to find meaningful ways to assess these details, since not every example is equally representative, not every case study offers us the whole truth, and not every interpretation is equally compelling or illuminating.³⁹ The historian and ethnographer engage in a process of accessing voices and foregrounding exemplars. The preponderance of details in the new cultural studies suggests a direct record of "what actually happened" or how audiences "really think" about a particular program. We must remember that the details don't speak for themselves; it matters how they are framed and deciphered. Claims about concrete examples still represent interpretations and speculations. When all is said and done, ethnography and history represent alternative modes of theorizing.

We need to recognize and acknowledge the contingent nature of our analysis, to avoid making totalizing generalizations until we have developed a sufficiently rich set of case studies to illuminate larger social and cultural processes. We need to engage in constant critique, questioning the adequacy of our evidence. Such work demands that we be explicit about the interpretive frameworks

and procedures we use and the standards by which we select one example over another. The best writing in contemporary cultural studies mixes and matches different modes of cultural analysis, merging history, theory and criticism, or combining ethnographic observation with larger historiographic frameworks, trying to place the details into the most meaningful context.

CONTEXTUALISM

This approach to cultural studies embraces contextualism. We view popular texts not as discrete entities that stand alone but instead exist in relation to a broad range of other discourses, placing media production and consumption within a vast social and cultural configuration of competing voices and positions. Rather than canonize a text for its intrinsic or inherent value, we try to understand and articulate more fully the frameworks within which individual texts are produced, circulated, and consumed. As such, the emerging cultural studies deals with representative rather than monumental texts and is interested in texts in context rather than in texts as isolated phenomena. Studying texts in context also suggests that their meanings are subject to change.

This concern with contextualism reflects the impact and importance of the lessons of work like Richard Dyer's *Stars* and Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott's *Bond and Beyond*, projects that challenged the primacy of the text in the study of fictional and popular forms.⁴⁰ English and literature departments have traditionally focused on the close examination of specific texts, a practice that served both to isolate the object of study from the social networks in which it was embedded and to enable the canonization of particular texts as monuments of high culture. In response to the prevalence of textual studies, some critics turned to the study of the audience, zeroing in on practices of consumption. Dyer, Bennett, Woollacott, and others called for a different understanding of the text: they focused on situating an individual

work or figure within a constantly mobile set of intertextual relations; that is, they strove to understand a single artifact in relation to other social events. Dyer's groundbreaking work on the study of stars insisted that "stars are, like all significations, also and always social facts" (1). He urges us to broaden our study of texts beyond formal analysis, for "you need to know what kind of thing a text is in society in order to know what kind of questions you can legitimately pose of it" (2). He also understood that his demystification and analysis of a star like Marilyn Monroe always existed alongside his knowledge that, when "I see her, I catch my breath" (184).

In their study of the "James Bond phenomenon," Bennett and Woollacott situate their reading of this popular hero within a broad network of social and textual relationships. While they carefully examine the formal and narrative devices of the Bond novels and films, they utilize these analyses to illustrate how the figure of Bond has served as a nodal point to condense and articulate a wide range of cultural and political positions. Furthermore, this process of condensation was and is a mobile one; Bond's meaning is not fixed in time and space but is subject to change and variation. Their view of "texts as sites around which a constantly varying and always many faceted range of cultural and ideological transactions are conducted" (8) influences the role of contextualism for the new cultural studies.

A similar understanding of context has been important in other academic disciplines, including the field of labor (and social) history. Rather than simply unearthing or discovering the facts of history, many of these historians strive to situate these "facts" within a larger social and ideological frame, indicating the influence of both E. P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman on the field. In *Counter Cultures*, feminist historian Susan Porter Benson details the history of the department store, examining this cultural institution from many different contexts. Her multiperspectival reading al-

lows her to understand the early-twentieth-century department store not as a monolith of industrial capitalism but as a site of struggle between the competing interests of saleswomen, managers, owners, and customers.⁴¹ These historians understand that traditional historical accounts, in their pursuit of the general and universal, often omit the experiences of the poor, the working class, women, and minorities. Contextualizing historical detail within broader social and ideological frameworks can illuminate the experiences of the underrepresented.

The important work of historian David Roediger draws from both the traditions of labor history and of cultural studies as he investigates the social and historical construction of whiteness. In both *The Wages of Whiteness* and *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, Roediger examines the varying ways whiteness has functioned in American history as a kind of "extra" wage for certain members of the working class, often serving to solidify white identity in opposition to blackness.⁴² He notes, for instance, that the Irish in America were not unquestioningly seen as "white"; rather, they strategically came to identify themselves as white to gain access to white privilege. But whiteness doesn't always undermine cross-racial alliance. By paying close attention to context, Roediger is also able to investigate those moments when allegiance to whiteness was superseded by class or gender interests, and he recognizes that exploring these moments can offer powerful clues for contemporary struggles for racial justice. Here, Roediger's use of context powerfully links past events to contemporary politics; the reading of the past in the service of the present is also a hallmark of cultural studies, distinguishing it from many traditional disciplines. Contextualism also means situating our readings in terms of their impact on contemporary life.

Cultural studies does not confine its use of context to the study of the past. Contextualism is also a vital aspect of contemporary investiga-

tions of popular culture, and this can often lead to what might seem like odd or eclectic juxtapositions of texts and practices. Still, it is understood that knowledge (about texts, events, or practices) is always situated. For instance, in her essay “On the Cutting Edge,” Anne Balsamo seeks to understand the meaning of cosmetic surgery in contemporary society. Her examination of a wide range of medical texts, advertisements, and imaging technologies leads Balsamo to conclude that, in many ways, “cosmetic surgery illustrates a technological colonization of women’s bodies.”⁴³ But Balsamo also moves to situate cosmetic surgery within broader cultural practices of body modification (from ear piercing to tattooing), noting that we must refrain from the too-easy privileging of the “natural body.” Much as in Kipnis’s work, Balsamo’s contextual reading complicates her analysis, preventing her from dismissing cosmetic surgery as inherently bad, but it does not erase her ambivalence about the complex ways cosmetic surgery gets packaged and realized in our culture. Thus, the emergent cultural studies explores the importance of context without relinquishing the right to judge a work’s value or impact. To see context as situational does not mean that we see all situations as of equal relevance or that we embrace an uncritical pluralism.

This understanding of context—the realization that the meaning of texts or practices exists only in relation to complex social and cultural forces—supersedes an attachment to one rigid, global theory. We are not interested in narrowly defining the methods by which an emerging cultural studies should proceed. Cary Nelson has described cultural studies “as a ghostly discipline with shifting borders and unstable contents,” arguing that “it needs to continue being so.”⁴⁴ To be contextual is to understand that cultural studies is relational. Thus, while a cultural scholar may utilize the techniques of semiotics or close textual reading (or psychoanalysis or ethnography or oral

history), none of these tools itself defines what cultural studies is or should be.

SITUATIONALISM

If the emergent cultural studies is contextual, it is also situational, for we know that texts and practices have temporal and spatial properties. We also see the products of the new cultural studies, its own texts and practices, as existing in particular places at particular times for particular audiences. Put differently, we write for specific and concrete situations, with a purpose in space and time. In recent years, this work has included the attempt by academics to engage in public debates emerging in the popular press, debates about the digital revolution, about political correctness, about NEH or PBS funding, about globalization, and about warfare and terrorism. What we say today about these issues (and how we say it) is not the same as it will be in the future when different political and cultural situations may demand a different strategy. This concern with the situational is already manifested in a number of key debates in cultural studies, debates that focus on space, place, and time, on the global and the local, and on the public and the private.

The local was a key terrain for the struggles of the New Left as it moved into the 1970s, as two popular bumper sticker slogans from that period attest: “The Personal is Political” and “Think Globally, Act Locally.” Likewise, the familiar union labor call to “support your local” combined labor politics with a concern for specific geographies, while one-time Speaker of the House “Tip” O’Neill’s refrain, “All politics are local,” also recognized the need for a grounded political practice. While these slogans may imply for some a retreat into the rigid boundaries of identity politics or other parochialisms, the new cultural studies understands them as holding the terms “local” and “global” (or “private” and “public”) in a productive tension. We believe that local politics matter,

that the practices of situated, everyday life have a ripple effect on the culture at large, and that the abstraction of a strictly global politics may disempower rather than empower marginalized social groups. We also recognize that the local and the everyday are not the same everywhere and that global processes do have an impact on how we can study, understand, or experience the local. We want to keep larger questions of power or inequality in focus, and we read these impacts as they are situated in both the local and the global.

One intellectual legacy of the feminist mantra “the personal is political” can be found in the feminist contributions to the field of geography, an academic discipline concerned with how experiences are placed or situated. Over the past twenty years, urban geographers such as Edward Soja and David Harvey have increasingly detailed the political ramifications of space, insisting that spatial constructions are as central to our understandings of everyday life as are temporal ones. They encourage us to think through the ways in which the spaces we inhabit shape our views of the world and of our selves, precisely situating us.⁴⁵ As such, space is a political rather than a natural category. For instance, a map does not neutrally represent a geographic area; it selectively foregrounds some areas at the expense of others. While these insights help to remind us of the spatial realities of daily experience, the work of Soja and Harvey has been taken to task by feminist geographers for displaying a tendency to privilege a view from above. For instance, Doreen Massey points out that Soja’s work on Los Angeles tends toward the “overview,” a stance that is driven by a need for “mastery” and “detachment,” along with the “authority of the viewer which it helps to construct.”⁴⁶ Soja and Harvey remain attached (though to differing degrees) to a modernist project that privileges a universal (i.e., white, male) perspective. Their understanding of space is still trapped within this global point of view, a perspective that allows Soja to

portray the overall demographic make-up of Los Angeles without ever reaching a street-level vantage point that might tell a different story.

Massey explains that this tendency to think only of the geographic big picture tends both “to rob places . . . of their individual specificity” and “to assign virtually all causality to a somehow unlocatable level of the global” (117). She encourages a turn to the local and to place, insisting that such a vantage point can also lead us to an understanding of wider terrains. She notes that specific places exist at the juncture of intersecting social relations, “tying any particular locality into wider relations and processes in which other places are implicated too.” Thus, “theory is not restricted to the sphere of the big, grand phenomena alone . . . the understanding of any locality must precisely draw on the links beyond its boundaries” (120). To be situated demands that one understand how the local impacts the global and vice versa. Massey and other feminist theorists of space put their theory into practice in their investigations of regional communities, domestic architecture, and various work places, outlining how local spatial practices affect our experiences of gender, race, and class. For instance, in *Gendered Spaces*, Daphne Spain explores the degree to which the very architectural design of the plantation home reinforced the Old South’s social patterns of gender and racial inequity.⁴⁷

French theorists like Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre have also expressed an interest in the local and the situated, offering a view from the streets, from the urban pedestrian.⁴⁸ Still, work such as de Certeau’s often feels oddly unspecific, as if the realities of a particular city matter less than the generalized experience of walking. Any city might do, though surely walking in Los Angeles is quite different from walking in New York, let alone Tokyo or Lima. Our approach to cultural studies respects the specificity and integrity of the situation and also recognizes that walking (or driving)

in a city as a woman or a minority is not the same as walking as a white man. Meaghan Morris teases out these specific spatial complexities in her essay “Things to Do with Shopping Centres” in which she rejects a semiotic reading designed to show “how shopping centres are all the same everywhere.”⁴⁹ Instead, she is concerned with the ways in which “particular centres strive to become ‘special,’ for better or worse, in the everyday lives of women in local communities” (298), and urges us to write the histories of how women inhabit particular places. Her approach moves between many types of reading, including the concerns of managers, urban planners, and local shoppers, allowing her to trace the tensions inherent in one place. This turn to the particular exemplifies the concerns of the new cultural studies, as does Morris’s insight that “in researching the history of . . . a particular place, however, one is obliged to consider how it works in concrete social circumstances that inflect in turn, its workings—and one is obliged to learn from that place, make discoveries, change the drift of one’s analysis, rather than use it as a site of theoretical self-justification” (306–7).

This call to examine the particular, the local, and the situated has recently had an impact in cultural studies’ engagement with mass media as well. Scholars like Anna McCarthy and Victoria Johnson have begun to investigate how our experiences of particular places are influenced by broadcast media that are not confined to a local sphere.⁵⁰ In her work on television viewing in 1950s Chicago pubs, McCarthy details how TV brought together specific working-class publics, highlighting television’s role outside the domestic sphere. Johnson’s work explores how TV mediates between the local and the national, especially in its constructions of the American “heartland.” For instance, her examination of *The Lawrence Welk Show* illustrates how national mass media serves to locate “family values” in particular geographic areas like the Midwest. McCarthy’s and Johnson’s

research pays particular attention to the local, but it is also interested in understanding how places are connected to one another at specific times. Readings such as these, as well as work that investigates the impact and reworkings of U.S. media in other countries, suggest that global forces, while powerful, are never absolute. They are also worked through at the level of the local in diverse and unpredictable ways.

This concern with the specificity of place is not, of course, new to cultural studies. At its best, the tradition of cultural studies inaugurated at the Birmingham Centre was preeminently focused on the specificities and particularities of British life. While this tradition is an important legacy for cultural studies as a whole, Cary Nelson notes that much of their work was “concerned with defining a distinctly British heritage” and that thus much “British subcultural theory . . . is not well suited” to describing the structures of leisure peculiar to American life.⁵¹ An attention to the situational demands that one’s approach and methodology be flexible; as such, a simple and strict allegiance to all that emanates from Birmingham limits what cultural studies might achieve. Indeed, what cultural studies means in Birmingham today is not what it meant to Richard Hoggart or Raymond Williams.

Larry Grossberg has written that “there is . . . often a certain fetishization of the local. Cultural analysts are constantly harangued to bring their analysis ‘down’ to the level of the specific. . . . Yet such celebrations of the local are often untheorized, based on . . . a model of inductive empiricism.”⁵² But an engagement with the local or situational does not necessarily entail an abandonment of theory; rather, the new cultural studies understands that to explore how the particularities of the local intersect with other networks of power and experience is one way to theorize specific temporal and spatial situations. For instance, in his exploration of the politics of popular music in East Los Angeles, George Lipsitz traces

both the global influences that shape this music and the precise and particular ways in which such music reflects life in a specific locale.⁵³ The music of Chicano rock bands enters into a network of global capitalism while also representing a real and concrete place and the many diverse histories that shape that place. In this approach, an appreciation of the particular is not a “fetishization of the local” but instead offers a way to move beyond the false polarization of the empirical and the theoretical, the global and the local, and the public and the private. A focus on the situational also allows one to ask crucial questions about how notions of identity, belonging, and experience are related to notions of place, space, and time. At its best, theory is not antithetical to details.

*On Politics and Pleasures:
Notes Toward a Conclusion*

If, as discussed earlier, the title of this volume is open to multiple interpretations, our subtitle, “The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture,” also charts a volatile terrain. The relationship between “politics” and “pleasure” has been a hotly debated issue in cultural studies. The fear that cultural studies has been de-politicized by a privileging of the pleasures of popular culture is now a commonplace critique of the Americanization of cultural studies, a position voiced in such works as Jim McGuigan’s *Cultural Populism* and in Michael Budd and colleagues’ “The Affirmative Character of U.S. Cultural Studies.”⁵⁴ For instance, this latter essay takes American cultural studies to task for failing to consider the relations of culture to “larger economic processes” (176) and for “confusing active reception with political activity” (169).

Such work served to highlight the need for cultural studies to think carefully about a rhetoric of “subversion” and “resistance” that had emerged within the field, but it simultaneously reinforced the tendency to reduce all of cultural studies to a

simple binary of production versus consumption. In such a formulation, the site of production becomes the realm of politics, while the site of consumption only speaks of pleasure. As the essays in this volume attest, the relations between pleasure (or pain) and politics is always more complicated. While many of the essays do explore how popular culture can be pleasurable, they also recognize that these pleasures exist in a complex relation to larger socio-economic forces, that one person’s pleasure can cause another person pain. Todd Gitlin maintains that “it is pure sloppiness to conclude that culture or pleasure is politics,” but this formulation fails to understand that the political is at least partially constituted through culture and the popular.⁵⁵

Arguments such as Gitlin’s are limited on at least two counts. First, they tend to view the political as only occurring on the large or global scale. Such a position often raises the rhetorical question, “What can studying the local or the popular do about the war in Bosnia (or the Gulf of Afghanistan)?” This catchall critique cannot recognize that the study of the popular *does* have much to tell us about the politics of warfare. For instance, by understanding how the 1991 Gulf War got played out on the home front in, say, media coverage of the Super Bowl, one can begin to understand the ideological ties between popular conceptions of masculinity, domesticity, and the nation. This understanding is political. Likewise, understanding local notions of family and domesticity have everything to tell us about the U.S. media coverage of the Serbian campaign of rape waged against women during the war in Bosnia. Certainly, any understanding of the American “war on terrorism” post–September 11 must also examine the mass mediations of “ground zero,” bringing local and global together.

Gitlin’s position also reduces the terrain of the political (not to mention the economic) to a very narrow field, a conception of the political tied to Old Left formulations and perhaps out of tune

with the contemporary social landscape and the often mobile social groups that inhabit it. In an insightful essay entitled “Post-Marxism and Cultural Studies,” Angela McRobbie has argued that “it is increasingly in culture that politics is constructed as a discourse; it is here that popular assent in a democratic society is sought.”⁵⁶ Rather than refuse to see connections between the daily experience of popular culture (or the identities it helps produce) and the realm of the political, McRobbie argues that in an increasingly post-industrial society we need to rethink how we understand the connections between the political, the cultural, the ideological, and the economic. While the critics of the “affirmative character” of cultural studies lament the loss of, in the words of Budd et al., “direct thinking about and behavior in politics” (178), the emergent cultural studies understands, in McRobbie’s terms, that current social conditions and “the pluralities of emergent identities need not mean the loss of political capacity. Instead, they point the way to new forms of struggle” and new forms of the political (723).

McRobbie’s reconceptualization of politics borrows heavily from the project of radical democracy as articulated by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and others.⁵⁷ This project calls for new tactics and advocates a politics of alliance that is more flexible and contingent than the grand claims of more traditional Marxist theory. Such a position accepts that culture and power are not only related, but related in contingent and historically specific ways that preclude a grand and total theory of politics. But advocating a flexible political strategy does not mean that a radical democracy is characterized by passivity, reaction, or endless pluralism. Instead, according to McRobbie, “what we have to expect is not the growing simplification of the class structure as predicted by Marx, . . . but rather the development of a multiplicity of partial and fragmented identities, each with its own role to play in the pursuit of radical democracy” (724). This fragmentation sets the stage for “the possibility of forming chains of con-

nection and articulation across different interest groups” (724), a process that also allows us to envision and move toward other possible (and hopefully pleasurable) futures.

Such a vision of the political recognizes that any viable politics must begin in the spaces people already inhabit, and here the study of popular culture offers fertile ground for understanding the contemporary shape of people’s hopes and antagonisms. This does not mean one fetishizes where one is from or retreats to a separatist identity politics, but that politics must begin from somewhere even while we are busy creating and recreating, in the words of Stuart Hall, “imaginary, knowable places.” We understand the benefits to be had from a tactical use of identity politics but also know the limits of a fixed politics of identity when one wishes to form productive alliances. Thus, a political position does not derive from fixed origins but from shared, contingent, and temporary places. Popular culture is one area around which such places take shape and are organized.

We recognize that to call for a flexible politics of alliance is a tricky business, for it makes the outlining and privileging of one specific political practice impossible. It also leads to a certain level of abstraction as the foregoing no doubt makes clear. Yet our very commitment to flexibility and specificity makes it hard to be specific when defining the political. Radical democracy is often abstract until the level of praxis. We share an affinity with the political and organizational strategies of alliances like ACT UP, the riot grrls, the WTO protests, and Greenpeace, but also recognize that politics can take other forms, including theoretical excursions less clearly linked to political activism. In fact, we embrace Stuart Hall’s insight that theory is an important “detour on the way to something more important” and believe that our intellectual work is political.⁵⁸ Politics takes many forms and many valences, ranging from volunteering at a local school to organizing trade unions to intellectual labor. The inherent value of these forms (or the relations between them) is never

fixed. Rather than offer one rigid definition of the relation of the political to the popular, we want to consider briefly one example of political alliance that speaks to the power of the popular.

Bad Subjects: Political Education for Everyday Life began in 1992 as a print newsletter written largely by a group of Berkeley graduate students. Its first issue had a run of about 250 copies, the second about 400, and the editors encouraged a policy of "xerox and distribute" among readers. The newsletter, now an online webzine (<http://eserver.org/bs>), is published by the Bad Subjects Collective and reaches an audience in the thousands. An extensive Web site chronicles back issues, introduces visitors to the newsletter and the collective, invites them to join an Internet discussion group, and solicits writers and workers for the collective. What began as a local effort to link the political and the everyday and to examine the relationship of intellectuals to these links (while also creating a productive space for underemployed young scholars) has evolved into an alliance with a global reach.

While the Bad Subjects often espouse a more manifesto-like style than we've advocated in these pages, their interests parallel many of the concerns we have highlighted throughout this introduction. Their first introductory essay proclaims that "we at BAD SUBJECTS believe that the personal is political; we also believe that the left needs to rethink seriously its understanding of the connections between the personal and the political."⁵⁹ The collective also strives to address a public beyond the walls of the academy and takes seriously questions about just what responsibilities the academic has to a wider community. Generally, they do not position themselves as having all the answers, but they realize that taking on certain questions is imperative. "It will take us a lot of time and practice to figure out just what it would mean to conceive of ourselves as public intellectuals. This is where Bad Subjects is relevant. The purpose behind Bad Subjects . . . is to provide a public forum, however limited, in which leftists and progressives

can experiment with imagining and building some kind of new public culture."⁶⁰ Though these introductory essays tend to be fairly general, most essays in *Bad Subjects* directly engage with everyday life, addressing topics as varied as addiction, immigration, the Christian Right, cyberspace communities, and *The X-Files*. Through these essays, the collective both explores the contradictions and complexities of popular culture and sketches a vision of other possible worlds, of "other fictions worth believing in."

The futures they outline do not perfectly coincide with the futures we might advocate. Indeed, it is clear that even the members of their collective sometimes disagree, and we are often more comfortable with their specific investigations of culture than with their more abstract theoretical proclamations. Still, they do offer a model of what alliance across difference might look like and of what an engagement with the politics and pleasures of popular culture might produce. We find the urgency and energy of their work inspiring and see it as a viable model of the emergent cultural studies. This spirit is continued and developed in the essays that constitute *Hop on Pop*.

Of course, as editors, our own views of what constitutes the political (or even the popular) often conflict. The process of producing this volume has taught each of us much about our own beliefs and about working as a collective (if a small one.) Despite our disagreements over exact titles or essays or over the relative role of the fan, of theory, or of economics in cultural studies, we each remain firmly committed to the notion that the popular is political and sometimes pleasurable.

Notes

- 1 Bruce Sterling, "Introduction," in *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, ed. Bruce Sterling (New York: Ace, 1988). The cyberpunks were a movement within science fiction associated with such writers as Sterling, William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, Pat Cadigan, Lewis Shiner, and Neil Stephenson who showed increased

- awareness of the role of media and global capitalism in shaping contemporary social life. The cyberpunks set their stories in vividly described near-future societies struggling with the repercussions of our contemporary economic and cultural environment. Cyberpunk has often been described as a form of postmodern fiction, but the case can be made that it is strongly influenced by cultural studies' focus on subcultural resistance and appropriation. For a range of critical responses to cyberpunk (although tilted toward the postmodern reading), see Larry McCaffrey, ed., *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).
- 2 Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1924); Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theater, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964).
 - 3 Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
 - 4 Cathy Griggers, "Thelma and Louise and the Cultural Generation of the New Butch-Femme," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: AFI/Routledge, 1993), 129–41.
 - 5 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).
 - 6 Joli Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization" in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 19–28, 21.
 - 7 Lawrence Grossberg, "'It's a Sin': Politics, Postmodernity and the Popular," in *Dancing in Spite of Myself: Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 250–51.
 - 8 David Morley, *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992); Michael Schudson, "The New Validation of Popular Culture: Sense and Sentimentality in Academia," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4(1) (1987): 51–68.
 - 9 See, for example, Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar, eds., *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Marianna Torgovnick, ed., *Eloquent Obsessions: Writing Cultural Criticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Beverley Skeggs, ed., *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
 - 10 Jane Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow" in *The Intimate Critique*, ed. Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar, 30, 24, 39.
 - 11 Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (New York: Verso, 1995).
 - 12 See, for example, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
 - 13 See, for example, Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon, 1993); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
 - 14 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin, 1958).
 - 15 Stuart Hall and David Morley, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
 - 16 Angela McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique," in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Printed Word*, ed. Simon Firth and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 66–80.
 - 17 John Hartley, *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture* (London: Edward Arnold, 1998), 66.
 - 18 Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, eds., *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 1–2.
 - 19 Laura Kipnis, "(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 378.
 - 20 Erica Rand, *Barbie's Queer Accessories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 5.
 - 21 Ibid.
 - 22 Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (New York: Grove, 1996); Lynn Spiegel, "Barbies without Ken: Femininity, Feminism, and the Art-Culture System," in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage, 1994).
 - 23 See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975); and Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Lega-

- cies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, 277–86. Gramsci contrasts the organic intellectual to the traditional intellectual, a figure he aligns with the status quo. The organic intellectual emerges from a subaltern class, representing their concerns within the public sphere.
- 24 Considerations of the figure of the organic intellectual can be found in Meaghan Morris, "Banality in Cultural Studies," in *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 14–43; and Tony Bennett, "Putting Policy into Cultural Studies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, 23–33. Hall also expresses some reservations about the organic intellectual in "Cultural Studies."
 - 25 Rose, *Black Noise*, 185.
 - 26 Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).
 - 27 Thomas McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 5.
 - 28 *Thriftscore* was published by Al Hoff, who can be contacted at P.O. Box 90282, Pittsburgh, PA 15224.
 - 29 John Frow and Meaghan Morris, "Australian Cultural Studies," in *What Is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (London: Arnold, 1996), 362.
 - 30 Of course, before the past few generations of academic specialization, many critics bridged scholarly and journalistic writing, as past issues of nonacademic journals such as *Dissent*, *Saturday Review*, and *Partisan Review* amply illustrate.
 - 31 Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 000.
 - 32 Scott Bukatman, "Gibson's Typewriter," in *Flame Wars*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).
 - 33 Seiter, *Sold Separately*.
 - 34 See, for example, Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); H. Aram Veeser, *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
 - 35 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973); Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Random House, 1985).
 - 36 Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 78.
 - 37 Mark Dolan, "The Peaks and Valleys of Serial Creativity: What Happened to *Twin Peaks*," in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to "Twin Peaks"*, ed. David Lavery (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 30–50.
 - 38 Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Post-War America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
 - 39 Virginia Nightingale, "What's 'Ethnographic' about Ethnographic Audience Research?" in *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. John Frow and Meaghan Morris (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
 - 40 See Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979), and Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (New York: Methuen, 1987).
 - 41 Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).
 - 42 David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1991), and *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1994).
 - 43 Anne Balsamo, "On the Cutting Edge: Cosmetic Surgery and the Technological Production of the Gendered Body," *Camera Obscura* 28 (1992): 226.
 - 44 Cary Nelson, "Always Already Cultural Studies: Academic Conferences and a Manifesto," in *What Is Cultural Studies?*, ed. Storey, 276.
 - 45 Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (London: Verso, 1989), and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
 - 46 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 324.
 - 47 Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
 - 48 Michel de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), and Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. S. Rabinovitch (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984).
 - 49 Meaghan Morris, "Things to Do with Shopping Centres," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993), 297.
 - 50 Anna McCarthy, "'The Front Row Is Reserved for Scotch Drinkers': Early Television's Tavern Audience," *Cinema Journal* 34(4) (summer 1995): 31–49, and Victoria Johnson, "Citizen Welk: Bubbles, Blue Hair, and Middle America," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised:*

Sixties Television and Social Conflict, ed. Michael Curtin and Lynn Spigel (New York: Routledge, 1997).

- 51 Nelson, "Always Already Cultural Studies," 273.
- 52 Larry Grossberg, "The Space of Culture, the Power of Space," in *The Post-Colonial Question*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 176.
- 53 George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). Lipsitz continues his explorations of the local and the global in his *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1997).
- 54 James McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London: Routledge, 1992); Michael Budd et al., "The Affirmative Character of U.S. Cultural Studies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990): 169–84.
- 55 Todd Gitlin, "Who Communicates with Whom, in What Voice, and Why, about the Study of Mass Communication," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990): 191–92.
- 56 Angela McRobbie, "Post-Marxism and Cultural Studies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler, 726.
- 57 See, for instance, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1994).
- 58 Hall, "Cultural Studies." Though "detour" may for some have a negative connotation, Hall's essay makes it clear that his use is more affirmative. Here, the detour can take us to new places, thereby sometimes discovering a value in abandoning the linear.
- 59 Annalee Newitz and Joe Sartelle, "Bad Subjects: People Building the New Hegemony," in *Bad Subjects: Political Education for Everyday Life* (1992).
- 60 Sartelle, "Public Intellectuals," *Bad Subjects* 1 (1992).

DEFINING POPULAR CULTURE

Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson,
and Jane Shattuc

When Miles Davis improvised "My Funny Valentine" at Lincoln Center in 1964, jazz stood as an unquestionable art form. Jazz has not always had such respect. In the 1920s the reception of form stood somewhere between "moral opposition and primitivist celebration."¹ Theodor Adorno condemned much of jazz in the 1940s as a form of "pseudo-individualization," or a false attempt at originality. He argued that such fakery was produced by the pressure to standardize within popular or mass culture.² In the years since Adorno's critique, jazz did not become somehow "better." Rather the definitions of high culture and popular culture changed to accommodate new tastes. Jazz, and even the "low" form of the blues with all its sexual innuendo, became associated with refined tastes. Should not the capriciousness of cultural tastes cause us to wonder whether today's rap—another "low" popular culture form—might be deified as high culture in the future? The 1990s as the *high* period of rap? What then defines this line between popular and high culture?

Defining popular culture is complicated. It is seemingly the simplest and most pervasive culture and therefore often maligned. Yet for ourselves and many others, popular culture is pleasurable. We are connected to its pleasures and politics in our everyday existence through a diversity of experiences. The range of subjects of this book attests to this ubiquity: television wrestling, children's books, soap operas, home videos, baseball card collecting, and shopping, to name a few. Even our pleasure in playing on multiple levels with Dr. Seuss's title for our book can be understood as a popular culture activity—we based our choice on

a favorite children's book and its playful humor and remade it for our own use.

However, the concept "popular culture" belies a simple definition. It has been the subject of debates for three hundred years and has changed, for example, with Romanticism, industrialization, Marxism, American conglomerate culture, and identity politics. Different times have produced different definitions. And we can understand the term only within the complex historical context of its use. Yet one common thread can be traced in the debates: the concept has been used as an instrument by the educated and middle classes to maintain their ideological authority by defining "good" and "bad" culture.

With such a range of meanings, what is "popular culture"? Not only does it evade one simple all-embracing definition, it cannot be easily classified in a list. It undercuts a simple black-and-white history of good and bad culture. An honest history of popular culture is fraught with contradictions concerning economics, class power, theory and criticism, and critical enjoyment. Any attempt to summarize the history of the use of the term (including this essay's) will be schematic at best and often fall into a linear conception that smoothes over the contradictions and nuances. Nevertheless, this essay counters the familiar academic characterization of popular culture—the denigration of popular culture as a form of candy, pollution, or control. Instead it serves as an introduction for those outside cultural studies as a counter-history of how popular culture has stood as a potentially powerful and progressive political force in the battle to define "culture."

Such a positive picture of popular culture has always existed in definitions that consider the experience of makers, consumers, and participants. For centuries, many people have experienced popular culture as a form of liberation from the top-down strictures of high culture—a subversion of dominant notions of taste. This history leads to

the inevitable focus on the hundred and fifty years when mass production led to the vast proliferation of popular culture, and the resulting critical analysis of it comes to the fore.

To begin, the cultural theorist Raymond Williams sees "culture" as one of "the two or three most complicated words in the English language," a word with a range of meanings.³ It comes from the root Latin word *colere*, meaning "to inhabit, cultivate, protect, honour with worship."⁴ By the sixteenth century its previous use—"tending to natural growth"—was extended to human activity, such as the growth of the mind and understanding. Its modern class-conscious usages take hold in the eighteenth century with culture connoting either the development of the intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic sensibility, a particular way of life, or an intellectual or artistic activity. The term's use as a descriptor of the intellect and/or of artistry took on even greater class distinctions and associations with refinement through class and educational changes in the nineteenth century. Although the term today can often describe the activities of a generalized people (as in "Asian American culture"), it has also remained an ideological tool. Here, "culture" signifies the cultivated or more elite realm of the educated classes as opposed to the debased world of the lower classes, the realm of the popular.

"Popular" was originally a legal term derived from the Latin word *popularis*: "belonging to the people." It began with a political connotation referring to a country's citizenry or to a political system carried on by the whole. Yet according to Williams, this definition always also carried a sense of "low" or "base" and was used by those who wanted to influence the populous. This pejorative meaning remains along side the newer, modern meaning of "well-liked" or "widely liked"—an important shift away from the top-down perspective on popular culture. Here the term refers to the people's own views. But the term remains am-

biguous: which “people” are we talking about? All people? Only the underclasses? The marginal classes and groups? Can the middle class be understood as part of “the people”? These two words—“popular” and “culture”—have not historically been easy allies.

Ultimately, popular culture is a self-conscious term created by the intelligentsia and now adopted by the general public to mark off class divisions in the generic types of culture and their intended audience. Yet the divisions have structured a cultural battlefield where the educated standards of the upper class have often been imposed as universal on the other classes. According to Tony Bennett, “the most one can do is point to the range of meanings, a range of different constructions of the relations between popular culture, ‘the popular,’ and ‘the people’ which have different consequences for the way in which popular culture is conceived and constituted as a site for cultural intervention.”⁵

One has only to consider Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* to begin to understand the problem of defining popular culture. Shakespeare is taught today as high culture in high schools and colleges, yet when the work premiered at the end of the sixteenth century in London, it played to the educated and the lower classes as both wordplay and spectacle. Lawrence Levine claims that Shakespeare became increasingly a class bludgeon in America in the twentieth century. Shakespeare has become the possession of the educated portions of society who disseminate his plays for the enlightenment of the average folk, who in turn are to swallow him not for their entertainment but their education as a respite from (not as a normal part of) their usual cultural diet.⁶

For all of Shakespeare’s elite connotations, *Romeo and Juliet* has been adapted in many forms, from the Royal Shakespeare Company’s “authoritative” renditions to Franco Zeffirelli’s “critically acclaimed” version of 1968 to Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 “questionable” adaptation where multiracial gangs in designer label colors fight to the sounds

of Prince, the Butthole Surfers, and Radiohead. This postmodern rendering has been converted into a CD-ROM game and has spawned a series of Web pages designed by teenagers comparing the film to other films and the play. What constitutes high and popular culture in these remakings? Not only does this reveal the difficulty of arriving at an all-encompassing definition of popular culture that does not take historical context, audience, and cultural form into consideration; it also reveals how standards are arbitrary—a reflection of social standing and historical circumstance.

Romanticism and the Rise of the People’s Culture

Popular culture as a concept was initially defined in anthropological terms. In his *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Peter Burke argues that the term “popular culture” first appeared in the late eighteenth century as intellectuals became interested in folk or peasant culture as an object of cultural inquiry.⁷ Folk songs appeared as a category across Europe—*volkslieder* (Germany), *canti popolari* (Italy), and *narodnye pesni* (Russia)—as the middle class began to celebrate these simpler forms. In this period, popular culture encompassed activities as diverse as ballads, religions, carnivals, pantomime, and the making of figurines. Burke credits the German philosopher J. G. Herder with the creation of the term “popular culture.”⁸ In his famed 1778 essay on poetry, Herder suggested that poetry had lost its moral power in modern times. As opposed to Rabelais’s vision of popular culture as anarchistic and pleasurable, Herder looked to peasant culture as a more moral way of life, one that he described as an “Organic Community” of “savages” (*Wilde*) or the lower peasant classes. He thus proclaimed a division between popular and elite culture. This use of culture not only established its anthropological basis as a way of life, but also influenced its modern application to national and traditional cultures. Often implicit in these uses was a roman-

tic nostalgia for a simpler life closer to the organic traditions of thinking about nature.

Although socio-scientific in his logic, Herder established an evaluative hierarchy that is still present in cultural studies debates today. He argued that popular culture, or the oral culture of peasant folk songs, is a morally more effective way to communicate because of its direct and content-oriented approach to meaning. He opposed the utilitarianism of the peasantry to the poetry of the educated middle class culture, which he claimed was formal and therefore frivolous. Jakob Grimm, the writer of fairy tales, followed Herder's lead when he argued that oral folk culture such as ballads, poems, and songs gained its strength from the lack of a single author. Because their authorship was communal, these popular ballads belonged to the people as a whole rather than to an individual.⁹ This nostalgia for a peasant-based popular culture can be understood as part of the growing Romantic backlash against a number of converging influences. According to Burke, these influences included the cold formalism of Classicism, the distant rationalism of the Enlightenment, and the inhumanity of industrialization. He argues that intellectuals and artists championed a cultural primitivism where the ancient, the exotic, and the popular were conflated.¹⁰ For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau espoused the naive and simple experience, Boswell dwelled on the pastoral life, and the Brothers Grimm prized what Burke describes as "the instincts of the people over the arguments of intellectuals."¹¹ Much of this passion was also fueled by a growing nationalism where peasant culture was conceived of as part of the organic traditions of a country. A century later, Hitler tapped into this same sensibility when he triumphed the *volkische Kultur* as the basis of German nationalism.

Intellectuals also rushed to preserve this hand-hewn culture of the people as it disappeared in the face of mass-produced culture at the turn of the nineteenth century. Such nostalgia can be linked

to a growing upper-class fear of the emerging economic and political power of an industrial class: what once was handmade was increasingly manufactured and bought with the rise of commercial capitalism. Clear cultural divisions between the folk and the educated middle class broke down as industrial capitalism redefined cultural class divisions.

Industrialization and the Rise of Commercial Culture

As industrialization gained momentum, so did the upper classes' fear of the masses. Raymond Williams argues that the association of popular culture with vulgar culture began with the backlash against the new literate classes. As industry grew, the middle class advanced to prosperity and literacy.¹² A second shift in England came in the wake of the Education Act of 1870 as a new mass reading public developed. This growing democratic emancipation provoked an anxiety in intellectuals such as John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold, both of whom feared the power invested in this new culture. In *On Liberty*, Mill offered a liberal defense of democracy, but one based on the necessity of "elites" and "minorities." The concept of culture as a "refined" experience is often associated with Arnold. In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), he wrote about culture as a process of learning the "right" literature and knowledge. He suggested that English literature should be the secular religion in reaction to growing political unrest and class changes in contemporary England. He demanded that England teach "the best that has been thought or known in the world current everywhere" to stem the growth of the power of what he called "the masses."¹³

Although the popular culture of cheap novels, tabloids, and melodrama was not made by but for the lower classes, the intelligentsia in general branded the new forms as a decline in standards in order to control their political use. For ex-

ample, the novel—a middle-class form—was considered “a new vulgar phenomenon.” Consider Flaubert’s withering description of Madame Bovary’s déclassé propensity for dime novels. The new tool of social control became “good taste.” The nostalgia for a preliterate, more humble popular culture had waned under the brunt of more moneyed and ideologically aware working and middle classes.

There is no better example to illuminate this class division over mass-produced culture in the 1800s than the response to serial fiction and, in particular, the work of Charles Dickens. Due to the technological revolution that allowed printing of sections of novels in cheap newspapers to reach the “masses,” the literary establishment reacted in anger at Dickens’s popularity. Jennifer Hayward quotes a literary quarterly of 1845:

The form of publication of Mr. Dickens’ work [serialization] must be attended with bad consequences. . . . [Reading novels] throws us into a state of unreal excitement, a trance, a dream, which we should be allowed to dream out, and then be sent back to the atmosphere of reality again. . . . But now our dreams are mingled with our daily business. . . . The new number of Dickens, or Lever, Warren . . . absorb[s] the energies which, after the daily task, might be usefully implied in the search after wholesome knowledge.¹⁴

Not only does this quotation echo the same language later used to describe the popular “folly” of the movies and television, but Hayward notes how often nineteenth-century reviews repeated the high culture connection between the commercial “manufacturing” of fiction and an “absence of artistic merit.”¹⁵

Marxism and the Working Class

Conversely, Marxism reinvented popular culture as an idealized working-class culture. Marx himself outlined a cultural theory in his *Critique of*

Political Economy (1858) without ever fully developing it.¹⁶ He offered the broad portrait of an economic base and a superstructure that produces culture and its ideology. But there is no explicit mention of a popular or even a people’s culture. In one of Marx’s few references to high art (Raphael) in *The German Ideology*, he argues that art, like all culture produced under capitalism, results from a division of labor and the alienation of individuals from their labor.¹⁷ Implicit in Marx’s writing was the idea that the only truly “popular” culture was one produced outside the alienation of capitalism. This moment would come only after the working class revolted and took the reins of production. Given that within the Marxist framework “the people” translates exclusively into the working class, it has fallen to Marx’s interpreters to outline what constitutes popular working-class culture. As Tony Bennett points out, the Marxist construction of “the popular” has gone in two directions. He describes one type as a form of “rear-view mirrorism.” Here critics rediscover “the people” in their historically superseded forms and offer these as a guide for action in the present.¹⁸ E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* and Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* exemplify this reconstruction of a popular working-class culture. The former celebrates the rising class consciousness of the British lower classes in past centuries while the latter bemoans the loss of working-class communities in northern England with the coming of the American-style “milk bar” in the 1960s.¹⁹ By returning to their working-class roots, these writers write evocatively of how the English working class had developed its own culture in the shadow of industrial capitalist ideology and Americanization.

An important literary version of this love-hate relation with popular culture by the English Left surfaces in George Orwell’s writings of the 1940s. Concerned with the moral health of the nation, he found a disquieting brutality and pursuit of power in comic and crime novels. Yet Orwell dedicated

much of his writing to constructing an approach to fiction that was egalitarian and sociological. For example, he argued that Virginia Woolf might have been a better writer than Harriet Beecher Stowe. But why should that matter? *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had a wider appeal and therefore had a more profound significance. His *Coming Up for Air* was created out of an intense frustration with the chasm between the intellectual and the person on the street. Much of his criticism was pointed at the pretenses of the middle class while finding a certain honesty and straightforwardness in working-class culture.

A second way into Marxism and working-class culture is what Bennett describes as "'ideal futurism' in which the only version of 'the people' that matters is one that has yet to be constructed: the ideally unified people of a projected socialist future" (9). In this view, present-day popular culture is tainted by the domination of the capitalist production of culture and its enslaving ideology. There is then no truly popular culture of the people. True Marxist popular culture is configured as an ideal in the future when the workers remake capitalism on their own terms after the revolution. Official or state popular culture often replicates this ideal futurism. Soviet socialist realism of the 1930s exemplified the dangers of a top-down tradition where utopian posters and films of healthy and happy workers in harmony with industry and the land belied the cold repression of Stalinism.

*The Frankfurt School:
Popular Culture as Mass Culture*

The Frankfurt School is usually cited as the Marxist group that described popular culture as a mechanism of modern capitalism's repressive ideology. As German Jewish Marxists in exile in America, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno equated their experience of Nazi propaganda in the 1930s with their experience as European intel-

lectuals of American consumer ideology. They coined the Marxist concept of "mass culture," arguing that mass media in a capitalist democracy manipulates the masses by lulling them into the pleasures of conformity, consumption, and consumer ideology. They broke from Marx's belief in a worker's revolution and culture. The modern capitalist state had gained nearly complete authoritarian control through scientific rationality and capitalist industrialism. Like fascist propaganda, the power of the capitalist media undercuts critical reason, destroying resistance. Horkheimer wrote, "In democratic countries, the final decision no longer rests with the educated but with the amusement industry. Popularity consists of the unrestricted accommodation of the people to what the amusement industry thinks they like."²⁰ Adorno critiqued a diversity of popular pursuits as ideologically and intellectually corrupting: jazz, the jitterbug, and American TV of the 1950s. According to Ian Craib, "it seems as though the possibility for radical change had been smashed between the twin cudgels of concentration camps and television for the masses."²¹

By the 1940s, Adorno and Horkheimer replaced mass culture with the "culture industry"—a term they considered more critical because of the incompatibility between "culture" and "industry." Adorno's critique of popular music exemplifies this concept. People desire this music because the mass media hammer it into their heads. This mass-produced form is defined by standardization; originality and complexity are slowly squeezed out and a false individualism or novelty is substituted. Adorno argued that "the beginning of the chorus is replaceable by the beginning of innumerable other choruses . . . every detail is substitutable; it serves its function only as a cog in a machine."²²

Though the Frankfurt School critique does underscore the power of capital, insisting as it does on the role of production, it could not account for the ideas and opinions of the users of popular cul-

ture. Adorno saw these people as unrefined observers dulled by exhausting manual labor or by the tedium of nonstimulating work. Ultimately, Adorno's model pictured mass culture as both homogeneous and homogenizing, for he operated from a perspective that made it difficult for him to foresee the diversification that the culture industry would undergo in the late twentieth century.

The culture industry critique of popular culture underlines much of the fear of the "Americanization" of culture. This critique evolved into cultural imperialism theory in the latter half of the twentieth century. In this view international media corporations (such as Disney, Time Warner, Viacom, and Microsoft) spread American consumerist ideology to second and third world countries as a much more insidious form of domination than physical conquest. No essay better evokes this view than David Kunzle's "Introduction to the English Edition" of Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck*, where he heralds the writers' ability to "reveal the scowl of capitalist ideology behind the laughing mask, the iron fist beneath the Mouse's glove. The value of their work lies in the light it throws . . . on the way in which capitalist and imperialist values are supported by its culture."²³ The seeming simplicity and innocence of popular culture serve as powerful vehicles for capitalist inculcation. Additionally, the Frankfurt School had a profound influence on American criticism of popular culture spanning from the research of Paul Laserfeld on the effects of television to Fredric Wertham's study of American comics and children, entitled in classic Frankfurt School logic, *The Seduction of the Innocent*.²⁴

Although Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of popular culture as mass culture is the position generally associated with the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin, an associate of the school, offered a different view, one that pointed toward the liberatory appeal of popular culture. According to

Benjamin, within capitalism lurks its own seed of destruction—mass production. As opposed to lulling the masses into capitalist consumption, Benjamin argued that reproducibility democratizes a culture. Mass production destroys the social control produced by the aura and authority of original art. Such authority is descended from the ritual function art played for religions throughout the centuries. Icons served as direct connections to God, and individuals marked this power through awe and prayer. It took mass reproduction to break art's ritualized authority.

In particular, the ubiquity of the cinema and photography destroy the uniqueness of art. Mass reproduction brings culture in an accessible form to the people, allowing them to become more analytical. They remake objects for their own political needs—the opposite of the enthrallment by mass culture espoused by Adorno and Horkheimer. "With the screen, the critical and receptive attitude of the public coincide."²⁵

Neo-Frankfurt School critics such as Miriam Hansen and Bernard Gendron have also complicated the Adorno/Horkheimer critique of popular culture through their respective studies of the contradictions in the popular reception of Mickey Mouse and doo-wop music.²⁶ The differences between Benjamin and Adorno mirror the tension in the twentieth century between the consumptionist (what the people do with popular culture) and productionist (what the producer constructed) frames of Marxist interpretation. Much present-day work negotiates this great divide.

American Criticism and the Aestheticization of Popular Culture

From the 1920s through 1950s, a number of American critics—Gilbert Seldes, Robert Warshow, Dwight Macdonald, and Parker Tyler among them—began to take popular culture seriously in a culture dominated by conservative critics such as

Clement Greenberg (who viewed popular culture as “kitsch”). Long before the auteur theory of film in France in the 1950s, these critics valued film and other popular works based on the objects themselves and on the audience’s interaction with them. In 1924 Gilbert Seldes wrote *The Seven Lively Arts* in which he broke from the elite traditions of American criticism, arguing that art included both high and popular cultures. He maintained that much of popular culture, or what he called the “lively arts” of the mass media, was a good deal more entertaining and worthwhile than the so-called serious arts: “My theme was to be that entertainment of a high order existed in places not usually associated with Art, that the place where an object was seen or heard had no bearing on its merits, that some of Jerome Kern’s songs in the *Princess* shows were lovelier than any number of operatic airs and a comic strip printed on newspaper which would tatter and rumple in a day might be as worthy of a second look as a considerable number of canvasses at most of our museums.”²⁷

Seldes expressed an intense emotional pleasure in the complexity of “movies.” As opposed to a criticism that saw popular culture as a form of degradation of the high arts leading to a lowering of American tastes, Seldes grouped the high and popular arts together as the “public arts,” refusing to keep them in separate categories. He believed that they were two dimensions of the same phenomenon. For example, he lauded the comic strip *Krazy Kat* as “the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America today. With those who hold that a comic strip cannot be a work of art I shall not traffic.”²⁸ Yet Seldes’s writing also revealed the age-old fear of the emotional power of popular culture. He felt people developed an emotional relationship to popular culture and particularly to film that is akin to passionate love because of “the way a story does all the work for the spectator and gives him the highly satisfactory sense of divine power.”²⁹

This power had the potential for addiction or what he called “the mood of consent.”

Continuing this interest in the popular appeal of everyday culture, Robert Warshow developed a sociological theory of “the immediate experience” of popular culture in American life. His focus was genre films—popular commercial films—that critics had traditionally ignored. He argued that there was no simple division between popular movies and art. All culture depends on the conventions endemic to popular forms. But the frequency of repeated conventions in genre films creates their power. “It is only in an ultimate sense that the type appeals to its audience’s experience of reality; much more immediately, it appeals to previous experience of the type itself: it creates its own field of reference.”³⁰ Therefore, the complexity of popular culture lies in the audience’s knowledge of previous similar forms and the intricate variations that are carried out.

As a result, Warshow advocated that critics needed to take seriously the knowledge and tastes of the frequent filmgoer. In fact, he broke with the concept of intellectual distance that had defined film criticism to this point. The fan could be a critic and a good critic could only be steeped in film. He was such a person: “I have gone to the movies constantly, and at times almost compulsively, for most of my life. I should be embarrassed to attempt an estimate of how many movies I have seen and how many I have consumed.”³¹

Like Warshow, Parker Tyler combined intellectualism with a passion for popular culture. He continued the American interest in the mythic potential of popular culture as opposed to the European emphasis on ideological analysis as the central critical tool. However, he carved out his own critical approach combining psychoanalytic and mythic analysis of popular film and genres. In books such as *The Hollywood Hallucination* and *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, Tyler offered what he called “Magic Lantern Metamorphoses” that

transformed popular texts to bring to the surface the “unconscious” content. Tyler saw popular cinema as possessing dreamlike qualities that were experienced all the more acutely because “the movie-theatre rite corresponds directly to the profoundly primitive responses of the audience; the auditorium is dark, the spectator relaxed, the movie in front of him requires less sheer mental attention than a novel or stage play.”³²

Tyler also expanded the scope of serious popular culture criticism in America. He often found profundity in the most banal text and punctured highbrow and middlebrow fare. While he did not have a concept of ideology, he offered a critical mode that we might now call “reading against the grain,” uncovering the repressive and repressed elements in popular culture. His late work on sexuality in the cinema expanded the definition of popular culture to encompass gay issues—an early model for the emergence of queer cultural criticism.

Dwight Macdonald, perhaps the most left of these critics, adopted a much more ambivalent attitude toward popular culture. While he was one of the first critics to point out how the Frankfurt School’s critique of mass culture insulted the basic intelligence of the average person, he still branded popular culture as an inferior form. He admitted that popular/mass culture was a “dynamic, revolutionary force breaking down the old class barriers, tradition, taste and dissolving cultural distinctions.” But, following the Frankfurt School’s critique, he argued that mass culture produced “homogenized” culture. “Mass culture is very, very democratic: it absolutely refuses to discriminate against, or between anything or anybody. All is grist to its mill, and all comes out finely ground indeed.” Although Macdonald critiqued Adorno’s infantilization of the average person, he repeated Adorno’s view of the unidimensional nature of popular culture and damned the user’s experience as nothing more than “appreciating dust.”³³

For all his disdain for the leveling effects of popular culture, Macdonald saw “Midcult”—the offspring of the marriage of high and popular cultures—as the greatest threat to culture: “This intermediate form—let us call it Midcult—has the essential qualities of masscult—the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity—but it decently covers them with a cultural figleaf. In masscult the trick is plain—to please the crowd by any means. But Midcult has it both ways: it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them.”³⁴ Here, popular culture remains the loyal “enemy outside the walls” of high culture, but one that has a clear and perhaps more honest purpose: reduction of educated tastes. Midcult is even more insidious because of its lack of clear class boundaries.

Other American critics and institutions have succeeded in legitimizing the study of popular culture. Andrew Sarris created an auteur theory for Hollywood films that applied European notions of expressive individualism to an industrial form to evaluate their worth and legitimize them to an educated population. John G. Cawelti widely expanded the understanding of the Western and other popular genres of film and literature. Reacting against the academic obtuseness of the auteur theory, Pauline Kael wrote in the *New Yorker* eloquent and powerful defenses of certain films and directors such as Martin Scorsese and Robert Altman based on her own take on the auteur theory. She even legitimized the aesthetic importance of violence in commercial film in a magazine whose appeal was based on intellectual distance and not physical transgressiveness. The Association for Popular Culture represents an advocacy group offering an eclectic mix of “popular culture for popular culture’s sake” and detailed studies. And finally, the American Film Institute breaks down the wall between the critical and educational establishment and the Hollywood film industry as an institution devoted to the promotion of popu-

lar film that ultimately functions as a showpiece for the industry.

*British Cultural Studies:
Popular Culture as Everyday Culture*

In 1958 British critic Raymond Williams declared “culture is ordinary,” a moment that represents the symbolic beginning of what has become “cultural studies.”³⁵ This marked a British Marxist move away from the reductive concept of mass culture as simply a vehicle of false consciousness, while also breaking with the view that high culture was the central liberatory form for all classes. In place of these two critical positions, cultural studies emphasized “culture” with a small “c”—the realm where people exercised their human agency, creativity, and will for freedom within capitalist culture. As a result, cultural studies increasingly focused on everyday life and on how modern society creates and circulates its meanings and values. This critical school “attempts to reclaim culture for the working class, ‘common people,’ or ‘masses’ as against antidemocratic and too often academic definitions that identify culture exclusively with elitist ideals of education, leisure and esthetic consumption.”³⁶ Williams saw lived experience as having more social credence than the judgments of critics from afar. As a working-class Welshman at Cambridge University, he argued that his native awareness of the class hierarchy imposed by education and taste was shared by his fellow working-class Britons. This “critical populism” has tempered its interest in the political resistance of the underclasses with much more of a Marxist awareness of how capitalism creates consumption and class divisions than have American cultural studies.

Williams rejected the classic Marxist base-superstructure model of popular culture as a form of vulgar determinism, preferring a more complex model of interaction. No longer could academics study culture as if the economy totally governs

consciousness and average people had no awareness of dominant ideology. British cultural studies sought models that acknowledged the volition of everyday people. They were aware of cultural and economic power and even able to resist the dominant power. This tension between socioeconomic class analysis and a populist notion of resistance has characterized cultural studies’ history.

Cultural studies has often focused more on the moment of reception—the individual’s experience of everyday culture—rather than the cultural object as the primary source of meaning. With ethnography as a prime tool, critics have attempted to understand the consumption and uses of popular culture by everyday people “in their own terms.”³⁷ Although British cultural studies still perceives itself as a Marxist discipline it is based on the theories of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci saw that dominance was a much more complex process than the traditional view of capitalism and the dominant classes’ coercion of the individual, involving a constant battle and the continual necessity of winning consent to the prevailing order.³⁸

Gramsci argued that the central ideology was in fact common sense, or “the philosophy of the non-philosophical.”³⁹ This conservative glue makes the social system function. But unlike ideology, its workings are contradictory and multiple, creating a space for the average person to be intellectual and critical. This common sense is tested every time the power (or the hegemony) of the ruling class is questioned. Cultural studies has translated this theory into the study of voices of resistance and opposition. Such forms reveal the contradictions in capitalism that the individual experiences daily where aspects of their social identity—class, gender, race, or sexual preference—knock roughly against the dominant values.

Elaborating on Gramsci’s more open-ended notion of hegemony, Williams constructed a model of “cultural materialism” wherein he posed

a theory of dominant, residual, and emergent formations. All human cultural practices fall into these categories. The dominant practices—the prevailing forces of power and control—never control the people entirely. There are always residual cultures from the past (such as religion and rural cultures) and emergent cultures (such as the working class and the women's movement) that resist the hegemonic culture. Williams focused on the resistive cultures (which he further subdivided into alternative and oppositional categories) as the site of cultural democracy. He sought to understand the ways in which certain cultural forms were not swallowed up by the dominant ethos and served as an antidote to the class strictures enforced by the cultural base.

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England, served as the next locus of British cultural studies and as the site for many studies of resistive cultures. Its analytical framework was fashioned around the founding work of E. P. Thompson (*The Making of the English Working Class*), Richard Hoggart (*The Uses of Literacy*), and Williams (*The Long Revolution* and *Culture and Society*)—all intellectuals who integrated their ideas within a popular and interactive understanding of politics. The Birmingham center moved away from the elitist traditions of the academic disciplines of literature and art and the deterministic concept of “ideology” toward a more interdisciplinary and anthropological definition of culture, and popular culture in particular. Members also took their ideas to a popular audience with a more journalistic approach, publishing their work in magazines such as *Marxism Today* and newspapers such as the *Guardian*.

The work of Stuart Hall, the center's director in the 1970s, exemplified this wide-ranging populist political approach. Chairing the Department of Sociology at the Open University (an adult education program), he mixed French structuralism's awareness of the structural determinants of semiotics and ideology with a culturalist sensibility

that highlighted human agency and resistance. Under his direction, the center produced a body of research concentrating on voices of resistance within British working-class culture, including studies of traditional trade unionists, skinhead punks, teenage girls, and Rastafarians. Nevertheless, Stuart Hall argued that “the term ‘popular,’ and even more, the collective subject to which it must refer—the ‘people’—is highly problematic.” He cites Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher—“We have to limit the power of the trade unions because that is what the people want”—as a case in point of the difficulty in arriving at a definition of the people and their culture. “That suggests to me that, just as there is no fixed content to the category of ‘popular culture,’ so there is no fixed subject to attach to it—the people.”⁴⁰

In his own and his collaborative work (*The Popular Arts*, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, and *Policing the Crisis*), Hall attempted to understand the contradictions inherent in the English working class and especially their support of Margaret Thatcher's government, a government that espoused the end of the social support system for that very class. He insisted that there must be an understanding of the “articulation” of the distinctly different, often contradictory, elements that make up culture to avoid either a simplistic economic explanation or a naive populism. Thatcher's success stood as his central case, for she used the language of populism (“the little man”) layering it with a competitive individualism and the pleasures of unbridled consumerism to produce a popular “authoritarian populism.” Birmingham's work in the 1970s and 1980s provided in-depth studies of the context and history of cultural resistance in relation to the structuring dominance of the economic and class system. The Marxist frame of the economic class system remained central within these nuanced studies.

Using ethnographic studies, these cultural writers sought out how people used fashion, life-

style, and music as a way of resisting the “we are all one” ideology of the bourgeoisie. This trend spans from the center’s collective study (*Resistance through Ritual* [1976]) to Paul Willis’s studies of hippie and motorcycle culture (*Profane Culture* [1978]) and shop-floor teenage activities (*Learning to Labour* [1977]) to Dick Hebdige’s work on style, particularly punk—as youth resistance (*Subculture: The Meaning of Style* [1979]). Each study highlighted how the smallest element of personal expression could serve as a form of subversion of the class system. Still, throughout this work, there is a continual awareness that these moments of creativity, subversion, and freedom exist as individualized examples of revolt that ultimately do not challenge the social dominance of English capitalism.

Under Pierre Bourdieu’s influence, the Birmingham center in the 1980s fostered a series of studies focusing on subcultures. Originating from a view of the 1960s counterculture as a form of political resistance, academics looked at the British working class and the experiences of its youth culture. They focused on how subcultures resisted the class domination represented most immediately by the middle class’s penchant for slavish consumerism, respectability, Puritanism, and political obedience. Central to this project was the idea of undercutting the concept of a universal culture—an ethos that the dominant culture seeks to maintain.

A second major influence on British cultural studies in general was the feminist movement and theory. Armed with Kate Millett’s manifesto, a rewriting of politics to encompass personal or everyday experience, feminism in the 1960s and 1970s scrutinized popular culture for the ways that it reproduced the patriarchal power structure and falsified the representation of women, finding its worst-case scenario in pornography. Often all of popular film was indicted for its connection to commercialism and mass tastes. Molly Haskell wrote that “the [Hollywood] industry held a

warped mirror up to life” producing images that victimized or demonized women. Such male control found its powerful visual equivalent in Laura Mulvey’s “gaze”—a psychoanalytic theory of how the pleasure of a Hollywood film emanates from positioning the audience to identify with the controlling look of the male protagonist as he looks at the woman as an object.⁴¹

During this same period women were busy reclaiming a women’s cinema of positive images of strong and independent females. While Haskell mourned Hollywood’s disfigurement of female images, she championed the roles of Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis, and Barbara Stanwyck. Feminists were retrieving the careers of little-known directors such as Stephanie Rothman, Ida Lupino, and Dorothy Arzner.

By the late 1970s, feminist theory of popular culture began to question the repercussions of theorizing women as victims. It moved from an emphasis on production (the text and its making) to an interest in consumption (what the viewer/reader does with the work)—a shift that was central to the rise of cultural studies. Linda Williams wrote in her study of pornography, *Hard Core*, “As long as we emphasize women’s roles as the absolute victim of male sadism, we only perpetuate the supposedly essential nature of women’s powerlessness.”⁴² Not only was there a shift in feminism’s focus with the rise of the anticensorship movement, there was a growing interest in seeing women as discerning readers and active viewers of popular culture. Central to this shift is Janice Radway’s 1987 study of romance novel readers as critical thinkers conscious of the ingredients of the romance formula. “The significance of the act of reading itself might, under some conditions, contradict, undercut, or qualify the significance of a producing particular kind of story.”⁴³ Another important figure in feminism and cultural studies is Angela McRobbie, whose ideological study of teenage girls’ response to the magazine *Jackie* challenge the male bias of the subculture studies of

the Birmingham School.⁴⁴ These girls were not “dupes” nor were they discerning readers. McRobbie later critiqued the ideological determinism of her study and even encouraged her students to work for the mainstream girl magazines because of “the space these magazines offer for contestation and change.”⁴⁵ This feminist tension between the productionist and consumptionist analyses of popular culture remains a guiding thread in British cultural studies.

*Cultural Studies in the 1990s:
The Polysemic Play of Popular Culture*

As British cultural studies disseminated its project internationally, its ideas were challenged and changed as it encountered other national and cultural differences. British-trained intellectuals such as John Fiske, Tony Bennett, John Hartley, and Larry Grossberg brought these ideas of cultural studies to other English-speaking countries. Cultural studies affected the critical traditions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Caribbean Islands, and the United States, as well as different disciplines such as women’s studies, history, gay and lesbian studies, literature, and anthropology. As the work traveled outside England, some scholars began to question the universality of the British model.

The work of John Fiske in America and Australia represents one of these noteworthy shifts in cultural studies. Combining the theories of feminism, Bourdieu, Hall, Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Michel de Certeau, he began an extensive study of what might be called the “micropolitics” of consumer practices. His work developed from what he sees as the native intelligence of the people to resist subordination. Following the lead of the subculture studies of the Birmingham School, he believes that popular culture has become the central terrain for resisting repression. The people no longer have access to the self-made or folk culture of the peasant that Herder studied in the

nineteenth century. Rather, the subordinated people of advanced postindustrial society create their own popular culture by remaking the dominant culture of the mass media. “There can be no popular dominant culture, for popular culture is formed always in reaction to, and never as part of, the forces of domination.”⁴⁶ Fiske sees the forces of domination in clear hegemonic terms—“white patriarchal bourgeois capitalism”—yet, following de Certeau, his focus is on the remaking or “poaching” process by which human beings reveal their talents for resistance.

Borrowing from feminism and the concept of empowerment in his study of teenage girls and Madonna, Fiske looked at the punning strategies of her songs (e.g., “boy toy”), and theorized what the pop star’s ambiguous style meant to girls, as well as the girls’ responses. He found that the girls created a variety of meanings and this revealed the open-endedness of commercial television as a space where one can resist the force of hegemonic meanings. Critics have argued that he has naively gutted popular culture of its repressive elements in his attempt to affirm a nebulous and idealist category of “the people,” creating a model of resistance that forgets the complex interaction of dominant and resistant forms. Fiske’s analysis exists in diametric opposition to the Frankfurt School’s top-down determinism in which there was little or no room for volition under capitalist ideology. Fiske has substituted the politically conscious and savvy resister of dominant ideology as the typical user of popular culture.

Fiske’s and other recent cultural studies research calls upon the work of two French sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau. Bourdieu offered yet another key model of the different experiences of popular culture based on cultural class differences. In *Distinction* he contrasts two aesthetic modes, the “Popular Aesthetic” and the “Bourgeois Aesthetic,” to clarify how taste is a reflection of class and particularly of cultural class (e.g., education). The popular aes-

thetic makes no clear distinction between art and everyday experience. It depends on the willing suspension of disbelief in order to “participate” or “identify” with the fiction. It also celebrates the intensification of emotion and the collapse of the individual into the collective experience. The bourgeois aesthetic is the experience of our dominant cultural institutions (the museum, the gallery, the university classroom, the library). It is defined through its “detachment, disinterestedness, indifference,” its refusal to be taken in by popular art, its anxiety about mass culture’s lack of emotional control and expressive restraint, and its celebration of high culture’s formal experimentation. When the bourgeois aesthetic takes up works of popular culture, it does so by creating “a distance, a gap” between the artwork and its perceiver, placing the popular text in the realm of connoisseurship. Such divisions in experience offer a model of class analysis of the critical reception of popular culture within the aforementioned high culture and low culture traditions.⁴⁷

Michel de Certeau offers a systematic analysis of how everyday people “poach” the established culture to remake it for their own use. The “trickster” of folk culture becomes the modern rule breaker who conducts tactical raids on the established rules that attempt to constrain his activities. De Certeau’s central example remains the everyday practices of consumerism where consumers create “clever tricks of the ‘weak’ within the order established by the ‘strong,’ an art of putting over on the adversary on his own turf, hunters’ tricks, maneuverable, polymorph mobilities, jubilant, poetic and warlike discoveries.”⁴⁸ For de Certeau, consumers are no longer the mindless pawns of capitalism that the Frankfurt School envisioned. Rather, they are guerrillas making tactical strikes on the occupying army of consumer capitalism through their choices, schemes, and recreations. Readers/viewers constantly struggle to find their meanings in a popular culture that does not measure up to their needs or social expe-

riences. Through this notion of the active consumer, de Certeau’s theory forces us to question to what degree the media producers are able to control the creation and meaning of popular culture. Ultimately, the viewer is also a producer.

A further elaboration of this debate between the production and consumption of popular culture has manifested itself around postmodernism. The term encompasses an academic theory, a condition, an epoch, a form of politics, and/or an aesthetic. As an academic sensibility, it often describes a new social order where “popular culture and the mass media shape and govern all other forms of social relationships.”⁴⁹ No longer is popular culture simply a reflection of the world around it. Rather, it serves as an active, if not the primary, shaper of social reality. We are caught up in a culture of consumption created by the cultural conglomerates of late capitalism in which reality is determined in the digital haze of television, VCRs, films, computers, cable, and advertising. The critics of such a culture (Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and David Harvey, to name a few) bemoan the growing dominance of style over content in our society as we exchange the pleasures of such visual spectacles as MTV, Disneyland, and the Internet for an in-depth critical understanding of consumption and ideological control.

For Jameson this postmodern condition also leads to a problematic collapse of the distinction between art and popular culture; a place where Warhol’s artwork playfully dances between commercialism and critical art or the commercial photography and videos by Herb Ritts are treated as thoughtful artworks. We have begun to prefer the simulation of the real over the empirical real, the synthetic and the virtual over reality. The orienting boundaries of time and space are collapsing due to these simulations, the mixing of aesthetic and historical signs, and the ease of global communication and travel. These forces have disoriented us to the point that we have abandoned the desire to make clear moral and political judg-

ments.⁵⁰ Ultimately, for the likes of Harvey or Jameson, the postmodern condition is leading to a gutting of political opposition as modern consumers lose their ability to resist and so surrender to the pleasures of late capitalism. This position on postmodernism rewrites the Frankfurt School's culture industry argument, draping it in late-twentieth-century clothing.

Opposing this negative perspective on the postmodern, scholars such as Jim Collins and Barbara Flax argue for the liberatory value of postmodernism because it promotes a multiculturalism that refuses a strict adherence to grand metanarratives or to the canonical power of the theories of modernism, Marxism, Freudianism, Christianity, and capitalism.⁵¹ The fears of Baudrillard and Jameson are often perceived as deriving from their own loss of cultural control as white male intellectuals of European origin. Many feminists, multiculturalists, and global theorists now recognize the possibilities inherent in a postmodern world where identity can be understood as existing at the intersection of many registers. Rather than lament the loss of a totalizing view of the world, they prefer a more nuanced and localized model. For these celebrants of postmodernism, gone is the all-consuming anxiety about the complicity of popular culture in social control. Popular culture provides a plane for the popular remaking of corporate culture and for the fragmenting of power. The totalizing model of capitalist control has been replaced by one of rearticulations and rewritings through popularly created alliances and coalitions.

New Cultural Studies:

The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture

Our anthology enters this debate over the politics and pleasures of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, arguing that popular culture is neither simply progressive nor regressive.

Rather, pop culture's politics continue to be formed not only by the historical context and the individual readers who experience it, but also by the ongoing class battle over who determines culture. The discipline of cultural studies has divided over the postmodern emphasis on forms of resistance. This political split has polarized around such dichotomies as British versus American cultural studies, critical versus affirmative analyses, modernism versus postmodernism, and ideological versus multipositional studies. We attempt to move beyond these divides, tracing an emergent position in cultural studies that reflects the contributions of a generation of academics who see that the politics and pleasures of the popular are contingent upon its historical context in late capitalism, as well as upon its forms and users. Central to these debates are the conflicting views about the role of ideology and class in defining the experience of culture. The critics within this newer perspective still question the dominance of a socioeconomic model as the primary mechanism for understanding how people make sense of their identity. Such class determinants stand alongside gender, race, and nation as shapers of social identity for people today. In 1991 Angela McRobbie argued for a middle ground between the extremes of economic reductionism and insouciant hedonism.⁵²

There is a growing sense that popular culture cannot be defined as simply progressive or repressive in its social role. A "pure" politics does not exist in popular culture.⁵³ But we cannot dismiss popular culture for its lack of a purely oppositional or progressive impulse. Manthia Diawara argues that the popular remains the central vehicle for African American expressions of emancipation and a prime source of their victimization. Alex Doty writes about the centrality of popular culture for queer studies: "Part of my queerly realistic view of popular culture then is that queers have always been a major force in creating and

reading cultural texts even though pop culture has been a vehicle to reinforce sexism, racism, homophobia, heterocentrism, and other prejudicial agendas.”⁵⁴ In her work on transnationalism, Ella Shohat maintains that “popular culture is fully imbricated in transnational globalized technoculture,” but she still finds it a “negotiable site, an evolving scene of interaction and struggle.”⁵⁵

Perhaps such ambivalence about popular culture’s role may not provide the definition of popular culture that this discussion has sought to provide. Ultimately, what often defines it is this “indeterminability.”⁵⁶ Popular culture only “means” something in relation to other readings and readers. We need to know how a particular object of popular culture is presented and experienced before we can begin to define its politics. In the end, these historical and specific contexts of reception, the social positions of readers, and the specificity of form determine the politics and pleasures of popular culture and that shape the work of this volume.

Notes

- 1 See Nick Evan’s essay “‘Racial Cross-Dressing’ in the Jazz Age: Cultural Therapy and Its Discontents in Cabaret Nightlife,” in this volume.
- 2 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Seabury, 1972), 136–37.
- 3 Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 76.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 5 Tony Bennett, “The Politics of the ‘Popular’ and Popular Culture,” in *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, ed. T. Bennett and C. Mercer (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1986), 8.
- 6 Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 31.
- 7 Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Hants: Wildwood House, 1978), 3–4.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 10–11.
- 12 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 305–6.
- 13 Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London: Routledge, 1992), 21.
- 14 As quoted in Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 26.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 16 Williams, *Keywords*, 265.
- 17 Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers), 428–32.
- 18 Bennett, “The Politics of the ‘Popular’ and Popular Culture,” 9.
- 19 See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963); and Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
- 20 Max Horkheimer, “On Popular Music,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9(1) (1941): 303.
- 21 Ian Craib, *Modern Social Theory* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf), 184.
- 22 Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991), 303.
- 23 Kunzle, “Introduction to the English Edition,” in Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck* (Paris: International General, 1984), 11.
- 24 See Fredric Wertham, *The Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954).
- 25 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1978), 234.
- 26 See Bernard Gendron, “Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs,” in *Studies in Entertainment*, ed. T. Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Miram Hansen, “Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92 (Jan. 1993): 27–61.
- 27 Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Pantheon, 1924), 3.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 231.
- 29 Gilbert Seldes, *The Public Arts* (New York: Sagamore, 1957), 7.
- 30 Robert Warshaw, *The Immediate Experience; Movies, Comics, Theater, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 129.

- 31 Ibid., 27.
- 32 Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth in the Movies* (New York: Garland, 1985), 30.
- 33 Dwight MacDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. B. Rosenberg and D. W. Manning (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957), 62.
- 34 Ibid., 38.
- 35 Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, and Socialism* (New York: Schocken, 1989), 3.
- 36 Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe's Footprint: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 38.
- 37 See Renaldo Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).
- 38 See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 419.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the People,'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. R. Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 238–39.
- 41 See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970); Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974).
- 42 Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 22.
- 43 Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 102.
- 44 See Angela McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures," in *Culture, Ideology, and Social Process*, ed. T. Bennett, G. Martin, C. Mercer, and J. Woolcott (London: Batsford, 1980).
- 45 Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 186.
- 46 John Fiske, "Popular Television and Commercial Culture: Beyond Political Economy," in *Television Studies*, ed. G. Burns and R. Thompson (New York: Praeger, 1989), 43.
- 47 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 41.
- 48 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 39–40.
- 49 Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 224.
- 50 See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53–92.
- 51 See Jim Collins, "Postmodernism and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. R. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 327–49; Barbara Flax, *Psychoanalysis and Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- 52 Angela McRobbie, "Post-Marxism and Cultural Studies: A Post Script," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 719–30.
- 53 "Symposium on Popular Culture and Political Correctness," *Social Text* 36 (fall 1993): 27.
- 54 Ibid., 7–8.
- 55 Ibid., 27.
- 56 Ibid., 28.

THE TOPICS STRUCTURING THIS ANTHOLOGY are not intended to provide an exhaustive or definitive list of the core research interests or buzzwords that define the emergent paradigm in cultural studies. Rather, they are intended to provide nexus points to help us identify the common ground between the specific essays. Many of these essays could have fit under multiple topics, suggesting the multiple relationships which exist between these key terms. Our goal is not to put these essays into cubbyholes but rather to flag issues we think cut across them and thus encourage readers to engage with contemporary debates defining academic research on popular culture. These topics suggest subtle shifts in the ways cultural scholars theorize pleasure, popular culture, and everyday life, especially when read in relation to the critical and theoretical vocabulary of earlier phases of cultural studies.

“Self,” for example, is chosen over “subjectivity” to suggest new understandings of the relationship between individuals and larger cultural forces. The term “subjectivity” has become too closely associated with the old “subject-position” model which has increasingly fallen into disfavor because of its implication that individuals are passively woven into ideology through a process of indoctrination. The use of “subjectivity” thus evokes all-too-familiar debates between those who want to emphasize the controlling or regulating force of mass culture and its role in the manufacture of consent, on the one hand, and those who want to emphasize the resistant use of popular culture on the other.

The concept of self found in these essays is one of personal identity as emerging from an ongoing process of negotiation. Such a model maintains some conception of personal autonomy while acknowledging that our self-perceptions are powerfully shaped by social processes, economic realities, and cultural discourses. Our use of “self” does not signal a return to the Kantian subject, but rather a more complex understanding of how in-

dividuals and their particular experiences relate to generalized patterns of social and cultural behavior. The self is seen as provisional, under construction, shaped by competing forces, defined through our interactions with popular culture. We agree with earlier generations of critics that one can never fully step outside these social and cultural processes, that there is no “authentic” self. However, we also need to understand that we have differential experiences of those social and cultural processes, that our personal histories shape how we are likely to respond to them, and that we can only understand and analyze how culture defines the self from a situated perspective. Often, ideological criticism adopted a theoretically impossible—and thus alienating—vantage point, pulling back far enough to see ideology at work and thus feigning an exemption from its own claims about how social subjects are constructed. The new discourse on the self, on the other hand, often starts with autobiographical impulses and then explores broader social and cultural contexts that shape those personal experiences.

Discourse analysis has become an important tool for developing a more historically and culturally specific understanding of how the negotiated self operates. Researchers have looked at self-help guides, pop psychology and sociology books, childrearing and etiquette manuals, mass-magazine fiction and nonfiction, and other such sources to better understand the social construction of the self and to specifically understand the ways our assumptions about childhood, sexuality, race, class, and gender took shape at specific historical junctures. Feminism, queer studies, African American studies, and other identity politics movements have played a major role in promoting this new emphasis upon the self and on the value of lived experience in understanding larger cultural processes. Each essay in this section asks core questions about “who we are” and how we come to understand our selves through our relations with popular culture.

Revisiting the old slogan “the personal is political,” Elayne Rapping draws upon models of autobiographical criticism to suggest how soap operas fit within family relations and how they relate to a longstanding tradition of utopian thought in American feminism. She understands soap operas as positioning their characters within a complex web of community relations and thus encouraging viewers to understand the self in more collective terms. She describes how discussions about soap characters and their situations became useful in sharing her feminist values with her son and daughter and how they remain one of the ties that continue to bind her family together as her children have become adults.

John Bloom, by contrast, focuses on the more conservative influence of popular culture on white men’s conception of themselves and their childhood pasts. He explores the relationship between baseball card collecting and a nostalgia for pre-sexual identities, a means of returning to a simpler past free from the anxieties and failures of adult life. Rebuilding a collection of baseball cards that the collector had as a young boy helps him to take inventory of the relationship between popular memory and the autobiographical past. Heather Hendershot is also interested in the conservative dimensions of popular culture, exploring the religious right’s attempts to create an alternative teen culture consistent with its “pro-life” and abstinence campaigns. Hendershot explores the ways that Christian popular culture seeks to regulate, constrain, and channel young bodies into gender-appropriate and church-sanctioned forms of sexuality and sociality.

Peter Chvany uses the fictional alien race, the Klingons, as represented on *Star Trek* and as appropriated by fan culture, to test various contemporary frameworks for understanding “ethnicity.” An underlying focus here centers around the ways that the performance of an “imaginary” ethnicity relates to the social and cultural construction of “whiteness.” Like Bloom, he helps us to under-

stand the feelings of marginalization felt by members of dominant groups within an era of multiculturalism, while recognizing the potentially reactionary impact of these cultural impulses to redefine the self as cultural other.

Jane Shattuc explores another aspect of the self—our professional identities as academics and how we understand our role as experts in relation to the popular culture we seek to critique. Specifically, Shattuc draws upon her own experience as an expert about talk shows who now appears on talk shows to work through a range of different models that deal with the intersection between academic expertise and the general public. She is interested in the challenge that talk shows pose to traditional academic authority (and especially the concept of objective distance) given their embrace of personal experience as a source of knowledge.

Alex Doty’s essay begins with an attempt to map his shifting understanding of his own sexuality in relation to repeated viewings of the childhood classic *The Wizard of Oz*. Part of what makes this MGM musical so effective as a tool for understanding the self is that the story centers around Dorothy’s attempts to explore her own emerging sexuality. In Doty’s account, Dorothy’s struggle to decide whether she is a “good witch” or a “bad witch” forces her to experiment with differing constructions of lesbian identity and desire. Doty argues that queer readings of the film are no less valid than straight interpretations given the total absence of traditional trappings of heterosexual desire one would anticipate from a Hollywood musical.

DAYTIME UTOPIAS:
IF YOU LIVED IN PINE
VALLEY, YOU'D BE HOME

Elayne Rapping

For only in art has bourgeois society tolerated its own ideals and taken them seriously as a general demand. What counts as utopia, phantasy, and rebellion in the world of fact is allowed in art. There affirmative culture has displayed the forgotten truths over which "realism" triumphs in daily life.

—HERBERT MARCUSE, *NEGATIONS*

A work of art opens a void where . . . the world is made aware of its guilt.

—MICHEL FOUCAULT, *MADNESS AND CIVILIZATION*

It's Sunday night and my daughter, Alison, is calling: "I hate that they have to kill off Eve," she moans, "although I don't blame her for wanting out of her contract—the show is definitely going downhill. And at least they're using her death to make a point about experimental drugs. ACT-UP should be happy about that, if any of them are watching. Probably not. Even the rec.arts.tv.soaps. cbs crowd on the Internet seem to hate her, which I really don't get. She's the only interesting woman left on the show. What do you think?"

We are having our usual weekly check-in call about *Guiding Light*, the soap opera of choice among Pittsburgh women in the 1960s and 1970s, when she was growing up, and the one to which we have both remained loyal for almost three decades, through good times and bad. Neither of us lives in Pittsburgh now, but when we watch and discuss our soap opera, we still share a common community and a set of friends and neighbors about whom we care deeply, even as we laugh at their often ridiculously implausible lives.

But what's this about AIDS, you are no doubt wondering. Dr. Eve Guthrie, after all, as you may

know if you are a fan yourself, has died of a rare disease with no links whatever to any activity connected with sex or drugs or even blood transfusions. She has, it seems, picked up this virus while working as selflessly as Mother Teresa (and with as little political sophistication), as a doctor in a war-torn fictional nation. Nothing political or kinky about that.

Nonetheless, as Alison and I both understand, having followed and discussed the murky, contradictory, often subtextual, politics of daytime soaps for so long, there is something progressive, in the most utopian sense of that word, about the conclusion of Eve's story line. In a frenzy of what some would call "denial" about her fatal illness, Eve has made contact by way of the Internet with a colleague doing research on this disease and has been secretly medicating herself with an untested drug. Her fiancé, Ed, himself a physician of the more conservative and typical variety, is adamantly opposed. But lo and behold, the cyber-researcher Eve has hooked up with an old med school pal of Ed's, a woman no less, for whom he has the utmost respect. And this brilliant woman convinces him, in a series of inspiring speeches of the kind Alison and I love to savor, of Eve's courage, her intuitive scientific acumen, and her right to choose her own treatment. Eve even improves for a while on the treatment, but it is too little too late, and she finally succumbs, as the contract of the actress who plays the role demands (and as we who follow the cyber-chat gossip have long known she would), amidst sobbing friends, flashback clips of better days, and a eulogy in which it is predicted that her final act of medical courage will lead to an early cure for the disease. In soapville, this is credible.

The path that led my daughter and me to the soaps is worth tracing briefly, for it was as contradictory and unlikely as many soap story lines. In the 1960s, when Alison was very young, I was a full-time graduate student increasingly caught up in New Left and feminist politics. In those days, hard as it is to remember this now, we of the dem-

ocratic Left believed that revolution was around the corner; that a post-scarcity world of equality, beauty, pleasure, and material plenty for all was on the horizon.¹ In my socialist-feminist consciousness-raising/study group, we devoured new feminist tracts that corrected for the masculinist biases and blind spots of traditional Left theory. And in our women's caucuses, we developed strategies that challenged traditional Marxist ideology and process, with their artificial splits between public and private, work and play, labor and sexual repression. In our feminist revisions, women would not only be integrated into the public sphere of work and power; the public sphere itself would be transformed, as values such as compassion, nurturance, mutual support, and respect, long marginalized as relevant only to private, family life, were incorporated into public life.

Those were heady days. Also exhausting ones. I would drag myself home each afternoon, after classes and before the evening round of meetings, to find my grandmotherly baby-sitter faithfully watching *Guiding Light* while my two infants napped. And since she would not budge until her "story" was over, and I was too tired to budge myself, we would watch together as she filled me in on what I had missed. The habit stuck. In fact, *Guiding Light* became a daily delight to which I looked forward as a respite from my increasingly hectic life. More than that, although at first I chalked it up to exhausted delirium, the soap seemed, at odd moments, to offer a vision of social and emotional happiness that echoed the social visions my friends and I were constructing in our position papers and organizing projects. "What does a woman want?" asked Sigmund Freud, of penis envy fame (Juliet Mitchell had not yet rehabilitated him for feminism), and I couldn't help but think that, in all the male-run world, only the *Guiding Light* writers seemed to have a clue.

These were very different times in the academic and critical communities. Women's studies, as an academic program, was just being developed, a result of the growing movement of university-based

women's liberation unions. But efforts to bring the study of mass media and popular culture into universities, at least in this country, were not yet spoken of. These were the days, in any event, when feminist media analysis was almost exclusively of the "negative"-and-"positive"-image variety. And the gender images that feminists were analyzing in popular culture were rarely considered positive.

Nonetheless, say what they might about "mass culture" and its evils, the Frankfurt School theorists I was then studying could not dissuade me from my instinctive sense that much of what I was trying to teach my kids about what life was supposed to be like in the brave new world I envisioned could most easily be explained with soap examples. In the rest of their world—their school rooms, their friends' homes, the cartoons and sitcoms they watched—women's lives were marginalized and demeaned. But in Springfield, the fictional midwestern town in which *Guiding Light* is set, and in Pine Valley, the somewhat smaller fictional community in which *All My Children*, our other, occasionally watched, show was set, I glimpsed, entangled amid the absurdities and contradictions of the form, a feminized world in which women and their traditional concerns were central, in which women played key roles in every arena, in which, when women "spoke truth to power," even back in the 1960s, power stood up and paid attention.

The idea that bourgeois culture incorporates utopian visions and values, moments during which we are liberated from the constraints of realism and can glimpse, in the distance, a vision of that better world in which our often unarticulated heart's desires are fulfilled, is not of course new. Media scholars have been aware of this at least since Jameson's seminal essay on "Reification and Utopia." Nor is it news that popular culture, often taken so much less seriously than high art forms, has been the most powerful site of imaginative utopian protest. For as Jameson has written elsewhere, it is in times like ours, when "our own particular environment—the total system of capital-

ism and the consumer society—feels so massively in place and its reification so overwhelming and impenetrable that the serious artist is no longer free to tinker with it,” that popular forms that are less “serious,” less “massively in place,” assume “the vocation of giving us alternate versions of a world that has elsewhere seemed to resist even *imagined* change.”²

While Jameson does not specifically mention soap opera, feminist media theorists have written extensively and insightfully about the utopian element in daytime soaps. Feminists have discovered in soaps a representation of “a world in which the divine functions”; a world which “exhorts the [real] world to live up to [women’s] impassioned expectations of it,” as Louise Spence nicely puts it.³ And John Fiske, taking a somewhat different perspective, has described soap opera as a genre in which “feminine culture constantly struggles to establish and extend itself within and against a dominant patriarchy . . . to whittle away at patriarchy’s power to subject women and . . . establish a masculine-free zone from which a direct challenge may be mounted.”⁴ Other feminist theorists have pointed to any number of specific soap conventions and teased out their utopian implications. It is often noted, for example, that through the incorporation of multiple subjectivities and points of view and the use of multiple, open-ended narrative lines, readers are potentially empowered to question dominant patriarchal assumptions about family and gender norms and to resist hegemonic readings.⁵

But most of this work has focused on the way soaps represent and negotiate the traditionally feminine sphere of private life: the home, family and gender relationships, marriage and maternity. My own pleasure in soaps, and my sense of their usefulness as a tool for raising feminist daughters and sons, came from something much less often mentioned: their implicitly utopian social and political vision. Raymond Williams has written that “community is the keyword of the entire utopian enterprise.” And it was their sense of community,

a feminized community closer to my feminist visions of the future than to classic literary utopias, that drew me to soaps.

“The personal is political,” we used to say back in the late 1960s. And what we meant by that (and it is a sign of the times that this statement is so often misunderstood, even by feminists, today) was that it was *political* institutions that were responsible for personal suffering, and *political* institutions, the public spaces from which women had so long been excluded, that would need to be changed in order for women to be free and happy. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, themselves socialist-feminist activists, eloquently articulated the vision and the demands of that utopian worldview. “There are no answers left but the most radical ones,” they wrote in the 1970s:

We cannot assimilate into a masculinist society without doing violence to our own nature, which is of course *human* nature. But neither can we retreat into domestic isolation, clinging to an archaic feminine ideal. Nor can we deny that the dilemma is a social one. . . . The Woman Question in the end is not a question of *women*. It is not we who are the problem and it is not our needs which are the mystery. From our perspective (denied by centuries of masculinist “science” and analysis) the Woman Question becomes the question of how shall we all—women and children and men—organize our lives together.⁶

The answer to this question seemed vitally important to me as I was raising my children. And despite the derision of most people I knew (“Do you actually watch this stuff,” I was asked repeatedly when I first “came out” in print, back in 1973, in a column about soaps and women viewers in a New Left newspaper), the political imaginary of soap opera, in which courtrooms, hospitals, and offices seemed miraculously to bend themselves to women’s desires, suggested some answers.

For those not intimately familiar with the always implausible, often incredible, world of soap opera convention, a bit of background on *Guiding*

Light's Springfield community may be in order. The series, which has been on the air since the beginning of television, and before that, as a radio series, focuses primarily on the lives of eight complexly intertwined families who have lived in Springfield forever; they eternally intermarry, engage in personal, business, and political battles with each other, and they see each other, when they aren't feuding, through the constant barrage of mental and physical illnesses, natural disasters, onslaughts by master criminals of the financial as well as physical variety, and via the more mundane events like adultery, unwanted pregnancies, financial setbacks, and addictions that afflict them all, usually in multiple doses and in intensely dramatic ways. They are the Bauers, the Marlers, the Reardons, the Coopers, the Lewises, the Thorpes, the Spauldings, and the Chamberlains.

The show is distinctive in its special emphasis on class differences within a context of community harmony. This explains, in large part, its special appeal in Pittsburgh, where, until recently, the steel industry and organized labor colored the culture of the city. Where many of the newer shows elide issues of class, *GL's* Reardon and Cooper families are distinctively and proudly of working-class backgrounds. They are proprietors, respectively, of a boardinghouse and a diner, both located on "5th Street" where street life, it is hinted, is a bit rough-and-tumble and folks look out for each other. This sense of working-class community life, while perhaps foreign to audiences in other parts of the country, did indeed ring true in Pittsburgh, where ethnic communities, populated with large networks of extended families, remained for generations in the areas in which the steel mills had provided them work, at least until the demise of the steel industry in the 1980s.⁷

Despite this working-class presence, it is, not surprisingly in a commercial tv text, the Bauers and Marlers, middle-class professionals all, who provide the backbone and set the constant, stabilizing moral tone of the community. Dr. Ed Bauer, grieving fiancé of Dr. Eve Guthrie, is, in fact, the

chief of staff at the hospital where so many characters work and spend time healing from physical and mental trauma. And Ross Marler, his best friend, is the all-purpose, ever humane and democratic attorney for the "good" characters and causes. Then there are the Lewises, the Thorpes, and the Chamberlains and Spauldings, who represent big money and high finance. But here too class difference is marked with moral distinction. The Chamberlains and Spauldings are "old money." But where the Chamberlains have class, breeding, and humane policies based on a kind of noblesse oblige, the Spauldings are ruthless, competitive, and cutthroat, among themselves and against all others. The Lewises, by contrast, are Texas oil upstarts of the "good old boy" variety, fairly new to Springfield and closer in style and sympathy to the down home 5th Street crowd. And the Thorpes, represented by the rakishly evil Roger Thorpe, represent an upstart business class, driven by envy of and ire at the respect and love that the nicer and/or more established and self-confident families effortlessly attract.

At any given time there are any number of other characters who arrive in town and remain as semi-permanent or permanent residents, usually by marrying into and/or working with one of the clans, until, most often, they wear out their welcome in some way and disappear. Within the permanent families, as regular viewers soon discover and adjust to, characters often change personalities and natures with Jekyll-and-Hyde alacrity. The love of a good 5th Street woman, for example, will temporarily transform a Spaulding into a humane, class-conscious saint. And by the same token, good characters will often stray from the homegrown morals of their Reardon, Cooper, or Bauer roots when lured, romantically or materially, by members of more ruthless families.

Another distinctive feature of the soap genre is its dominant setting. Soaps take place almost entirely indoors, so that interior spaces—kitchens, bedrooms, living rooms, offices, restaurants, hospitals, shops and boutiques, health clubs—are key

elements in setting the tone and establishing the theme of story lines. On *GL*, besides the main characters' homes, the Reardon boardinghouse, the Cooper diner, the Lewis and Spaulding corporate offices, the usually Cooper-staffed police station, the country club (where the wealthy characters socialize and where major social events, to which all are invited, are held), and the hospital are the major settings.

In fact, it was the eternal presence of hospital scenes in which healing and nurture were always needed and always provided that inspired my first impulse to share my "escape" with Alison. With a typical four year old's insistence on brute realism, she was refusing to consider the possibility that she might be a doctor rather than a nurse "when she grew up," since, as she scornfully explained to me, "Everyone knows there are no women doctors." I could think of only one counter-example that might bear weight with her: *Guiding Light*. Here, even back in the sixties, women were as commonly cast as physicians and surgeons as men. And why not? On soaps all settings, all institutions, all workplaces are, on one level, merely extensions of the wholly feminized and personalized universe that is soapville.

But this example served me well for reasons beyond the obvious one of offering a "positive" alternative to the *Good Housekeeping* image of Mom as homemaker. It also allowed me to suggest to her that if she did indeed become a doctor, she might be able to act a lot more as she wished the doctors she had often encountered with terror would act. She could, best of all, get to run the hospitals as they did on soaps, and not in the truly terrifying and insensitive ways that hospitals—especially emergency rooms, where we spent more time than I care to remember—then were run. She liked that, for she could see that doctors on soaps, male and female alike, actually behaved like good Mommies at home, caring for and comforting the sick and frightened, and keeping the hospitals warm and friendly.

At Springfield General, for example, doctors

and nurses were generally personal friends of their patients, and so every illness was treated with personal attention and concern. Parents and other loved ones, for example, seemed to be allowed to stay with patients at all times and to elicit the most confidential medical information, always provided with kindness and sensitivity, about a patient's condition. This was hardly the case in our own experience. Alison, who suffered chronic ear infections as a child, was plagued by nightmare memories of being wheeled off by silent, white-clad figures to hospital examining rooms where I was not allowed to follow. This did not happen on *Guiding Light*. Moreover, as I pointed out to her, bad, mean doctors, such as the ones we had too often encountered, did not last long on soaps. They and their bad ideas about ignoring patients' feelings and living only for power and money soon came to a bad end, as would be the policy in a right-thinking world.

As time went on, and Alison and her slightly younger brother Jon grew older, soaps continued to play a role in our life together, in our mother-child talks about life and love and politics. For one thing, on the simple level of "positive" images and examples, I found that issues of sexuality and gender were handled much more progressively on soaps than in other popular culture.⁸ And since these topics are always difficult for adolescents to talk about, soaps opened up a convenient discursive space for discussing sex and relationships without getting too personal. It was a growing interest in gender relations that first sparked Jon's interest. A girl on whom he had a crush was herself a *Guiding Light* fan and always went home at 3 P.M. to watch with *her* mother. He wanted to find out what was up. As it turned out, we were then following a story line about a girl named Beth, the daughter of Lillian Raines, one of the hospital nurses who has remained a standard character throughout the years, whose stepfather was sexually abusing her. Upon learning of this, her boyfriend Philip, a Spaulding but one clearly uncomfortable with his heritage and heading for

class defection, reacted as most boys would have: he ran out in a rage to find the brute and beat him up. But he soon returned, shame-faced, to apologize for being so insensitive. He should have seen that Beth's feelings, not his, were important, he realized, and stayed and comforted her. This was a far cry from what Jon was used to in the (to me) often terrifying boy's culture that he tried to emulate in those sexually insecure years. He said little at the time. Indeed, he often pretended he was not "there" at all. But Alison made sure he got the point. And he still remembers Beth and Philip and mentions them on occasion.⁹

The immediate drama of this story line was intensely personal. But it is a feature of soap opera's strategies for presenting such issues that they never remain merely personal. Rather, they become political and social in the most utopian sense of those words, offering a vision of institutional procedures such as board meetings, trials, hearings, even social gatherings in which serious debate occurs, in which, more often than not, a progressive community consensus occurs. This is what happened on the Beth/Philip story line. The issue of secrecy and shame, important since both Beth and Lillian had been long abused and beaten by the "respectable" husband/stepfather, was endlessly explored, in conversations at a variety of settings, during the course of events related to a variety of other story lines. And in this long, drawn-out process, various community members were forced to accept that such atrocities might indeed be perpetrated in even the "best" homes and families, and that the women were in no way at fault. (Quite often in such story lines, although not in this particular case, characters are actually sent to support groups in which, in a most didactic way, information about the issue is provided to the soap community and the viewer community at once, and generally progressive attitudes and even policy suggestions are advocated.)

And then came the trial in which, in a more public, ritualistic, fashion, the entire community

came to terms with and adjudicated the matter, freeing the women from fear and shame and meting out punishment, in this case banishment, to the man. In the course of the trial, which went on for weeks, key characters were heard discussing the shocking events at work, at the hairdressers, over breakfast, and so forth, often arguing with each other, realistically enough, about who was to be believed. And as the pillars of the community, the doctors and grandmothers and police, came to believe and side with the women, so did viewers for whom these characters were equally credible and important. This was back in the late 1970s, it should be noted, long before issues of sexual abuse and violence against women were openly discussed or given the media play they receive today. But on this daytime soap opera they were indeed being discussed and dramatically represented in ways that seemed to me almost daringly oppositional.

How is it possible, in a form in many ways so hokey and even reactionary, for such progressive ideas to appear regularly? Well, for one thing, soaps are presented from a female perspective that is, by its very nature, *alterior*. The private sphere, as has so often been noted, is privileged and valorized on soaps, and the things women do in that sphere are seen as central to the maintenance and proper functioning of human life. But what is less often noted is the effect that this valorizing of private, feminine experience has on the representation of the public sphere. Soaps portray a world in which reality, as we know it, is turned on its head so that the private sphere becomes all-important. But there is more to it than that. For in so privileging private values, soaps also construct a highly unrealistic but nonetheless prominent and important public sphere in which all institutions are forced to conform to private, feminine values.

The feminist idea that "the personal is political" was a critique of what had, since the rise of the industrial world order, been a sharp delineation between the male-driven public sphere, in which

work, business, and public affairs were handled, and the female-driven domestic sphere, the haven in a heartless world, in which took place the work of caring for and maintaining family relations, the socializing of children, and the negotiation of emotional and spiritual matters. In this scheme, issues of morality, and emotional and spiritual health, were designated "female" concerns relevant primarily, if not exclusively, to the home and family life. The male world, by contrast, was understood to be ruled by the competitive, individualist values of the marketplace in which ruthlessness and greed and self-interest were largely accepted as inevitable, if not necessarily desirable. This divide structured a wildly schizophrenic and ideologically contradictory system which maintained that men could escape the maddening crowd of the city via a return to the nurturing hearth and home. This realm was seen to promote values such as caring, emotional openness, mutual support, and concern for the welfare of the group, in this case, of course, the nuclear, or at best, extended family or immediate neighborhood community where one lived one's private life.¹⁰

In most popular TV and movie genres, the split between these realms and their values is assumed and maintained, and one or the other of the spheres is foregrounded as the central arena of action and thematic concern. Westerns, film noir, and crime dramas, for example, take as given a male world in which violence, greed, and cold-blooded individualism are forever encroaching upon the public spaces of commerce and politics, and the solitary, male hero is seen as single-handedly confronting the worst of this social evil with more or less, always temporary, success. By contrast, sitcoms and theatrical family melodramas are set almost exclusively, and certainly primarily, in the domestic sphere of the family home in which marriages are negotiated, children are socialized, communal and family values figure, and women work feverishly to keep the encroaching evils of urban life, commerce, crime, and corrup-

tion from tainting the domestic realm.¹¹ In sitcoms, this is easily done, since the larger world is rarely visible at all. In melodramas, the job is more difficult, indeed, often impossible. But in all these forms, the gendered bifurcation between the female and male spheres, the values and roles they encompass, and the clear gender roles appropriate to each, are clear.

Soaps are a bit different. While adopting the stylistic conventions of the melodrama, and certainly privileging the concerns and values associated with the feminine, domestic realm soaps claim for their territory, and for their women characters, more than the geographic and social boundaries of home and family. They map out a public realm of political, economic, and legal events and institutions in which women, and the concerns of the feminine, operate as prominently and importantly as in the domestic. By so blurring and eliding the distinctions between the proper concerns of the two spheres, they draw their male characters more fully into the life of the family and the emotions than do other genres. In this way, they create a world in which women are free to take their concerns for such values as compassion, cooperation, and the valorization of spiritual and emotional perspectives into the marketplace, the workplace, and the arenas in which law, justice, public health, and the business of maintaining democratic institutions are negotiated. And, by extension, men themselves, now forced to operate in so feminized and humanized a public sphere, have no choice but to bring home the values by which they now run their public lives to their personal lives. As lawyers, doctors, and policemen, they are, in their good phases at least, caring, humane, and emotionally involved in their colleagues' and clients' lives. And at home they are similarly involved with their children, their wives, their extended family of friends, relatives, and neighbors.

In discussing feminist utopias, Fran Bartowski notes that, unlike most traditional male

utopias, they incorporate “tacit rather than reified models of the state.” What is “tacit” in feminist utopias, she suggests, and what distinguishes them from their male-defined counterparts, is a “discourse on the family” that sees the family as the “place where the inhabitants of the projected utopian state [are] formed.”¹² It is just such a discourse on the family, as the foundational root of social and political ideology, I would argue, that informs the vision of community and public life on soap operas. If, as I have argued, home is where the heart is, home is located everywhere on soaps. The gathering spots of soap geography, the restaurants, the health clubs, the diners and malls, even the hospital nurses’ stations and corporate office buildings—all serve as “homelike” environments. This is a world of public space that is family-driven in every arena. Its laws and policies reek, implicitly, of the values of “interconnectedness . . . nurturance, responsibility, and mutual respect,” which Carol Gilligan has defined as informing the feminist moral universe that girls are socialized to maintain: on soaps the binary split between private and public is virtually dissolved.¹³ Thus, it is standard on soaps for police officers, district attorneys, and lawyers, who tend to be equally divided between genders, to view their work in fighting crime, for example, as an extension of their roles as parents, keeping the city safe for their children, or, as in the case of sexual predators, for their wives and sisters and mothers. So thoroughly blurred are the sphere distinctions that there is *never* a contradiction between the two roles, never any possibility that one’s role as a family member might clash with one’s duty to defend a client or uphold the law. In fact, it is not uncommon on soaps for characters in these kinds of positions of authority willfully to ignore the law when their own sense of what is best for the safety of their loved ones is involved. And they are always, inevitably, proven to have been right, even heroic, in their judgment. On soaps, one’s instincts about what is right for the family, no matter what the

law might say, are always validated, since the laws themselves are assumed, implicitly, to be in the service of such values.

“Utopia,” Angelika Bammer notes, in establishing a theoretical framework for her analysis of feminist utopias of the 1970s, “identifies society as the site of lack.” Unlike ideology, she explains, which “represents things as they are from the perspective of those in power . . . utopia is the opposing view of how things could and should be different.”¹⁴ Soap operas illustrate this strategy in an interesting way. They construct a world in which women, who do not, in any meaningful sense, participate in public policy formulation in reality, are allowed to have their say about how things should be run. In soaps, women are free to “play house,” as it were, with the world; to set up a public sphere informed by the very values they are, in reality, enjoined to maintain and pass on (but only within the home and family of course).¹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir once said that women were most grievously disempowered in not being allowed to “take responsibility for the world.” On soaps, they are allowed to do just that. This is what is most empowering about the genre, because it is most at odds with the “common sense” to which women and children are otherwise exposed.

This is, to be sure, a somewhat unorthodox view of soaps. It is usually assumed that romance and the rituals of mating and marriage are what draw and hold women viewers. But while this is certainly a factor, I have always thought it was misleading to focus so heavily on these elements of soaps and to ignore what, to me, has always seemed so much more compelling: the sense of community. Men in soap operas, the good ones in their good phases anyway, are indeed wonderfully nurturing and caring. They become totally obsessed with the needs of the women in their lives and seem to devote every waking moment of work and leisure time to them. It is very common, for example, to see a lawyer, doctor, or cop stare soulfully into the eyes of a woman character in deep

trouble and say, "I'm going to drop all my other cases and devote myself entirely to your case, because I care about you so much." And somehow, it's possible to accomplish this without total destruction of the man's career or business.

In a story line on *GL*, for example, Alan-Michael Spaulding, one of the Young Turks prone to switching from evil tycoon to humanistic, selfless community activist under the influence of a good woman, disappeared for weeks at a time from his post as CEO of Spaulding Enterprises when his fiancée Lucy Cooper, of the 5th Street Coopers, was being held by a psychopath who had already committed date rape upon her. And even before her abduction, when Lucy was *merely* suffering the posttraumatic stress of the rape, Alan-Michael seemed to leave his office continuously at the merest hint that Lucy, his office assistant, was feeling down, in order to take her out for a special treat, or to whisk her to his palatial penthouse where she could be pampered and coddled, and allowed to weep, talk about her ordeal as the need arose, or simply sleep. Every woman who has ever complained that her male partner had no time for her because of work, or had no understanding of what she was going through after a traumatic experience, could only drool in envy.

Such are the common characteristics and behaviors of good men. And even the worst of them, if they become regulars, are periodically good on soaps. But, as wonderful as they are, like their real-life counterparts, these men come and go. The sorrows and joys they bring are always fleeting. The marriage vows and family structures to which they commit themselves are always already disintegrating, even as their Friday afternoon wedding vows are being said. Thus, crisis and trauma are always imperiling the sexual and family lives of even the most fortunately partnered women. At the very moment when things seem, at last, to be blissfully perfect in a marriage, every viewer knows that catastrophe looms. In fact, if any marriage goes untroubled for too long, it is a sure sign that

the characters will soon be written out, shipped off to another town or country to return, perhaps years later, in different bodies and with new clouds of chaos and tragedy ominously looming.

To avoid such annihilation, it is customary on soaps for even the best of longstanding characters to periodically undergo serious character lapses, if not outright transformations, in which they abandon or lose their wives and families in order to free them up for new storylines. Ed Bauer, for example, among the very best of the "good" men on soaps (as Alison and I, who rarely agree on men in real life, agree) has, in his long career on the series, himself gone through many such periodic marital lapses. At one point, for example, Ed had a brief affair with Lillian Raines, his head nurse. Lillian, having recovered from her ordeal as a battered wife, had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and undergone a mastectomy. Ed, as is common with good men on soaps, was her only confidante. Eventually, he became emotionally involved with her and, in part as a way of reassuring her of her sexual attractiveness despite her surgery, made love to her.

The affair was brief, and Lillian ultimately worked through her trauma with the help of an exemplary support group. But Ed's unbelievably long, blissful marriage to Maureen Bauer (a favorite on the Internet not only because of her lovable character, but also because she was noticeably overweight and still portrayed as sexually desirable) was destroyed. This story line not only served to present the issue of breast cancer progressively, it also saved Ed from storyline oblivion and opened a space for his relationship with Dr. Eve Guthrie. Eve died before Ed could have one of his periodic character lapses and let her down too. But he is destined, as we fans well know, to do it again, at least a few more times, before his character becomes too old for that sort of thing.

Marital and romantic upheaval and disaster, then, rather than family stability, are the norm in

the lives of the most prominent and regular members of soap communities. But through all this family turmoil and crisis, the community itself remains stable. This is what really holds the women and children together during all the thick and thin. Every soap character, no matter how battered, how evil, how hopelessly fallen they may seem, can always rely on the emotional and material safety net of the soap community of extended family, social, and political relationships. No sooner has crisis struck than the character suddenly has more friends and attention than ever before. Harley Cooper, another of the Cooper diner/police dynasty, had been something of a hellraiser as a teenager. Abandoned and virtually orphaned by her negligent mother, she became, and remained, a central focus of Springfield concern and activity and enjoyed front-burner status in the story line department for quite a while. As a young adult, however, she was transformed, by love, into a “good” girl, and the beloved of a “good,” centrally positioned, man. As nanny to Josh Lewis’s two children, after their mother’s tragic death, she became Josh’s emotional rescuer and ultimately his fiancée.

But no sooner had she achieved the Cinderella happy ending longed for by all soap women, than her fate, luckily for the character and the actress, took a turn for the worse. Josh, upon hearing that his (supposedly) dead wife was spotted in Italy, took off to search for her, leaving Harley jilted and traumatized. The entire community then predictably came to her rescue. Suddenly new career and social opportunities came from all quarters and once more her life was filled with adventure. She eventually became a police officer and something of a local heroine. When, at last, she found true love again, she was given better luck in the romance department, if not the series. She married her new love and so blissful were their prospects that no story line at all emerged for either. Instead they were shipped off to another town and have never been heard of since. So much for happily

ever after on soaps. It happens, but usually off camera, and is not a good career move. Soap actors, who do not know in advance what their story lines hold, watch for telltale signs in their scripts that they are about to be written out of a show. And one sign that provokes anxiety is, indeed, a wedding.

If weddings are often bad news for characters, they are among the most anticipated of delights for viewers because of their lush, festive air of community celebration and ritual. Indeed, soaps, in their portrayal of such events, uncannily call up delightful visions of the kind of post-scarcity plenty and beauty that we on the democratic feminist Left believed in and planned for, back before recessions and Reaganomics gave our youthful optimism a jolt. Soap characters live in splendor and have an endless supply of always up-to-date furniture, clothing and, apparently, hairdressers. They have access to glamorous travel destinations and accommodations on the understandably rare occasions when they need to get away. Should they choose to eat privately, or decide, at the spur of the moment, to call some friends and share an evening of joy, or sorrow, or nervous waiting for the tense outcome of some storyline, they have at their disposal gourmet cooking from places like the Pampered Palate that deliver a world of earthly delights at a moment’s notice. Nor are the poorer characters excluded from such treats. Sharing is endemic in soapville, and in fact the first hint that a “bad” character is about to be converted may well be that a wealthy character invites her or him, out of compassion or an instinct that they are savable, to share in some celebration or luxury.

Soaps, then, are in many ways similar to the socialist-feminist utopias of the 1970s. Marge Piercy’s *Mattapoisett*, the utopian community of *Woman on the Edge of Time* in fact offers a similar vision of community, abundance, and pleasure. Here technology, fueled by collective decision-making, is used to produce the very best food and

clothing for all, shared in communal dining and recreation areas or, as on soaps, alone if one so chooses. Among the most delicious features, for example, of what a socialist-feminist imagination would do with technology in the service of pleasure and beauty is Piercy's idea of disposable garments called "flimsies," which can be whipped up instantly, cheaply, and to one's personal taste and measurement, for special occasions where formal attire or costumes are required. After wearing, the flimsies are easily disposed of and recycled.¹⁶

A number of soap conventions resemble this kind of fantasized world of pleasure and beauty. Every soap periodically presents, for example, elaborate celebrations—masked balls, weddings, and so forth—for which everyone, rich and poor, seems magically to acquire the most elaborate, gorgeous evening wear immediately upon hearing of the occasion, even if it is scheduled for the next evening, as it often is. Here too, the costumes seem magically to disappear, never to be worn again, come the stroke of midnight. On soaps, in fact, the entire community seems to coordinate their attire in ways that allow a whole event to take on a particularly collective, communal flavor. Such things do not normally appear in traditional male utopias, but Piercy's feminist world answers real women's dreams, as any proper, technologically advanced, post-scarcity utopia should.

Indeed, the entire utopian world that Piercy spells out in such economic and political detail is filled with feminist-informed, radically democratic details that can be glimpsed, in a far less explicit, less rationalized format, on soaps. The idea of consensus and full community debate, made possible because each community in Mattapoisett was small enough to afford actual town meetings for all decisionmaking, is very much like what happens, in a more drawn out way, in Pine Valley and Springfield politics. The large permanent cast of town residents that make up the communities of these towns afford exactly the kind of structure in which entire populations can debate, differ, and

come to consensus. Indeed, the endlessly dragged out story lines, in which every character must weigh every facet of every issue, are in many ways like the endless "consensus-based" meetings that feminists and the more countercultural Left employed in the 1960s. Like soap story lines, these meetings could become irritating, dragging out over many nights and into the wee hours of the morning. All voices, it was insisted, had to be fully, often repetitively, heard. Each interpersonal conflict and disagreement, whether politically or personality-based, had to be aired and "processed," until, at last, everyone not only agreed but "felt okay" about every decision.

So it is on soaps. In fact, the inclusion of complex interpersonal factors not usually allowed in legal and political procedures is one of the most politically interesting aspects of the form. In creating characters who live and interact with each other, sometimes over decades, and who are thrust into so wide a variety of story lines and conflicts and crises over time, soaps allow viewers to see characters as contradictory, complex, and changeable. A good mother can be a terrible friend, an adulteress, or worse. A terrible tyrant in one sphere can be a doting godfather in another. A personally selfish, conniving woman can be a leading figure in a political or legal battle for a progressive cause. Alexandra Spaulding, for example, the matriarch of the Spaulding clan, dotes on the younger members of her dynasty and acts as a good and loyal friend to Lillian Raines and to newcomers to the community at times, even as she ruthlessly schemes to rob and cheat her business and political opponents. Because of this complexity of character and relationship, when consensus actually comes, it is a consensus far more rich in impact and significance than in forms in which a single narrative line, involving a small group of less complicated, contradictory characters, is traced. Thus, the complexity and open-endedness of soap structures serve more than a merely personal, psychological function. They also con-

tribute to the form's implicitly utopian vision of a feminized, radically democratic political process, in which difference and subtlety are recognized and honored within a community structure.

To give one example, on an *All My Children* story line developed over months of endless intrigue and complication in the early 1980s, a woman named Natalie Cortlandt accused her ex-lover Ross, who was actually her husband Palmer's son, of acquaintance rape. As the community discussed the case, taking sides, reviewing in detail her past sins, and recalling bits of their own histories and those of other characters, an ongoing "community meeting" of sorts actually took place around this publicly charged issue. *All My Children*, it should be noted, is set in a town even smaller and more bucolic than Springfield. Pine Valley is a suburb of Llanview, Pennsylvania (setting of *One Life to Live*, which follows it on ABC and which is in turn located somewhere outside Philadelphia). Pine Valley is thus almost village-like in social composition and in many ways far less socially realistic than *GL's* Springfield. On *AMC*, the concept of class is elided in favor of a more fairy tale-like community structure made up of "rich" people, *really* rich people, and temporarily "poor" people. But here too there are long-standing characters who play police officers and lawyers and doctors and their roles in the life of community are central. Here too there are key families who own and control most institutions and who intermarry and tangle with each other incestuously and eternally. There are just fewer of them. The Martins, whose male head is, again, the hospital chief of staff, are the middle-class professional equivalent of the Bauers. And the Chandlers, Cortlandts, and (matriarchal) Wallingfords are the property-holding, economic controllers of the town doings. And then there is Erica Kane, the glamorous, ever crisis-ridden, ever married or in love, ever engaged in some major, glamorous business enterprise, diva of the show, whose campy, over-the-top character gives the show its

peculiarly self-reflexive stamp of irony and self-consciousness.

Nonetheless, even in the more rarefied and more self-consciously campy atmosphere of Pine Valley, social issues and serious, feminized, public rituals and institutional proceedings take place. AIDS, homelessness, and gay and interracial relationships have all been touched upon progressively on this soap. So have more typically feminist-inspired issues such as date rape, domestic abuse, and even, briefly, back in the late 1970s, lesbianism.¹⁷ Indeed, it may well be the very smallness, quaintness, and *unbelievability* of this particular soap community that has made it possible for *AMC* to lead the way in raising so many charged issues long before other shows dared. Indeed, primetime still hasn't caught up in most cases. And the Natalie/Ross/Palmer Cortlandt adultery/date rape story line was among the earliest and most daring examples.

As the trial itself played out, things, quite realistically in this case, looked bad for Natalie. She had arrived in town as a "bad girl" character, out for what she could get, and had not been rehabilitated sufficiently by the time of this storyline to store up much good feeling. Thus, her recent adultery with the accused made it difficult to imagine a jury believing her. But then, as could only happen on soaps (certainly not, for example, in the O. J. Simpson case), the defendant himself, having witnessed a gang rape that suddenly put his own act in a new perspective, actually confessed, entered counseling, and volunteered, upon release from prison, to work in a rape crisis center. In this way viewers were taken through the experience in real time, in all its subtlety and nuance, and allowed to digest the emotional and political strands gradually, as one would indeed do in an ideal political setting in which all parties had adequate counsel and access to all the time and resources needed to locate and sift evidence, find and bring in witnesses, and deliberate. Soap operas, in this way, open a discursive space within which the

characters and the audience form a kind of community. The experience is especially intense since the characters involved are so familiar to viewers and are “visited” virtually every day, for years on end. Court TV, in its best moments, can only approximate the complexity and thoroughness of this kind of coverage of emotionally-intense, politically-contested issues of justice and equity.

The often bizarrely unconventional family and living arrangements that arise from the extended families and community relationships on soaps provide a similarly rich and complex representation of political structure and process. Again, Piercy’s Mattapoisett is brought to mind in these utopian projections of a community that honors and accommodates the needs of all members for emotional and material support and security in a feminist-informed manner. Piercy’s utopia articulates a private, family realm in which various choices of sexual and child-care arrangements are allowed to suit the varied and often changing tastes and inclinations of citizens. Children in Piercy’s world have three biological parents and do not necessarily live with any. They may choose households that suit them, just as those who remain childless may find ways to relate to the children of the community that does not involve custodial care or biological connection.

Similar things happen on soaps. A typical custody decision on *Guiding Light*, for example, ruled that two single mothers, one the birth mother, and one the adoptive mother, should share custody in a way that gave the child two homes and mothers, linked by a common community of support. The fathers, as soap-fate would have it, were temporarily absent at the time. The birth father, Roger Thorpe’s then-awful son, had skipped town, and the adoptive father, Billy Lewis, was in prison. The situation was even further complicated, and socially intriguing, because the birth mother, Bridget Reardon, was the working-class manager of the boardinghouse, while the adoptive mother, Vanessa Chamberlain, was the CEO of Lewis Oil.

Thus, the extended family created by the decision crossed class boundaries. This story line was particularly interesting to Alison and me because, at the time, she was herself, as a young single woman recently out of a long-term relationship and deeply immersed in a career, worrying through the issue, so common to her generation, of how and when she might be in a position to have a child. Springfield certainly looked like a utopian heaven to the two of us at that time, for no “solution” to this common social and material dilemma offered in the real world even approached the beauty of the Springfield model.

But parenting isn’t the only problem for which soap communities provide utopian solutions. It is also very common on soaps for people to move in and out of relationships and households. And the end of a relationship does not involve the kind of trauma and agony that today sends so many desperate souls searching far and wide, even in cyberspace, for “support groups.” On soaps, support groups come to you. They find you sitting alone somewhere, or being beaten by a boyfriend, and they invite you to live with them or with some other character in need of just the service you can provide. Characters who are originally derelicts or exconvicts or worse often wander into town and are immediately recognized for some wonderful character trait or talent and given a home and work.

Roger Thorpe’s awful, woman- and baby-abandoning son, for example, returned to town after several years and was promptly left a large inheritance by Henry Chamberlain, who was killed off when the beloved actor who had played him for decades suddenly died. Henry “just knew” that the young man was, deep down, a good person and wanted to provide him with the wherewithal to take responsibility for his young son and become a “productive member of the community.” He did just those things and in short order. And, as of this writing, he is a model of nurturing, caring fatherhood, as well as an exemplary member of the

Springfield community, engaged vigorously and virtuously in several story lines in which community issues are at stake.

The Reardon boardinghouse is always full to brimming with such characters. They arrive in town, crash at the Reardons, and promptly give up their wicked ways and criminal schemes to become whatever thing the show seems to be needing at the moment. A black character, David Grant, for example, arrived in town as an ex-convict with a bad attitude. After several years at the boardinghouse, he reformed. But it took a while to find him a career. He flirted with law, police work, restaurant managing and finally settled on becoming a civil rights activist, a job for which he was required to leave town and the show. But each of his previous interests were temporarily central to some major story line, as, in each case, he worked with some other “good” character to solve a crime, try a case, or support and care for a troubled, crisis-ridden female character. In this way, he was integrated into the family and community life of the major characters and, while for the most part unattached and unfamilied, was included in the (largely white) social and family rituals and gatherings.¹⁸

In the same way, children who have been abused, who are left orphaned and homeless, or who have simply run away from their families because they reject their values, are always instantly incorporated into other, suitable homes, whether a nuclear family, a large home in which a sprawling extended family of relatives and friends live, or a commune-like boardinghouse, like the Reardons’. People thus do not ever really live alone on soaps. Nor are they forced to conform to a single social or sexual norm or lifestyle or family unit in order to have a “family” and community of support. It is no surprise that viewers especially love the holiday celebrations that take place, in real time, on every soap. For so many, especially older women living alone, it is the only family or community celebration they may be invited to.

The way in which these utopian structures and

processes are presented on soaps is, to be sure, more fantastic than realistic. Issues of money and power are far less plausibly laid out than in Piercy’s *Mattapoisett*. Modes and forces of production and consumption, if you will, are so distorted as to be laughable. And rituals of order and law and social management are, while not nearly so bizarre, nonetheless far from plausible by any standard of realism. Contradiction and elision are inevitable in all commercial texts, especially those that are most utopian. But the ways in which soaps negotiate and mask their particular contradictions are somewhat unusual in their explicitness and detail.

Most theorists who have discussed utopia in popular or feminist works have described the engines of state as implicit. Richard Dyer, in his well-known analysis of Hollywood musicals, describes the ways in which popular commercial texts attempt, not always successfully, to work through and resolve the contradictions inherent in their efforts to suggest a utopian world within a system of representation very much tied to and dependent upon the existing order. For him, the solution involves a substitution of emotion for detailed political mapping. “Entertainment does not . . . present models of utopian worlds, as in the classic utopias of Sir Thomas More, William Morris et al.,” he says. “Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies.” Nonetheless, I am suggesting that there is indeed something much closer to an actual social model in the soap representation of community than Dyer finds in Hollywood musicals, although the soap model is textured with the same contradictions and “gap[s] between what is and what could be” that Dyer rightly attributes to all such commercial forms.¹⁹

To see how this is done, it is useful to compare Piercy’s *Mattapoisett* with the soap imaginary. *Mattapoisett* is a socialist-feminist utopia that does indeed include detailed, discursive blueprints for ownership and decision-making processes, which is plausible, if one assumes the existence of a state government committed to investing in technological development for hu-

man rather than military or commercial ends. The political and economic foundations of soap institutions, while also fairly elaborately laid out, are far more contradictory and implausible. The most important difference is in the portrayal of ownership and property issues. Where Mattapoisett's public hearings and trials, elections and economic negotiations, family and child-care policies, all grow organically out of the radically democratic and collectivized ownership and decision-making structures established as foundational, soap operas simply impose a retrograde, almost medieval, and insanely implausible structure of ownership and power relations upon their idyllic communities. In every soap, there are two or three corporate lords who own virtually everything in the town and so provide all the employment and control all the media and other institutions. Nepotism and monopoly are thus givens in these realms.

Nonetheless, while these powerhouses are often the most "evil" of villains, at least in their dominant mode, things always work out in the interest of democracy because justice and virtue always magically triumph, and the corporate, patriarchal tyrant, at the proper moment, invariably undergoes one of those always temporary conversions to "goodness." The Ross Chandler conversion is typical. But such things happen regularly to even the most powerful male figures. Adam Chandler, of *AMC*, for example, has a twin brother who is as pure and simple and good as Adam is usually evil. Nonetheless, when Stewart, the twin, married a woman dying of AIDS and adopted her son, Adam eventually came around and supported the couple in ways that made it possible for him to remain within the feminized utopian community, at least for the moment.

Thus, "good" always emerges out of the "goodness" of human nature, a human nature that—and this would horrify Karl Marx and Marge Piercy—has no relation whatever to the social conditions in which it thrives. Race and gender and class never play a role in one's fate here, at least not for long. A "good" person, white or black,

male or female, well born or orphaned, simply prospers, through the goodness of her soul and those of the equally "good" power brokers and owners who provide material security and mete out perfect justice. If soaps are informed by a feminist set of values, then, it is a set of values based, at root, on the most hopelessly essentialist assumptions, if not about gender difference, certainly about human nature.

It is by presenting so patently absurd a view of money and power that soaps manage to elide what I think of as the "Procter and Gamble problem": the problem of how to present a world in which gender justice really reigns without challenging the corporate structure that sponsors these fantasies and uses them to sell heart-breakingly inadequate substitutes for the pleasure and fulfillment that the characters on the shows and in the commercials seem to enjoy. Things happen on soaps in the same "magical" way, to use Raymond Williams's term, that they happen in commercials. In commercials happiness, justice, freedom, and so on are seen, quite magically, to arise out of the consumption of commodities that, in fact, do not have the slightest ability to provide them.²⁰ Similarly, on soap operas, justice and freedom and goodness and bliss arise quite magically out of a system that, if realistically portrayed, would inevitably thwart, by its foundational principles, the very happiness it is shown to promote. The Ross Chandler date rape trial is a perfect example. A legal system in which, somehow, characters are compelled to act on principle, even if their very lives, fortunes, or reputations are at stake, is a system very different from the one in which O. J. Simpson and William Kennedy Smith were tried.²¹ For in the real world, money, class position, and the gender biases that inform all institutions are driving forces not only in legal proceedings, but also in the molding of a defendant's own character and his decision-making processes. Soaps are a bit like extended versions of commercials, then, in the way in which the "magical" thinking of sponsors is drawn out, as in the fa-

mous Taster's Choice coffee romantic "miniser-ies" commercial, into long, equally implausible story lines. The relation between commercials and dramas, after all, is integral.²² AMC's Dr. Cliff Warner, of "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on television" fame, shamelessly sells aspirin to an audience of viewers who wish to believe that the medical and pharmaceutical industries actually operate by the humane and ethical principles that drive the doctors and hospitals on the soaps.

The feminist-informed public world of soaps is one that bears absolutely no relationship to economic and political reality. Nonetheless, as I have been arguing, there is a fairly elaborate set of laws and rituals and policies, unmoored as they are from economic and political reality, that govern the social world of soaps. The trials do indeed follow actual legal practice, to a point. The board meetings and nurses' stations and police procedures, for all their clumsy gaffes and goofs in the interest of plot, do operate according to a relative coherent logic and system. If it is difficult to recognize these images of public life as "political," it may be because the melodramatic conventions of soaps render their political vision so unrealistic as to seem muddle-headed and naive, as women's ideas about how to run society *are* so often labeled. But it is in fact the very use of melodramatic conventions that allows soap operas so easily to incorporate and transform traditional male political, legal and economic matters into an essentially feminine, and implicitly feminist, worldview. Again, the Chandler trial serves as a perfect example. It did follow understandable, recognizable, procedures of testimony from witnesses and principals, arguments from defense and prosecution, and sentencing hearings and decisions. The way in which characters were allowed to testify, however, was often unbelievably absurd. Characters, for example, were allowed to simply rise up and demand to be heard, because of the "urgency" of the testimony they were suddenly moved to share or the events they were suddenly driven by con-

science to reveal. No real court of law would allow such irregularities. Similarly, hearsay, personal opinion about motives and character, and so on were included with no objections, if they were crucial to the feminist-informed understanding of what the issues in the case were. Ross's confession, for example, would have demanded any number of hearings and rulings to be permitted, once he had pleaded innocent. In soaps, however, doing the right thing, from a feminine, humane point of view, is all that is needed for testimony to be considered relevant or even crucial.

I have mentioned Carol Gilligan's moral vision as an implicit aspect of the soap imaginary. But even more telling in this regard is an essay by Kathleen Jones in which she applies feminist moral assumptions to traditional male theories of public sphere politics and suggests how they might lead to a radically transformed version of justice and political authority. "The standard analysis of authority in modern Western political theory begins with its definition as a set of rules governing political action, issued by those who are entitled to speak," she writes. But these rules "generally have excluded females and values associated with the feminine." Moreover, she argues, the "dominant discourse on authority," in placing "strict limits on the publicly expressible, and limit[ing] critical reflection about the norms and values that structure 'private' life and which affect the melodies of public speech," further ensure that female values will be marginalized within a private realm. Thus "compassion and related emotions" are rendered "irrelevant to law and other policy matters."²³ As Tom Hanks's character put it in the film *A League of Their Own*, "There's no crying in baseball." Or in court or in the military or in Mahogany Row.

This is hardly the case on soaps. There is indeed crying and wailing and gnashing of teeth, as well as other public expressions of emotion and personal concern, in all the public arenas in which right and wrong, justice and human well-being are

determined. And they are heeded and considered legitimate. Compassion, especially, is always relevant. Because of this, soaps' hearings and procedures arbitrate public matters in ways that implicitly, if implausibly, echo the political ideals of feminists. The 1960s model of consciousness-raising meetings and public speak-outs, in which women "spoke bitterness" and linked private emotional suffering to public institutions and policies, offers a useful comparison. In both there is an effort to correct for the failings of the masculinist public sphere by recognizing the subjective and emotional realities of women's experience. Again, the Chandler date rape trial comes to mind. But so do many other situations. The Reardon/Chamberlain custody hearing, for example, was interrupted by Bridget Reardon herself who, for love of the child, suddenly offered, without benefit of counsel, the compromise suggestion of shared mothering that the judge, a woman herself, simply accepted as ideal, based on a shared notion of what was best for the child. The key here was the wrenching sincerity of the emotions of the two obviously deeply loving women. The extent of their tears and wails was enough to convince the judge that they would do right by the child in this wholly unprecedented ruling. Nor was there ever any mention of social issues or of the financial arrangements between the two very differently propertied and positioned women. In real life, by contrast, as economically strapped, unconventionally "lifestyled" women who have been through the process know too well, such material and "moral" concerns actually dominate custody hearings.

Thus, that soaps are excessively melodramatic and emotional, and therefore highly *unrealistic*, is, from a feminist viewpoint, affirmative. For in feminist theory, as feminist social theorists in so many disciplines have continued to demonstrate, it is the exclusion of the values of the private, domestic sphere from issues of justice and equality that must be addressed and corrected.²⁴ But because

they so aggressively inject such values into their portrayal of every sphere of life and so flagrantly reject the conventions of aesthetic realism that are valorized in our culture, soaps risk the laughter and derision of those who maintain the artistic and literary canons.

The (gender- and class-based) shame that fans feel in watching soaps is therefore understandable. But it is based on a faulty psychological assumption that fans too often internalize: that pleasure in soaps amounts to taking them at face value. This is hardly the case. In fact, laughter and ridicule are very much a part of the viewing experience of fans. Viewers understand and laugh about most of the contradictions and "gaps" of the form, as any casual scanning of the cyberspace bulletin boards covering soaps will reveal. This indeed is among the more sophisticated pleasures of viewing. Fans happily suspend disbelief for the pleasure of escaping into a fairy tale realm in which dreams and desires and fantasies, despite what we know is plausible, seem magically to be fulfilled.

This aspect of viewership and fandom became an important element in the soap watching sessions I shared with my children. As they grew older and more experienced and sophisticated about politics and narrative, the issue of "realism" periodically came up in contexts that engendered increasingly complex and sophisticated discussions about the vexed relationship between social reality and what is filtered through the lens of popular commercial texts. On soaps the distinction between what is possible and what is desired and deserved is elided if not dissolved. But in life this is hardly the case. Teasing out and dissecting these contradictions was among the most fruitful and exhilarating aspects of our soap habit. It still is.

And, as my own examples of my talks with Alison illustrate, such sophistication about media and politics is not bought at the expense of pleasure. On the contrary, the pleasure becomes richer, more empowering even, as it is inflected with increasingly complex, contextualized strands

of knowledge and insight. “Against the grain” reading practices, as is well known by now, are a common ingredient in the pleasures of fandom. As my opening example of a conversation between Alison and me indicates, there is a quite complicated set of assumptions that inflect our by now habitual shorthand discourse about soap opera. We readily jump from one plane to another in our discussions, now savoring a utopian moment, now laughing uproariously at the idiotic apparatus that enable such fantasies, now expressing contempt at the ways in which soaps deflect from and distort painful social realities.

Nor is our conversation as one-dimensional in its focus on representation and textuality as it was in the early days, when affirmative images were all we were after. Today, we are likely to jumble together in any given conversation, in ways which make perfect sense to us, facts and tidbits from soap narratives, current headlines, personal issues, and behind-the-scenes information about the industry itself. The reality of AIDS and AIDS research funding; the fantasy world of medical research on TV; the star system and its economics as driving forces in the development of story lines—all these are taken for granted as we continue to watch and derive pleasure from the events and characters on *Guiding Light*. This is, after all, the way in which fans everywhere, as the literature on readerships and interpretive communities teaches, read and discuss popular texts.

Michel Foucault, in writing about the relationship between art and madness, credits art with “interrupting” the long-standing, tyrannical reign of bourgeois reason and creating a space for the return of the repressed. The work of art “opens a void,” he writes, “where the world is made aware of its guilt.”²⁵ It is in the nature of oppositional works to invoke this kind of social guilt. But soaps go a bit further than that. They offer a glimpse of a social order in which the guilty may be redeemed. And when we laugh at the absurdity of this vision, we are, at the very least, acknowl-

edging the distance between our dreams and our realities in a way that those whose tastes run only to more fashionably cynical forms may be able to avoid.

Notes

- Because of the delay in the publication of this book, some of the examples in this essay are not current.
- 1 For a vivid example of the amazingly optimistic utopianism of the New Left, see Michael Lerner, *The New Socialist Revolution* (New York: Dell, 1970).
- 2 Fredric Jameson, “World-Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative,” *Science-Fiction Studies* 2 (1975): 233.
- 3 Louise Spence, “They Killed Off Marlena, But She’s on Another Show Now,” in *To Be Continued . . . : Soap Operas around the World*, ed. Robert Allen (New York: Routledge, 1995), 193.
- 4 John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 197.
- 5 See especially Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Methuen, 1982), and Martha Nochimson, *No End to Her: Soap Opera and the Female Subject* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1992).
- 6 Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women* (New York: Anchor, 1978), 323.
- 7 That *Guiding Light* is now in serious ratings decline, causing panicky speculation on the Internet that it will shortly be canceled, is surely related to its rather old-fashioned social geography, in which a sense of old-fashioned working-class culture, based on clearly delineated working-class communities, as was until recently still recognizable in cities like Pittsburgh, is still valorized. Alison’s and my nostalgic loyalty to the series is infused, to a degree, with nostalgia for the political climate of that city in those years in which we lived, and I was politically active, there.
- 8 The importance of feminism’s growing influence on women’s-oriented popular culture cannot be overlooked as a politically encouraging factor here, one that is not often enough recognized in these depressing political times. For it is encouraging that soap operas, and a bit later other equally disreputable “women’s genres,” were far ahead of more highly regarded cultural and informational forms in treating gender issues progres-

- sively, in accord with feminist thought. At least one reason is surely that the producers of these forms were aware of, and, for economic reasons, responded to, the growing influence of feminism on the women viewers and consumers they targeted.
- 9 The actor who plays Philip during these years, as I write this, just returned to the role, along with the actor who played Rick Bauer, Ed's son (now himself a doctor) and Philip's best friend. Alison and I are, of course, thrilled about this, and are eager to share the news with Jon.
 - 10 The seminal, classic texts in which the political nuances of the public/private split, as articulated by second-wave socialist feminists, can be found in *Women, Class, and the Feminist Imagination*, ed. Karen Hansen and Ilene Philipson (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).
 - 11 See Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Film-making, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991); Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film* (London: BFI, 1987); and Fiske, *Television Culture*. Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* series is a useful example of how these contradictions may be used self-consciously to critique the very social structure that enforces them.
 - 12 Frances Bartkowski, *Feminist Utopias* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 15.
 - 13 Carol Gilligan, *In Another Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 57.
 - 14 Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 44.
 - 15 This is a feature of daytime soaps, it should be added, which strongly differentiate them from their nighttime counterparts. Ien Ang, in her discussion of *Dallas*, for example, in *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 71, points out that it is family that serves as a haven from the heartless outside world of business and politics, which is seen as "a hotbed of activity threatening to the family." This is radically different from the daytime strategy, in which the line between the spheres blurs.
 - 16 It is worth noting here that it was this very feature that often served most useful in my talks with my children about the sticky issues raised by consumerism, in a world in which social status and peace of mind often seem, and not only to children, to have so much to do with the crazy-making need to accumulate more and more of the right toys and clothing than others do, or at least to keep up. In trying to tease out the negative and positive aspects of this culture—pleasure, beauty, and fun are very real features of commercial culture for children and adults—soaps pointed to a different kind of money and production system. It was clear, from Pine Valley's example, that if one could indeed live in a world of plenty, in which individual and collective choices about clothing and other pleasure-providing items could be easily accommodated, without the anxiety-provoking pressures of competition, conformity, scarcity, and the need to accumulate and hoard, even Barbie might lighten up and fatten up a bit. The Barbie issue is also a gender and sexism issue. In Piercy's utopia this problem is tackled and resolved, again through the device of offering infinite choice and variety in every sphere of life. In soaps, this is hardly the case and this problematic must also be addressed when discussing their fictional worlds with children.
 - 17 The lesbian story line involved a regular character who had—as have all women soap characters have had—bad experiences with men. She became attracted to her daughter's therapist, an "out and proud" lesbian, and began a relationship with her. As usual, the community was fraught with tension and heated debate. Finally, the decent characters, including the woman's mother, came to consensus: if the young woman was happy, the relationship was acceptable. The story line abruptly ended soon after, however. And even as it played out, no physical contact of any kind between the two women was shown.
 - 18 The problem of race on soaps is vexed. Black characters do figure increasingly prominently on soaps, and at times an interracial relationship will be portrayed, generally as a controversial issue for the community (as Clarence Thomas would like us to believe), with no attention whatsoever to race as a factor in their lives. Of course, they must be given a black love interest or remain celibate—except when the writers are willing to tackle "the race issue." Thus the matter of race is always awkwardly and inadequately handled.
 - 19 Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 229.
 - 20 Raymond Williams, "Advertising: The Magic System," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980).
 - 21 I am not suggesting that the Simpson verdict was in-

correct. I do not actually think it was, because the issues of racism and corruption in the Los Angeles police department were, in my view, determining factors that compromised the evidence against Simpson enough to produce reasonable doubt, certainly in the minds of a large black jury. I am only commenting here on the behavior of Simpson himself, as a man already known to be violently misogynist, whether or not he committed the particular crime of which he was accused.

- 22 The tricky relationships among the various elements of soap textuality and viewership are cleverly developed in my Paper Tiger Television segment, "Elayne Rapping Reads Soap Operas." The producer, Dee Dee Halleck, intercut my analysis of the form with ironically juxtaposed story clips, Procter and Gamble commercial clips, and interviews with the residents of Staten Island (where the Procter and Gamble plant is located) about the health problems they have experienced because of the toxic pollution problems caused by making Ivory soap "99 and 44/100 percent pure."
- 23 Kathleen Jones, "On Authority: Or, Why Women Are Not Entitled to Speak," in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 119, 130–31.
- 24 Feminist legal theorists have written extensively and with particular relevance on this point. See especially Martha Fineman and Nancy Thomadsen, eds., *At the Boundaries of Law: Feminism and Legal Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1991) and Martha Fineman and Martha McCluskey, eds., *Feminism, Media and the Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 25 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Random House, 1965), 278.

CARDBOARD PATRIARCHY:

ADULT BASEBALL CARD

COLLECTING AND

THE NOSTALGIA FOR

A PRESEXUAL PAST

John Bloom

Only four sparks [remain] in my memory—four images that root me to this epoch:

- 1) The sound of Don Pardo's booming voice.
- 2) The sight of Richard Castellano's sister naked.
- 3) The fear that Albert Dorish might beat me up.
- 4) My three shopping bags full of baseball cards.

—BRENDAN BOYD AND FRED HARRIS, *THE GREAT AMERICAN BASEBALL CARD FLIPPING, TRADING, AND BUBBLE GUM BOOK*

Consciously, it may just be a love of the sport. . . . Unconsciously, I'm sure for me, it's vicarious. I was never good enough to play. . . . It's also an unconscious search for order in life. You're always aiming to complete a set, and that's a sense of security.

—ADULT MALE BASEBALL CARD COLLECTOR INTERVIEWED IN THE *DETROIT FREE PRESS*, AT A DETROIT BASEBALL CARD SHOW, 1974.

It sounds to me like they're jealous. . . . Sure we've ruined their hobby, but isn't that what America is all about?

—BASEBALL CARD SPECULATOR ALAN "MR. MINT" ROSEN IN THE *WALL STREET JOURNAL* IN 1990, ON HOW HE AND OTHER BASEBALL CARD PROFITEERS HAVE AFFECTED THE HOBBY.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the hobby of baseball card collecting underwent a radical transformation. For the better part of a century, sports card collecting had been something most North Americans had associated with children, but by the late 1970s, adults, primarily men, had taken an active, if not dominant role in the collecting hobby. As sports card collecting underwent this change, pop-