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Towards a Post-Imperial, Transnational American Studies: Notes of a Frequent Flyer *

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This essay is a meditation on the transformation of American Studies from a national to a global enterprise. The author, a self-consciously (North) American Americanist, inquires into

the implications of her fast-growing academic «empire» on scholarship outside of the U.S., the practice of American Studies «at home», and future directions for the field.

TO get my carrel in the library, I push open a carved wooden door and climb the hidden marble staircase to the balcony. The ancient floorboards of Schloss Leopoldskron creak in response to my weight. Cupids perched on ornate bookcases extend their arms in libidinal welcome. I plug in my Macintosh Powerbook and settle into the carrel, a window nook with a simple wooden table and uncushioned chair facing the frozen lake.

Introduction

February 1996. I've fled from the hyperactivity of metropolitan New York to An Other World: this 18th century baroque palace, immortalized in «The Sound of Music», which is the home of the Salzburg Seminar. Established in 1947 as the Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization — to educate young Europeans about the United States — the Seminar today offers short term programs on both global and Ameri-

* This paper was originally presented at the MidAmerica American Studies Association meeting in St. Louis, Mo., 19 April 1996. It will appear in a slightly different version in *American Studies*, Vol. XXXVIII, n° 2, Summer 1997.

can issues. As a resident scholar at the Center for the Study of American Culture and Language (CSACL) at the Salzburg Seminar, I'm free to pursue my own agenda. All scholarly and cultural events are available to me; nothing in particular, beyond collegial proprieties and schmoozing with international Faculty and Fellows, is expected. The residency provides leisure, luxury, scholarly resources and good company, too. It's hard to imagine a more agreeable setting for reflecting on recent developments in American Studies abroad.

My approach to this subject, as the subtitle, «notes of a frequent flier,» suggests, is anecdotal and personal. While I started travelling for American Studies in 1976 — when the Bicentennial stimulated (U.S.) government investment in academic conferences and curriculum development around the world — I want to focus here on a series of recent experiences. For the past five years, as a consultant to emerging American Studies programs in places as different as Mozambique, the Czech Republic and Nepal and as a participant in scholarly meetings in Turkey, Portugal, Japan, Poland, Belgium and the Salzburg Seminar, I've been pondering the course of our far-flung empire: its growth, diversity, and relation to the U.S.-based enterprise.

A visitor's view is inevitably short-sighted and self-centered. I say this to underline the difficulties of assessing academic developments in unfamiliar cultural settings, especially when English is not the principal language of instruction or scholarship. As a consultant or visiting lecturer, I try not to make assumptions: about (foreign colleagues') political contexts or intellectual and cultural frameworks or bodies of knowledge or mastery of English. However, some assumptions must be ventured, or at least problematized, if exchange is to occur. Consequently, I keep looking inward when traveling, «reading» myself «reading» my surroundings.

As a workplace, the Schloss Library is romantic to the point of distraction. The museum-quality paintings and exuberant sculptures, the polished woods and dim rosy lights set me to thinking about comfort, status and the mysteries of the crapshoot. I contemplate my privileged situation (e.g., as a white, middle class, American, tenured full professor on a year-long sabbatical) and the system of exclusions which sustains it. Staring out at the lake, I catch sight of a group of Japanese tourists, video cameras in hand, strolling across the brilliant white expanse; and I wonder, foolishly, whether their

guide, after giving the requisite «Sound of Music» spiel, mentions that in 1938 the Nazis confiscated the Leopoldskron estate, then owned by the theatrical producer Max Reinhardt, because it was «Jewish property.» I was two that year, a blond, green eyed toddler in New York, protected from the ravages of the war to come by my grandparents' flight from Austria-Hungary some forty years earlier.

The events of the Seminar lure me out of my carrel. Every day for the first half of a seven week stay, I drop in on sessions — first on «Reform in American History,» and then on «Europe on the Eve of the 21st Century.» The exploration of ideas (and personal/professional lives) continues at sumptuous meals, during coffee breaks and in the bierstube until the wee hours of the morning. While I'm curious about participants' responses to the substance of the presentations, I pay more attention to the subtexts: the interplay of geopolitical affiliations, national interests and personal politics; who talks to whom and in what voice; how friendship patterns emerge and which issues draw blood.

Of course, I am not a disinterested observer. These days, an Americanist's purview is large, and mine seems dangerously without limits. For example, when the impassioned, guitar-playing historian from Barcelona insists that Spain is really four nations (Catalunia, the Basque Country, Castilla and Galicia), and he himself rarely speaks Spanish, I suppress a shudder. Turning the conversation from the Spanish case, I talk to the Catalan about the anxious identification I felt this past winter when Canadians were voting on the future of their union with Quebec. Although neither Spain nor Canada is my subject, nationhood (overshadowed in our current discourse by culture/s) surely is. My overcharged reactions instruct me; I fixate on how and where in encounters like this one I locate myself as an American and an Americanist.

The reflexive impulse is an old story in (domestic) American Studies. It's the business of U.S. Americanists to study ourselves — at home and, nowadays, abroad. Once upon a time, I envied my friends in French Literature and Italian Art History their research trips and culinary enrichment; and I berated myself for the parochialism which led me to specialize in my own continent and culture. Who could have imagined, thirty years ago, that our self study project would be re-invented as a global growth industry and that so many of us would become frequent fliers for American Studies?

Often, it seems that we, frequent fliers, are — whether will-

ingly or reluctantly — participants in a great imperial adventure: bringing our news of our culture and our strategies for studying it to foreign «outposts» all over the globe. Yet there are signs that the imperial character of the adventure is diminishing. In recent years, news of our culture has been traveling from abroad to the U.S. And quite independently of U.S. Americanists, that news makes its way among foreign experts who have their own stake in the evolution of the field. Further, as new programs are launched abroad, foreign scholars are putting «our intellectual properties» to their own local and national uses. Finally, U.S. Americanists, building on diversity studies and other new practices and paradigms at home, now see «abroad» as a site for comparative and reflexive cultural studies.

In the mid 1970's, when I traveled to West Africa and South America for American Studies, our field was exploding; it was breaking out of the clubbish confines established by interdisciplinary-minded, white male historians and literary critics. A more diverse student clientele and demands (by activist students and faculty) for a socially relevant curriculum spurred innovation in American Studies in subject matter, methodology and pedagogy. Radical teachers opened up the classroom, replacing conventional hierarchies with student-centered course contracts, field study, collaborative social action and research projects. As an extension of that agenda, we fought to democratize the American Studies Association and make participation in national and regional meetings more accessible and equitable.

In a parallel vein, American Studies began discovering women and minorities at the very moment that we (women and minorities) were busy discovering ourselves. This confluence of intellectual and political energies unleashed a torrent of inspired identity-politics enterprises; and it laid the groundwork for a major paradigm shift in the humanities and the social sciences. Already, by the mid 1970's, the new interdisciplinary courses which we were developing on the «margins» challenged the old American Studies «mainstream.» In response, American Studies programs scrambled to demonstrate receptivity and flexibility as well as commitments to pluralism and anti-elitism.

Consider the irony of our professional situation. Imperial American Studies moved into high gear in an era of acute national self-doubt. Our faith in the democratic ethos was

shaken by evidence everywhere of systemic injustices. Our complacent assumptions about the unity of American culture were shattered by the unassailable realities of difference. The notion of American exceptionalism — always central to our identity as a nation — was deflated, if not permanently demolished, by familiarity with other frontier, pluralistic and democratic societies. Our arrogance about affluence dissolved in the face of a collapsing industrial sector, a burgeoning population of have-nots, and dependence on the Japanese yen. Finally, our confidence as «a leader of the free world» seemed irrevocably tarred by the legacy of Vietnam.

Yet neither the anxieties of Americans nor the sober readings of American culture by Americanists have slowed down international traffic in our field. Of course not. This traffic remains a function of power relations — economic, geopolitical and ideological. And the American Century, despite challenges from the Pacific Rim, will not end in the year 2000.

What has changed in U.S. American Studies is the following: a hard-earned humility in regard to «speaking as an American» and «representing» the culture/s of the United States is modulating our imperial tone. Where there once was An American Story (or, at least, conflicting interpretations which could be melted into a seemingly coherent metanarrative) today contentious, multivocal American stories in multimedia format defy our universalizing habits. Ever adaptable, we are making rhetorical and theoretical adjustments — in the direction of «dialogue,» «conversations,» and searches for «common grounds.»

In fact, the changes go beyond modulations in tone. Multicultural/diversity scholarship (including, of course, feminist and gay/lesbian scholarship) has forged a new sensibility among (many) practitioners of American Studies: more reflexive and contextual, more overtly politicized and personally inflected, decentered and hybrid, ecologically-minded, integrated and global. This new sensibility is propelling American Studies towards its transnational future.

Many of us have been involved in efforts to help launch American Studies programs around the world. Almost inevitably, that agenda — juxtaposing «developers» (usually funded by the United States Information Agency) with people who are «developing» — replicates the relations of empire to colony. Expert/teachers are empowered in ways that novice/learners are not. Frequent fliers for American Studies are

likely to hold most of the cards, especially in places where foreign colleagues have suffered from politically or economically imposed isolation, the absence of resources, the devastations of civil or regional wars, and burdens of national under/development. To begin with an illustration of imperial American Studies, let me describe my involvement in July 1993 with the faculty of the Instituto Superior Pedagógico (a college for secondary school teachers) in Maputo, Mozambique.

I remember, on the Air Mozambique flight from Lisbon to Maputo, practicing my restaurant Portuguese. It is not so much an instinct for survival — several years earlier, as a Fulbrighter in Portugal, I had mastered the intermediate course in «eating out» — as a strategy for making connections. I hope that my culinary enthusiasms will open doors, facilitate social relations with my colleagues. In fact, I am destined to do more eating than working during my three weeks in the poorest country in Africa, but mostly in venues not frequented by my colleagues: e.g., my five star hotel (which accepted only U.S. dollars and South African rand), chic «European» bistros, the Poets Club (a restaurant-hangout for artists, writers and musicians), and the homes of American diplomats. Eating, or more to the point, «not eating» with my Mozambican colleagues, signifies: the huge gulf between us in which economics and politics, gender and race, language and culture all figured prominently.

Probably the most significant barrier to the development of an American Studies curriculum at the Instituto involves power relations between USIS, our government agency abroad responsible for the consultation, and the Mozambican academics. USIS has all the resources and calls all the shots. They arrange study trips to the U.S. for key (male) faculty and expect gratitude and good behavior (e.g., American Studies curriculum development) in return. When the Mozambicans produce more gratitude than good behavior in preparation for my visit, USIS is furious. The message from USIS to me is unequivocal: «they» don't deserve «our» help and will surely «screw up.» You can imagine the rest.

In fact, American Studies is a low priority for an overworked and underskilled faculty whose major task is to prepare secondary school teachers in the social sciences. After 17 years of an enervating civil war — leaving the country's major institutions and infrastructure in massive disrepair — my colleagues are distracted and weary. Maputo is crowded with

homeless and often shoeless refugees, people without work or a place to wash or enough to eat. On the boulevard near the institute, a woman sits on the sidewalk, presiding over a stash of seven oranges; the woman sitting next to her has five. How does this economy of oranges work, I wonder. Will the sale of these pieces of fruit constitute a passable working day for the two women? Will the small change they earn be used to buy flour or bread? Pay off a debt? Or keep a daughter from prostitution?

My colleagues all want assistance in teaching subjects closer to home, specifically Mozambican and Southern African studies. However, for understandable reasons, they do not feel free to put that agenda on the table. To a limited extent, I grasp their needs. My demonstration lectures on women's oral history and multiethnic American foodways model reflexive, student-centered, pedagogically accessible approaches to the study of everyday life. But I speak English, as the Mozambican faculty coordinator requests, without assistance from a translator, knowing that English comprehension on the part of the faculty is uneven to poor. (During informal conversations with colleagues, I use Spanish or French with non-English speakers.) Moreover, the presentations come too late, after too much wasted time, for us to talk together about adapting these very American and interdisciplinary American Studies strategies to Mozambican circumstances.

Women save the consultation from catastrophe. Nine members of a newly constituted University Women's Organization — including one junior member of the American Studies group — take me to a nearby hotel for coffee and conversation. We gather around a row of small tables in an otherwise empty dining room, ten women — of Mozambican, Portuguese, Asian Indian and American backgrounds — eager to make contact. After a long wait, an indifferent waiter (accustomed to giving short shrift to women unaccompanied by men) brings strong tea and weak coffee and platters of sliced white bread with «American» cheese and ham. Although it is a humble repast (especially after the freshly baked croissants, English jams, French cheeses and South African fruits on the breakfast buffet at my hotel), what counts are the rituals of breadbreaking and tea making, the passing of platters and providing for one another.

Our topic, by common consent, is women's issues in the university. Speaking in Spanish, which everyone understands

(as Portuguese speakers generally do), I propose our state-side consciousness-raising approach. We then go around the table sharing stories (theirs in Portuguese, which I manage to follow) of the difficulties of women's professional lives. The process is new to the group, and a few are shy about revealing themselves in public. But most seize the chance to air their outrage at blatant sexism and to recount more nuanced experiences of gender injustice. Drawing on this potpourri of anecdotes, we venture some comparative observations about the intersections between gender, academic advancement and family structures. Good first-step feminist work. For two memorable hours in Mozambique, traversing barriers of language, race, culture and economics, we participate in an emotionally charged, democratic and transnational exchange.

I am not offering the Mozambican example to demonize USIS. USIS personnel, especially these days, are alert to the negative consequences of smug or condescending Americanists modelling American Studies. The structures of inequality, as they impinge on the community of scholars, are larger and deeper than USIS. For example, the challenge of moving from the imperialism of English to multiple language usage (or, in the near future, the universalizing languages of technology — including automatic translation) is hardly unique to American Studies.

By the same token, I do not make grandiose claims for our extended women's coffee break. For the Mozambican women, it is a break from university business as usual and from the frustrations of patriarchy. For me it is a breaking out of the business of Empire and the failed business of American Studies — into the refreshment of honest talk. After three bad weeks at the office with the «boys», I need tea and sympathy with women.

Clearly, encounters between U.S. and foreign women scholars must figure prominently in the evolution of a transnational American Studies. I am not advocating an essentialist connection. Rather I am suggesting that issues of gender which profoundly engage so many women in our field delineate a creative channel for conversation and collaboration. Not only in Mozambique, but everywhere I go, women come forward to inquire how U.S. feminists are progressing in the struggle for gender equity and justice; always, they are eager to compare ways in which issues are defined, strategies developed and achievements evaluated in our communities and theirs. However, to move from these still piecemeal, ad

hoc exchanges toward a rigorously pursued global feminism is an ambitious, long term project.

I turn now from the ill-starred Mozambican experience to some alternate scenarios in the development of American Studies abroad. In many corners of the world today, universities are launching American Studies programs with a focus on their own national and institutional needs — rather than applying U.S. models or following conventional disciplinary developments.

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Unlike the Mozambicans, who hesitate to make their own agenda part of the American Studies consultation, faculty at Tribhuvan University in Nepal, the poorest country in Asia, approach the issue directly. In Kathmandu in March 1995, I participate in discussions about establishing American Studies with professors from English, history, economics and political science. The circumstances surrounding the consultation are auspicious. First, leadership comes from a brilliant, innovative former dean of humanities and chair of English. And second, curriculum development on related issues is well underway: many members of the American Studies group are part of a bi-weekly faculty seminar (without remuneration or released time from teaching) on Minority Literature/s in the U.S., directed by an enthusiastic Fulbright professor. Inspired by the process of reconstructing the literary canon, the Nepalis are drawn to progressive, culturally critical syllabi in their discussions of an American Studies curriculum.

Like the Mozambicans, the Nepalis have a particular interest in developing an interdisciplinary approach to the study of their own culture. They are intrigued by a number of directions in contemporary U.S. practice which seem germane to their situation: reflexivity and self-criticism, non-elite culture studies, oral history, material culture studies and ethnic/diversity studies. Their introductory American Studies course, they decide, will feature methods of culture study (derived from a variety of disciplines) suitable to comparative work on U.S. and Nepalese cultures and ultimately transferable to a Nepalese studies program. They have no hesitation in claiming American Studies as an intellectual tool and transnational property.

While the Nepalis hone in on American Studies as a methodology, faculty at the University of West Bohemia in the Czech Republic focus on American Institutions as models of the late 20th century, postindustrial development. Since the

Velvet Revolution in the Czech Republic (1989), technological developments and entrepreneurship have been moving along at a remarkable clip. Everywhere there is an impatience to replicate American-style affluence — but without fully understanding the operations of corporate capitalism and its connections to political democracy and the institutions of a civic society.

The faculty most responsible for the American Studies initiative at the University of West Bohemia (members of the Department of Applied Linguistics, teaching English to future engineers and computer scientists) have begun building American subject matter into their advanced language curriculum. From that base, they envision a (sociohumanistic) service program for technology students, in the form of an American-style minor, with units on U.S. politics and law, history and economics, family, education, literature and mass culture. The savvy students with whom I speak when I visit the University (in the fall of 1993 and again in the spring of 1994) are fascinated by the U.S. as an instance of technocratic culture. Looking at our present circumstances, and particularly at the juxtaposition of wealth, power and knowledge against poverty, violence, injustice and environmental destruction, they see their futures.

Ironically, the Czech faculty who conceived the American Studies plan encounter their own deeply rooted disciplinary resistances as soon as they begin putting the innovative structure on paper. In Czech universities — and universities almost everywhere else in the world — the disciplines still function like fortified camps, keeping members in and strangers out. Joining together, even without breaking down barriers, goes against the academic grain. While the American Studies group has a sense of mission, it will take them some while before their agreed upon rationale finds a viable programmatic form.

All over Eastern Europe, new possibilities present themselves to scholars of the United States. The Russian americanist Tatyana Venediktova, on the front page of the *ASA Newsletter* (March 1996), calls for «pushing American Studies in the direction on comparative culture studies.» Describing Russia's current state of «profound unsettlement» as an incentive to change, «to choose oneself against oneself,» she asks, «but doesn't this describe the situation of any nation in the world these days, including America? Every community is

being pushed out of the cosy inwardness to the borders, being forced to open itself to the Other and to the future...» All around the world, she continues, students are going into American studies «to learn — through America — how to live in this strange new world of ours.»

For many U.S. Americanists, the possibility of doing comparative work is a welcome corrective to our parochialism. However, we don't often have the grounding in a foreign culture which non-U.S. Americanists possess: not just the lived cultural experience but, say, the historian from India's extensive training in Indian history in addition to U.S. history. In discussions at the Salzburg Seminar, I have been struck by the division among foreign scholars between those (often politically radical) who insist that without comparative approaches, U.S. values and perspectives are inevitably (inappropriately) privileged over their own ethnic/national traditions and those who worry that comparative approaches may open a Pandora's box of (unprofessional and unmanageable) subjectivities or actually be peripheral to the Main Agenda of American Studies.

In teaching, the objective of comparative work is not to label models better or worse, more «developed» or less «developed,» but to open up connections between and among institutional structures and cultural values, between material and symbolic domains. Here's an illustration from a CSACL/Salzburg Seminar on «The Literature of Ethnicity» which Paul Lauter, Kreis Versluys and I taught in the fall of 1995.

Towards the end of the two week seminar, Paul invites Fellows to give us, via e-mail, their (educated generalists') accounts of ethnic group arrangements in their respective countries. Fellows who were occasionally puzzled by our broad interdisciplinary framework for discussions of ethnicity and literary texts suddenly see, in their own treatments of ethnicity, links between demographics, politics, economic developments and cultural forms.

We print out and distribute the Fellows' collection of mini-essays. This document moves our discussion to a new level of inquiry. The Seminar has introduced participants to a broad sampling of ethnic writers and to possibilities for pairing ethnic and White «mainstream» writers to elucidate issues of group distinctiveness and common «American» traditions. What kind of pairing, we ask at breakfast the next morning, would be the most meaningful for American literature students in

Portugal or Pakistan? Is there a place for tapping students' own national (or ethnic) traditions in relation to the teaching of American texts? A proposal is underway to offer a workshop (at the 1998 meeting of the European Association for American Studies) on «paired texts» — one ethnic U.S. and one from the presenters' national/ethnic culture — as ways of approaching questions of canonization, majority/minority themes «and the problem of representation.»

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The more I travel, the more I am drawn to the work (and the pitfalls) of reflexive and comparative American/cultural studies. My visit to Japan, to attend the meetings of the Japanese Association for American Studies in May 1995, produces a dozen temptations and no shortage of cautionary tales.

For example, in Japanese taxi cabs, white cotton doilies, impeccably laundered and ironed, decorate the driver's and passengers' seat backs. While the old-fashioned domesticity of the doilies seems — to an American — ill suited to new-fangled '95 Toyotas, replete with television and telephone for the driver, I reverberate to the anachronism. Beneath the sleek technological surfaces of contemporary Japan is a potent (and, to the foreigner, largely inscrutable) past. Surely past and present co-exist in the cab (which is, like vehicles everywhere, both castle and conveyance) with doilies a sign of the dutiful daily labor of the Japanese driver's (traditionally) unemployed wife. I make a note to ask my students at home, why — beyond the rarity of the unemployed wife — these doilies are unthinkable in America.

In Kyoto I ride the efficient commuter trains and the safe, graffiti-free subways. I purchase pulpy fruit drinks from unbroken street vending machines and self-consciously gulp them down before moving on; the Japanese do not eat or drink on the street. In a public park I observe pre-school groups of four and five year olds sitting calmly in circles — no one is crying or shouting or grabbing another child's banana or crayons — and I wonder what it is about the Japanese that makes this self-contained, utterly unAmerican behavior possible. And then I contemplate the ease with which I have generalized about American behavior and my confident assumptions regarding our differences from the Japanese — even as I have spent the last 20 years critiquing such essentialist generalizations.

At Doshisha University in Kyoto I am struck by the orderliness and tranquility of the campus. It seems planets removed

from my manic, noisily multilingual college in Northern New Jersey. I notice rows of motorbikes with their handles all at the same 45 degree angle, and I marvel at the discipline that produces this level of visual harmony through conformity. Actually, the explanation for the phenomenon is, to an Americanist, stranger yet: a university employee is responsible for bringing all scooter and motorcycle handles into perfect alignment. It all seems quite amazing — until I remind myself of the small fortune spent on my own, modest, inner city campus to keep the grounds crew planting bulbs, trimming bushes, reseeded the lawns and repairing recurrent cracks in the concrete of the main plaza.

On my last working day in Japan, after lecturing to academic and general audiences on oral history, multiculturalism, Women's Studies and the Women's Movement in the U.S., I meet with senior English majors at Tokyo Woman's Christian University. Standing before 40 impeccably well groomed young women, I describe the aspirations of women students at my college and the conflicts they confront when they set out to «have it all» — career, family, independence and intimacy, private time and leisure, too. I ask how it is for young women in Japan. The response: first silence and then a few shy comments but nary a true confession — despite gentle promptings from two of their professors. Yes, they acknowledge anxieties about the tight job market, but not about social constraints, inner struggles or oddball choices.

The need to speak English inhibits these students. But more than that: I want to know, in personal terms, how they see their futures. How American of me to expect that, in the presence of their teachers and classmates, these young women would willingly explore culturally loaded, potentially troubling questions to satisfy the curiosity of a foreign visitor. I give the lecture, but real lesson is the one they give me.

Work in American Studies is often of interest to foreign scholars who do not identify as Americanists — either of the mono or interdisciplinary persuasion. Beyond the feminist connection, this is true in such areas of ethnicity and diversity, interdisciplinary approaches to culture, and teaching the «new clientele.» I am invited to participate in a (USIS sponsored) program organized by sociologists at the University of Liege on «Unity and Diversity in Modern Societies: Must They Conflict?» My talks, hardly sociological in orientation, on a Colombian family in multiethnic Jersey City, NJ and Asian immi-

grants in suburbia, complement presentations by Moroccan and Zairian-born scholars on the conditions and morale of their own immigrant communities in Brussels and a Belgian Walloon on the changing lifeways of Gypsies. The papers set off a heated discussion about contrasting representations of majority-minority relations in Belgium and the U.S., with several Belgians lamenting their own dark views while envying what they (incorrectly) take to be American optimism.

Even though 90% of the program is in French, it is all familiar enough — from the bitterness of those on the margins to the subtle interweavings of pluralism and racism. What is not familiar — I might add — is the ambitious five-course Belgian luncheon (for guests of honor), accompanied by three different wines, served in the «cave» of a university-owned chateau by students of the culinary institute. Now that's a cultural difference worth travelling for!

Diversity, like feminism, is on the agenda of academics everywhere. At the Center for Social Studies of Coimbra University, where an interdisciplinary project on migrations has been underway for some years, Alice Kessler Harris and I talk with colleagues, mostly non-Americanists, about relations between new immigrants, minorities, and changing patterns of employment in post-industrial America. Our experience in problematizing diversity is interesting to the Portuguese — as it is to the Belgians and to Turkish Americanists who invite me to speak at their Association's 1992 meeting on «The Rainbowing of America: Immigrants, Cities and Cultural Change.» More than most other nations, we have been putting our difficulties as a pluralist society on the table and on TV for all to see. For this candor, rather than our high flown rhetoric or ambivalent social politics, we earn a respectful hearing.

According to the protocols of the Salzburg Seminar, each of us leaves our titles and politics at the door. We dress informally, use first names, and speak — at least in theory — only for ourselves. Yet at Seminar 333 (February 1996) on «Europe on the Eve of the 21st Century,» the question of participating «as an individual» is complicated by the fact that most Fellows are in the employ of their governments or of international organizations like the European Union and NATO. Despite the artificially levelled terrain of Schloss Leopoldskron, the pecking order of the conference reflects the larger structure of power relations. All the more reason why, as an Americanist, I am fascinated by this discourse on Europe.

«Europe,» it appears, is the unproblematic property of Western Europeans. Comfortably ensconced in EU and NATO, the Western Europeans at the Seminar think of Europe as their Club and regard Eastern Europeans as petitioners at the gates. The Eastern Europeans in the group are desperately eager for membership. In elegant, often unaccented English they present their (nations') credentials; they testify to rapid progress made in the post-communist era and benefits which might accrue to all from «early admissions.» The older white men who founded the Club almost half a century ago speak kindly to their most youthful petitioners, complimenting them on their (unexpectedly) fine English and (surprising) intelligence.

At dinner in the Marble Hall, a salon resplendent with interior balconies, gilt-edged mirrors and massive Baroque paintings, I pursue this oddly familiar dialectic of power. My companions at our round table are two Latvians, a Romanian, a Belgian, a Filipino, an Israeli, a Turk and another American. After a second glass of white wine, the Latvian woman judge to my left and the Romanian woman diplomat to my right comment acerbically (in response to my questions) on the condescension of their colleagues from the West. I remind myself to ask the animated Filipino woman, a professor of Business Administration, and the voluble Turkish academic how they see relations among Europeans; and how they regard their own situations vis a vis «Europe» from their positions on the «periphery.»

Watching these interactions from my multicultural Americanist corner, I'm hardly surprised to discover that the Eastern Europeans, in response to slights from the West, don't hesitate to condescend to the Middle Easterners and Asians in the crowd. It's all too familiar. Internally and externally. How many times in the U.S. have I caught myself thinking or behaving as if not all members of our American Club were equal players? But now in Salzburg I commiserate first with the Eastern European «outsiders» and then with the even more marginalized Fellows from the Philippines, Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan.

My moral outrage has a hollow echo. To me if not to my new friends. I enjoy the feel-good tonic without responsibility. In the context of this particular seminar, where the United State is esteemed and repeatedly praised as the guarantor of (Western) European stability, I operate from a mix of white American privilege and female Jewish marginality. I wonder,

are my commiserations read as condescension? What do I really know about the global and personal politics which inform the outrage of non-members of the European Club? Are they not also, each and every one of them, consummate insiders in their own societies? And if so, does that location matter in the context of «Europe on the Eve of the 21st Century?»

When the 62 Fellows in the «Europe» Seminar depart, I am still atwitch with the interplay of politics and personalities. To refocus my attention on American Studies (more narrowly defined), I abandon that artifact of Old Europe, the Schloss library, for the year-old, hi-tech «lab» at the Center for the Study of American Culture and Language. The Center, on the second floor of the Meierhoff (the other main building belonging to the Salzburg Seminar), is spanking white and flourescent-bright. Its 18 «loaded» desk-top computers, all with CD ROM capacity, offer access to the latest in American Studies scholarship and communications technology.

Fellows in the session on «Reform in American History» have put their projects on the Salzburg Seminar's home page of the World Wide Web. I check out the Catalan separatist's mini-course on American mass culture in the 1960's; critical of Faculty members for failing to address the impact of mass culture abroad, he has focused on the reactions of European youth culture to American rock music. Less important than the content of his project is its presence on the net — accompanied by his photo, institutional affiliation and e-mail address. As a result of the Seminar, he is in The Community, hooked up, web-wise, and certain to be in contact with his political confreres in Quebec and his listserve colleagues in cultural studies.

A huge chapter of our transnational American Studies future is here, in the technology, for all those with training and access. Of course, as long as the electronic networks remains U.S. generated and English-centered, U.S. Americanists will continue to be privileged in American Studies. However, I count on the Catalan, and hundreds like him, to run a hard, fast race in cyberspace.

Mid March 1996. At four o'clock in the morning, I pace between the bedroom and study of my suite on the third floor of the schloss. My head spins from overstimulation. I contemplate a hot bath — or a double scotch. Suddenly I am weary and impatient to be home. It happens to every traveller, even

on «perfect» trips. Paradoxically, the very things we look for in travel — the epiphanies, the enlarged purview, the rush of adrenalin in confronting the unanticipated and the different — take their heavy toll.

Abroad, we are forced unmercifully to test our openness, empathy and cool, our articulateness and attractiveness to others. We measure our capacity to listen hard, shift intellectual gears, abandon some psychological props, lose our political grounding, and regroup. In the interest of self-development, we suffer through the lonely hours, the deprivations, and the dread of imminent self-destruction.

I ask myself, when I return home exhausted, will I be able to explain why seven weeks of uncommon collegiality and luxurious hotel living (without once having to shop or cook or serve a meal, do the dishes or make a bed, wade through junk mail or take out the trash) should produce such fatigue? Will I make the effort to explain? Or will I pass it off simply as jet-lag.

Transnational American Studies is a strenuous practice. It asks U.S. Americanists to add to our habitual trio of problematics (American culture, our individual identities as Americans, and our scholarly assumptions/methods) a fourth: our global location. It asks us to de-center ourselves and our nation-state: to be the first to mock our imperial vanities, our self aggrandizing «exceptionalism,» our macdonaldizing greed and vulgarity. More than the aforementioned: it asks us to negotiate a landscape of incalculable multiplicity and instability, with fewer rules and boundaries and more blind alleys and landmines than any we have ever traversed.

Even more critically, perhaps, transnational American Studies asks us to relinquish privileged ownership of our field. It asks us to reject as our due the inequities of material resources for pursuing this common work; to acknowledge the role of these inequities in the production and reproduction of knowledge; and to collaborate with foreign colleagues — without playing Big Sister or Big Brother — as partners in an enterprise unfolding beyond our control.

Have I got it right? Or simply pc? In this vision of transnational American Studies, have I invented a 21st century nightmare: an Americanist's Puritan/Jewish conscience and overweening ambition run amuck? Is this stretching toward transnationalism an invitation to an intellectual beheading? Or does the future always beckon thus to those foolish enough to harbor grand designs? ■