Chapter 1

Cultural Studies: What’s the Point?

C’mon in. Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable. Pour yourself a drink if you’d like. I want to tell you a story about this strange and wonderful thing called “cultural studies” and hopefully, by the time I’m done, you’ll see cultural studies as something that is appealing enough for you to take it up yourself—or to deepen your existing investment in it, as the case may be. Part of my goal in writing this book is to strengthen cultural studies by expanding the circle(s) of people who proudly claim it as their calling, and by encouraging current practitioners to renew their commitment to the project.

To this end, I was strongly tempted to begin with an even warmer, even friendlier invitation: something like, “Cultural studies! C’mon in! The water’s fine!” Too often, after all, cultural studies has come across as a sort of exclusive (and exclusionary) clique that’s only open to the cool kids: that is, the academic hipsters who wear too much black and
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spontaneously drop paragraph-long quotes from Deleuze and Foucault into “casual” conversation. And that is certainly not the vision of cultural studies that I want to perpetuate. If cultural studies is going to come anywhere close to fulfilling its mission(s)—and I will say more about what that entails later—then it needs to become more open, more flexible, and more expansive than it typically has been of late. Cultural studies isn’t easy work, and not everyone can actually do it—but it’s also not a tiny, private club that only a select few can join. At least it shouldn’t be.

At the same time, however, I also considered beginning with a clear, stark warning. “Cultural studies! Beware! Here be dragons!” Partially, this is because, for all of its value, cultural studies is not exactly in the best of health these days, and so the story that I want to tell you about it is not the sort of light-hearted, feel-good fairy tale that will ease your troubled mind or give you sweet dreams. It is, in part, a story about what’s wrong with cultural studies, about why cultural studies matters enough for its current malaise to be a legitimate cause for concern, and about what we might do to repair and revitalize cultural studies for the future. So you may not want to get too comfortable—and you might want to make that drink a strong one.

Even at its healthiest, cultural studies is a challenging, prickly, difficult sort of calling to take up—and so there aren’t many (if any) stories about it that should make you entirely comfortable. Done properly, cultural studies should agitate, provoke, disturb, and unsettle you. This is even more true if you actually claim to be doing cultural studies rather than just observing it from the sidelines. It is not just that good cultural studies work potentially shakes you out of your comfort zone (though this is also true): it’s that the very practice of doing cultural studies should make you
nervous, even as you engage in it. If you have somehow managed to be completely at ease with the work you’re doing in cultural studies, then the odds are good that whatever it is that you’re doing isn’t cultural studies at all.

As that last bit suggests, the story that I want to tell is unashamedly polemical. There are plenty of polemics against cultural studies in the world already, but not many for it: either in the sense of being in favor of it, or in the sense of speaking to cultural studies in a stern, tough-love voice. As a polemic, much of what follows is painted with broad strokes and in deliberately provocative tones—and so it’s intended to make you uncomfortable. Ideally, though, it is a productive discomfort—much like the irritation that leads oysters to create pearls—but you should know in advance that the story I will tell does not come with a happy ending. If, somewhere down the line, such an ending actually becomes a reality, it will only happen because you and I and a cast of thousands work awfully hard to make it so. And very little (if any) of that work will be comfortable in and of itself.

**Why Ask Why?**

Many of the stories that people have told about cultural studies—especially over the past decade or so—have concentrated on the wrong questions: What is it? How does one do it? When and where did it originate? Who does (or doesn’t do) it? And so on. To be fair, these are questions that deserve ongoing consideration, and I won’t ignore them completely here. But to the extent that people still tell stories about cultural studies at all, these are the questions they typically focus on. In and of themselves, these questions are
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fine, but since they too often define the limits of the stories that people tell about cultural studies, the conversations that follow tend to be much less productive than they should be.

Instead, I want to focus on the question of why (in several of its different variations) as it applies to cultural studies. Why does it matter? Why did it follow the particular paths that it did? Why is it currently in trouble? Why should anyone do it in the first place? Why is it worth saving? It’s hard—perhaps even impossible—to give good answers to all those “who, what, where, when, how” questions without also addressing the underlying “why” questions with some care. And yet those “why” questions are too often taken for granted in the stories that people have told about cultural studies. Such narratives typically assume that you’re already invested in cultural studies, or that its inherent value as a project is self-evident, and we can just dive into defining it (or describing its history, or outlining how to do it, etc.) without explaining why it’s worth your time or energy. This sort of quietly pervasive inattention to the “why” questions is more than just a gap in the broader conversation about cultural studies: it’s actually a large part of what has gone wrong with the project.

To be sure, one of the reasons why so many people focus on those other questions is because cultural studies is exceptionally hard to define—and so all those definitional questions seemingly need to be addressed before we can understand the project at all. Typically, people try to make sense of cultural studies by comparing it to traditional academic disciplines such as English or sociology or history. Most disciplines have well-established (albeit often unspoken) sets of rules and conventions for determining what counts as an appropriate research focus for scholars who
want to visibly belong to a particular field: Topic X situates you squarely at the center of things (and so no one doubts that your work is part of the discipline), Topic Y puts you somewhere on the periphery (arguably within the field, though you will still need to justify that claim to some traditionalists), but Topic Z clearly places you in a different field altogether (or, at best, any legitimate argument for Topic Z’s rightful place within the discipline will serve to expand the discipline’s recognized territory in ways that will also reconfigure its borders in significant ways).

Cultural studies, however, is not a traditional academic discipline (in fact, it’s not necessarily academic at all, but we’ll get to that prickly argument later), and so there are no simple litmus tests—not even rough and sloppy ones—to help determine whether a particular text belongs inside or outside the project. Cultural studies has no fixed object, method, theory, or politics (even if, at any given point in space and time, it favors some options in each of these categories more than others) that we can use to determine whether a given project is inside or outside its borders. There is, for example, plenty of cultural studies scholarship on popular culture, but—contrary to popular belief—not all (or even most) cultural studies work focuses on popular culture, and not all (or even most) popular culture scholarship counts as cultural studies.

All this open-endedness might make it seem like cultural studies is some sort of uncharted frontier where there are no rules at all, but quite the opposite is true. The persistent looseness of the project actually places the would-be cultural studies practitioner in a state of perpetual uncertainty about the relationship of his or her work to the larger project. And, for people who are genuinely committed to doing cultural studies over the long haul, this tension becomes
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more pronounced, rather than less, as their familiarity and experience with the project grow.

Newcomers to cultural studies, of course, may feel uneasy about the project simply because they’re not sure just what they’ve stumbled into. If you come to this book as a novice, that’s perfectly fine. You won’t come away from the experience as a full-fledged expert, of course—cultural studies is too big, too sprawling, and too diverse to be summed up neatly in any single volume—but you should still be able to come away with a preliminary understanding of the major contours of the project and, hopefully, a keen desire to do cultural studies yourself. Be forewarned, though: cultural studies is a fractious and controversial project that encompasses an eclectic range of practices. It has a heavily contested past, a fuzzy and chaotic sense of its present shape, and a wavering and uncertain future. It is almost impossible to define neatly, especially since it shifts and changes in rapid and unpredictable ways. At the same time, it’s also an incredibly exciting project to be a part of. But that excitement doesn’t come easily. So brace yourself. This will be a bumpy ride.

If, on the other hand, you come to this book with a relatively deep understanding of cultural studies, that’s also fine. But you may need that “brace yourself” warning even more than the newcomers do. Partially, this is because one of the major problems facing cultural studies today is that much of the work being done in its name isn’t actually cultural studies at all. And so it’s possible that your “deep understanding” of the project may, in fact, be deeply flawed. Given the vast (and growing) range of misinformation about cultural studies in active circulation, such misunderstandings are probably not your fault. There’s been a lot of “the blind leading the blind” when it comes to cultural
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studies, and if you’re one of those unfortunate souls who has been led astray, you can’t be blamed for the poor guidance you’ve received. Still, all that misinformation remains a problem, and so the amount of unlearning you may need to do could still be sizable enough to upset your sense of equilibrium—especially since some false notions of cultural studies are so far removed from the real thing that any meaningful reconciliation between the two may simply be impossible.

But even if you really do understand cultural studies well—you know that Stuart Hall isn’t just a manufacturer of notebook paper (or a scandal-plagued BBC announcer), that Tony Bennett isn’t just an aging (albeit once again hip) pop singer, and that “the Birmingham school” has nothing to do with Alabama—the odds are still good that this book will challenge your sense of what cultural studies is, where it can be found, and what it should do. Part of what I will argue in the pages to come is that, taken as a whole, cultural studies has shied away from even trying to embrace some of its most fundamental values. And it’s rarely a comfortable experience to be told that you’ve somehow failed to live up to your own ideals. So the ride to come may be even bumpier for cultural studies “veterans” than it will be for “newbies,” precisely because you may think you know what to expect—and you may be surprised to learn just how wrong your expectations are.

The Sigh

If you’re really familiar with cultural studies, then you’re probably also very familiar with what I’ve come to call “The Sigh.” You’ve heard The Sigh before—probably more than
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once. You may even have made The Sigh yourself—in which case, you’ve almost definitely done so more than once, as The Sigh is something that people tend to repeat with some frequency once they’ve started to make it themselves. The Sigh comes in a variety of flavors, ranging from “benign indulgence” (the sort of bemused tolerance that one shows a beloved, but wayward, child) to “exasperated hostility” (the sort of eye-rolling disdain that one feels when confronted with an act of unbelievable stupidity), but what triggers The Sigh is always the same: yet another bit of meta-discourse about cultural studies. What it is. What it isn’t. Where it comes from. Where it’s going. How to do it. Why it matters. What’s wrong with it. How to fix it. And so on, and so forth, ad infinitum, ad nauseam. Sigh...

Behind The Sigh is the sentiment that all this self-reflexive commentary about cultural studies is, at best, unnecessary—and, at worst, harmful. Either way, The Sigh is a way of saying that there’s already enough meta-discourse about cultural studies in the world, and that the time has come to stop producing more of it. Some Sighers simply feel that the moment for such efforts has passed: either because the battle has already been won (i.e., cultural studies is now too well established to need to explain itself in such detail), or because the battle has already been lost (i.e., cultural studies is now too diffuse for any further explanations to actually help reverse the dilution of the “brand”). Either way, for these Sighers, the battle is over and it’s time to move on. Slightly more skeptical Sighers aren’t convinced that there was ever a genuine need for extended self-reflexivity about cultural studies. In their eyes, all that meta-discourse has always been just so much hot air, and it’s more important for people to actually do cultural studies than it is to talk about what it is. For these Sighers, the success (or failure)
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of cultural studies depends entirely on the strength of the actual work done in its name—and that work should be able to speak for itself, without any need to frame, explain, define, or defend it. Meanwhile, the most hostile Sighers insist that all this self-reflexivity is needlessly divisive: that efforts to define cultural studies ultimately accomplish little more than branding certain people and practices as “undesirable” and then excluding them from the project altogether. For these Sighers, whatever gains might be made by defining cultural studies are simply outweighed by the ill will they generate by alienating people who might otherwise have been worthy allies for the project.

I’m sympathetic to some of the logic that gives rise to The Sigh, insofar as Sighers (of all stripes) get several things right about the problems with cultural studies’ propensity for self-reflexive commentary. First, there are limits to how much self-reflexivity any project can engage in without sliding into self-indulgence, and cultural studies has certainly engaged in enough of this behavior to at least appear to have crossed that line. Second, definitional gestures aren’t an obligatory part of the day-to-day activities of most cultural studies practitioners, and people can (and do) produce good cultural studies work without ever bothering to make public proclamations about the general shape and/or state of the project. Third, all that meta-commentary takes time and energy that could potentially be directed elsewhere: another discussion about how to define cultural studies, after all, won’t cure cancer, bring the troops home, or kick off The Revolution. And fourth, defining cultural studies in ways that impose new standards on the project (or even ways that simply reinforce existing standards) is guaranteed to make people who work on the “wrong” side of those lines feel excluded from a club to which they very much
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want to belong. At the very least, it’s impossible to offer a working definition for cultural studies without drawing boundaries that separate those people, practices, publications, and programs who belong “inside” from those who belong “outside.” So Sighers are perfectly correct to recognize that cultural studies’ pronounced tendency to talk about itself comes with a host of potential dangers.

Given all that, I could shut up about cultural studies already and “just do it”—and yet here I am, adding an entire book’s worth of self-reflexive commentary on cultural studies to what Sighers already believe to be an overgrown and unnecessary body of similar prose. Clearly, whatever sympathy I have for the Sighers’ various arguments against cultural studies-flavored meta-discourse stops short of me actually being persuaded by them. There are three basic reasons why I think more self-reflexivity is not just valuable, but actually necessary to cultural studies’ future success.

The first of these reasons is pedagogical. As I have noted already, cultural studies is a multifaceted project that is not instantly and fully intelligible to the average newcomer, even in soundbite form. By itself, this fact doesn’t distinguish cultural studies from other forms of serious intellectual work: it is arguably no more (and no less) difficult for newcomers to learn than countless other complicated topics. In this respect, whatever major differences exist between the learning curve for cultural studies and that for computer programming (or international copyright law, or molecular biology, etc.) are ultimately about the kind of intellectual work involved, rather than the relative degree of difficulty involved in making sense of the subjects in question.

Part of what distinguishes cultural studies from other forms of intellectual work, however, is the extent to which
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it is an opaque project from the very beginning of one’s engagement with it. A college sophomore who has taken a single introductory course in anthropology (for example) is a very long way from actually being an anthropologist (even an amateur one), but he or she should still have acquired a rudimentary understanding of what anthropology actually is. It is unlikely that this will be a terribly deep or sophisticated vision of the field—it certainly won’t be good enough for the student to convince professional anthropologists that he or she is one of them—but it should still be sufficient for the student to understand the discipline’s primary focus and to recognize mainstream work in the field when he or she sees it. The subtleties of the field that would presumably befuddle our hypothetical sophomore tend to come into play at its borders (e.g., where anthropology overlaps with neighboring fields such as sociology) or at its frontiers (e.g., where anthropology starts taking on new [to it] research objects, such as London pub culture or Texas high school football fans), but the core of the discipline is sufficiently well marked for the broad-stroke contours of its established territory to be readily identifiable.

The analogous subtleties of cultural studies, on the other hand, don’t wait to surface until our sophomore finds his or her way into a senior honors seminar (or, even later, into graduate school), nor are they limited to the test cases at the margins of the project. Because cultural studies doesn’t have the luxury of a “common sense” center or a “good enough” soundbite definition, those subtleties manifest themselves from the first bewildering moment at which one is introduced to the project. They are, in fact, one of the major reasons why cultural studies isn’t typically taught to undergraduates at all (and, yes, this is a backhanded way
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of saying that most people who claim to teach cultural studies to undergraduates are doing something else—but that, too, is a prickly argument for a later chapter). While no amount of self-reflexive prose will magically transform cultural studies into the sort of paint-by-numbers project that anyone can master in an afternoon, a certain measure of self-definitional effort is absolutely necessary to help bring newcomers into the project.

And, given the fluidity and variability of cultural studies across both space and time, these moments of self-definition need to happen with some regularity. Cultural studies doesn’t sit still long enough to allow newcomers to simply fall back on existing definitions of the project and move forward from there with relatively minor tweaks and modifications along the way. There are still good reasons for contemporary cultural studies practitioners to know something about the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, which is as close as cultural studies gets to a sort of foundational moment (though even that, as we shall see in Chapter 4, is an oft-contested claim). But an absolute beginner in cultural studies can’t simply start by reading (allegedly) canonical texts such as The Uses of Literacy (Hoggart 1957) or Culture and Society (Williams 1958) and then go on to grasp why the likes of Janice Radway, Melissa Gregg, or Handel Wright (to pick three contemporary figures almost at random) should be recognized as representatives of the “same” tradition. Put another way, cultural studies looks very different from itself across relatively small gaps in space and time: enough so that it is impossible to bridge those gaps without a significant amount of meta-commentary to explain how and why such a diverse and heterogeneous
range of phenomena can—and should—be understood to belong to the same category of practices.

The second reason that cultural studies needs to be self-reflexive about the work done in its name is pragmatic. The cultural studies “brand” has now been in play long enough (and proven to be economically, culturally, and politically valuable enough) that plenty of “outsiders” are happy to take on the task of defining cultural studies for a broader public—especially when such redefinitions somehow serve those outsiders’ agendas. And these definitions will not necessarily produce intellectual or political homes for cultural studies that actual practitioners will be especially happy to live in. This doesn’t mean that everyone who claims to do cultural studies needs to start composing definitional tracts or manifestos: simply that this task is one that cultural studies, as a whole, can’t safely ignore.

Perhaps more to the point, this sort of definitional drift has been happening in a variety of ways—large and small, local and global—for quite a while now. Many of the people who are eager to redefine “cultural studies” do so from positions of institutional power that give their misguided visions of the project a visibility and a force that individual cultural studies practitioners typically do not enjoy. University administrators can create (or dismantle) entire departments, redirect scarce resources toward (or away from) existing programs, hire (or fire) faculty, and so on. Publishing houses can apply (or withhold) the cultural studies “brand” to (or from) entire fields of inquiry, launch (or phase out) cultural studies book series, found (or eliminate) cultural studies journals, and so on. All these practices go a long way to establishing (or destroying) institutional bases for something labeled “cultural studies,” and to
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disseminating influential visions of what cultural studies is and can be. What administrators and publishers value most about the “cultural studies” label, however, does not always mesh well with what actual cultural studies practitioners value about the work they do.

At some universities, for instance, administrators invoke the “cultural studies” label as little more than a euphemism for an ugly form of downsizing. Merge a few “bloated” departments in the humanities, trim some “excess” faculty and staff, call the new unit “cultural studies,” and a university administration can make a brutal winnowing of its workforce look like a bold commitment to interdisciplinarity, or an innovative investment in the future of the humanities—even when it’s neither of these things at all. Meanwhile, at some scholarly presses, “cultural studies” has become nothing more than a “sexy” marketing category for repackaging what are otherwise ordinary discipline-specific titles in literary criticism, sociology, and history (and so on) in order to attract a new audience and boost sales figures for moribund lists (or so they hope) without actually having to change the nature of their offerings at all.

Put a different way, cultural studies insiders (whoever we may actually be) need to recognize that, whether we like it or not, someone will always attempt to define the project—and that we are better off if we are leading those efforts, rather than merely reacting to other people’s (re)visions of the project. To be sure, taking this task on ourselves will not prevent outsiders from continuing to try to exert control over the process. But that’s also all the more reason for diligence on the part of insiders: without our efforts, after all, the only people working to shape the contours of the project will be precisely those who are least qualified to do so.
Third—and most importantly for the purposes of this book—cultural studies needs to make a more concerted effort to (re)define itself because, as I mentioned at the outset, it’s currently in poor health. Such a diagnosis is admittedly debatable, especially given the proliferation over the past decade or so of cultural studies-themed textbooks, journals, conferences, departments, professional associations, and so on. It would be easy to look at all this growth, after all, and assume that cultural studies is a stunning success. Something, however, is clearly amiss when:

• Cultural studies’ most ardent champions describe the current state of the project as “fucking boring” (Grossberg 2006, 8) and “contain[ing] a lot of rubbish” (Stuart Hall, quoted in Alexander 2009, 479);
• Those same cultural studies advocates routinely find themselves unable to recognize work that bears the label as legitimate examples of the project (“There is a lot of shit published under the name of cultural studies, and I don’t understand why a lot of that shit is called cultural studies [by (publishers) or the authors for that matter], or why it is marketed as cultural studies” [Grossberg 2013, 68]);
• Senior acquisition editors who have built successful careers around their “media and cultural studies” lists flatly proclaim that “cultural studies is dead” and that all the interesting and innovative work is now happening elsewhere (personal communication with an editor who [for obvious reasons] prefers to remain anonymous, May 2008); and
• All that alleged success is not enough to keep cultural studies programs at major universities around the world safe from being shuttered (e.g., the department
at the University of Birmingham closed in 2002, the program at the University of North Carolina was shut down in 2009 [though resurrected, albeit in a smaller, more dispersed form, in 2010], the major at Curtin University was threatened with closure in 2013 and only spared after massive international outcry helped university administrators realize that the program had value after all).

Fully unpacking the arguments behind such pessimistic diagnoses is a task that will have to wait for Chapter 2. For now, I’ll simply note that cultural studies has long understood itself to be a form of intellectual and political work—with that conjunction helping to distinguish the project both from purely scholarly disciplines (which typically don’t understand themselves as politically engaged projects) and from traditional forms of activism (which don’t necessarily conceive of themselves as intellectual projects)—but that it has been quite a while since cultural studies, taken as a whole, has walked the walk of that intertwined relationship as well as it has talked the talk. Put simply, cultural studies has taken the intellectual end of its work far too seriously, insofar as it has drifted toward a collective understanding of itself as a shiny new discipline, and it has invested too much of its energy in various forms of professionalization and institutionalization. At the same time, cultural studies has failed to take the political end of its work seriously enough, insofar as it has tended to cut itself off from the “real world” constituencies that it otherwise claims to champion, and it has implicitly assumed that publishing scholarly monographs and journal articles is all that is required to deliver on the project’s putative goal of effective political intervention. If cultural studies today is
“dead” or “fucking boring” or “rubbish”—and I’m willing to accept the spirit, if not necessarily the letter, of these gloomy assessments—it’s because it has sacrificed too much of its former energy and passion and sense of purpose (i.e., all the stuff that once made it exciting and controversial and disruptive) in order to win a safer and more stable space for itself within the professionalized confines of the university.

None of the problems outlined here are likely to disappear overnight. And, if they do disappear, they certainly aren’t going to go away on their own. If they’re going to be addressed (much less solved) in ways that will allow cultural studies to survive as anything more than the palest shadow of its former self, then those of us who actually do cultural studies will need to play a much more proactive role in looking after cultural studies’ general well-being than we typically have. It is not simply enough, however, to put our noses to the grindstone, produce smart work, and then expect that the quality of that work will keep cultural studies in good health all by itself. There is nothing wrong with good work, of course, but the struggle to keep the project safe from further dilutions and distortions will require concerted, self-conscious efforts to (re)articulate cultural studies’ sense of purpose. This book is my own modest contribution to that project.

**Discomfort Zone**

Before proceeding further, I should pause to address what may appear to be a growing contradiction at the core of my argument. To this point, I’ve declared cultural studies to be a profoundly discomforting project—especially for those of
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us who actually practice it—and yet I’ve also discussed it with the sort of confidence that suggests I’ve managed to escape such feelings of unease for myself. So let me reassure you (or, perhaps, discomfort you further) by acknowledging that I, too, am deeply uncomfortable with cultural studies—and that I’m especially uncomfortable with writing a book that attempts to make strong claims about the current shape and state of the project.

Some of this discomfort is personal. I have good friends, for example, who are longtime Sighers, and it feels a bit awkward to argue with them in print (which is how some of them may interpret my discussion of The Sigh), even if my composite characterizations could just as easily describe any number of Sighers I have never met face-to-face. I also need to acknowledge that my own ways of doing cultural studies don’t always live up to the idealized “best practices” for the project that I sketch out in the pages to come. Even given that those ideals have more to do with my hopes for cultural studies as a collective project (rather than my expectations for what any individual practitioner should or can take on by him- or herself), it is still impossible for me not to feel the tension between (for example) my claim that cultural studies shouldn’t limit its sphere of activity to academia and the fact that my own efforts to do cultural studies over the years have been primarily academic in nature.

I’m also aware that the sort of public commentary I’m offering about the shape and state of cultural studies invites harsh criticism from readers who might otherwise have seen themselves as collegial allies and fellow travelers. Like any meta-discourse about cultural studies, this book necessarily makes strong claims about the project—what it is, where it came from, where it’s going, who does it, how to
do it, why it matters, and so on—and these sorts of definitional gestures will unavoidably upset multiple constituencies. Regardless of where I draw those lines, how flexible and permeable I make them, how openly I welcome traffic back and forth across them, or how diplomatically I lay out my map of the territory, someone—and probably more than one someone—will complain that I’ve done it all wrong. I’ll be castigated for welcoming some constituency into the fold that has no legitimate business there (and that, in their opinion, is the very thing that cultural studies most needs to keep at bay). Or I’ll be pilloried for excommunicating some community that absolutely, positively, unequivocally must remain at the very heart of the project. Or I’ll be criticized for trying to place the wrong values—especially political values—at the center of the project. Or I’ll be taken to task for the unspeakable presumption that I have the authority to issue public proclamations about what is and isn’t cultural studies. Most likely, I’ll be accused of all of these venal sins at once—and the fact that such objections are themselves examples of border-policing will not stop my critics from insisting that no one (least of all me) has the right to decide who belongs inside cultural studies’ borders.

I’m willing to acknowledge that part of my agenda involves a form of border policing. But I’m hardly alone in this practice. To invoke the label in any capacity, after all, is to establish borders and erect a series of checkpoints on them. This is Structural Linguistics 101: the meaningful use of a term depends on creating and maintaining a recognizable distinction between phenomena that the term describes and phenomena that lie outside its proper orbit. Even the most hardcore Sighers will admit that plenty of people who claim to do cultural studies—the rhetorician who serves up old-school Burkean analyses of Hollywood musicals,
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literary scholar who applies a dab of postmodern theory to graphic novels, the sociologist who sprinkles a few interdisciplinary citations into a journal article—are grossly misusing the term.

Some Sighers may be perfectly happy to tolerate such slippage as an abstract phenomenon, but specific examples of such mistakes can still bring out the inner Border Patrol Guard in many of them. One of the most emphatic Sighers I know routinely espouses a laissez-faire approach to defining cultural studies in the world at large—“let the proverbial thousand flowers bloom,” he says—but still complains quite bitterly when “the wrong” faculty members are assigned to teach his department’s graduate seminar on cultural studies. Those thousand flowers, it seems, are perfectly acceptable—but only as long as they’re cluttering up somebody else’s garden. In his own backyard, he’s exceptionally diligent about making sure that the “wrong” kind of flowers get recognized as the weeds that he knows them to be.

The real problem with trying to define cultural studies, then, is not the act of erecting borders per se. Rather, it is the impossibility of articulating the distinctions involved—for example, the reasons why much of the American Studies Association is “in,” but virtually the entire Popular Culture Association is “out”—without coming across as a hypocritical curmudgeon: someone who is violating cultural studies’ open-minded, radically democratic ideals by invoking untenable standards of “authenticity,” constructing fixed canons, and establishing exclusionary hierarchies. Nonetheless, such distinctions matter. Presumably, all those would-be insiders who mistakenly claim the cultural studies label for themselves do so in the belief that they gain something in being recognized as someone who does cultural
studies (rather than as “just” a media scholar, or an English professor, or a social theorist). Yet, for many legitimate cultural studies insiders, to actually speak of those distinctions out loud is to be impolite and unkind (at best)—if not needlessly divisive and destructive (at worst).

Mapping Cultural Studies

Perhaps my greatest discomfort in writing this book has to do with the thorny question of my right to speak as an expert about the shape and state of cultural studies. At some level, of course, I probably should not feel so uneasy. I have been practicing cultural studies for more than twenty-five years in ways that, by most common understandings of the relationship between experience and expertise, should lend my words on the subject a large measure of authority. On good days, I can even believe that I’m a legitimate expert on the subject (though certainly not the only one). Nonetheless, one of the more important lessons of all that experience is that it’s always risky to make strong claims about cultural studies. Always. The project is far too fraught—and its faultlines far too volatile—to assume that even the most basic descriptive comments about it are safe. Regardless of how it ends, virtually any sentence that begins with “Cultural studies is…” (much less more prescriptive statements, such as “Cultural studies should…” or “Cultural studies must…”) will upset a great many people, if only because any such sentence will place borders around cultural studies that manage to exclude people who firmly believe that they belong on the inside.

My concern about the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of my status as an “expert” commentator on cultural studies,
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however, is not merely a personal issue in the same way that some of my other discomforts are. It’s a tension that derives from the peculiar nature of cultural studies, and it potentially undercuts anyone’s ability to speak on behalf of cultural studies authoritatively. Perhaps the easiest way to explain this particular issue is to turn briefly to the prickly question of cultural studies’ ambiguous relationship to traditional scholarly disciplines.

Imagine, for the moment, that academic disciplines are sovereign nations. Each discipline-nation has a specific intellectual-geographic territory to call its own, with borders that separate it from other discipline-nations. Some of those borders are relatively easy for people to cross, while others are defended with extraordinary vigilance and force. The precise location of those borders may fluctuate over time, and they’re occasionally the object of bitter disputes between neighbors but, at any given moment, they define the outer limits of a discipline’s legitimate sphere of activity (e.g., cross over this line, and you’re suddenly doing economics instead of political science). Each discipline has traditions, customs, and histories: some of which are highly codified and official, while others are more informally maintained. Those histories are not inherently stable—the stories commonly told about a discipline’s past are sometimes revisited and rewritten to meet the demands of present circumstances—but, at any given moment, those narratives tell us something useful about the discipline’s most cherished values. Each discipline has a resident population of native-born citizens (scholars trained in the discipline), immigrants (scholars working within the discipline who were trained elsewhere), guest workers (adjuncts and temporary visitors from other disciplines), and so on. And each discipline has an institutionalized hierarchy of power and authority (pro-
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professional associations, accrediting organizations, etc.) that bears the primary responsibility for defending the discipline’s borders, maintaining its official histories, keeping the population (relatively) happy and peaceful, and (as need be) speaking to the outside world on the discipline’s behalf.

We could extend this metaphor further (e.g., to note that, like nations, disciplines vary tremendously in their relative size, longevity, prestige, power, and resources), but I think that enough of it is on the table to turn to the main question it poses for the topic at hand: where, on this hypothetical map of discipline-nations, can we find cultural studies? (Perhaps obviously, non-academic forms of cultural studies can’t be found at all on such a map. But that, too, is a topic for a later chapter.) One possibility is that cultural studies is best understood as a colonial territory that first took shape when some older, more established discipline expanded its sphere of influence to include topics, methods, and/or theories that were previously outside its purview. Understood in such a light, cultural studies most resembles what the Americas were to Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: an allegedly “new world” available to be settled (and exploited) by denizens of the old world or, perhaps, a “new” piece of an older discipline-nation acquired from another discipline-nation in a forceful land grab.

There are some obvious problems with this answer to the question—the sheer number of plausible “motherlands” to the cultural studies “colony” being first among these—but this has not stopped many commentators from treating cultural studies as if it were nothing more than a particularly vibrant outcropping of some older disciplinary formation anyway. In some accounts, cultural studies is simply the
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offshoot of English that came about when literary scholars turned their attention to the analysis of television, rock 'n' roll, and other forms of popular culture. In other versions of the story, cultural studies is what happened when communication scholars began to treat the mass media as a form of culture, rather than as an arena where messages and information moved from one point to another. Either way (or in any of several comparable variations on this theme), such accounts ultimately reduce cultural studies to a relatively well-contained corner of some larger discipline’s domain.

Another possible answer to the question is that cultural studies has become a sovereign discipline-nation of its own. The mystery of where the territory now occupied by cultural studies came from—a hitherto uncharted frontier? rebellious states that seceded from some other discipline? a new landmass produced by some massive seismic eruption?—is perhaps the most obvious problem with this interpretation (though, to be fair, it may also be where the metaphor starts to break down). Nonetheless, this, too, is a relatively common understanding of cultural studies’ place on our hypothetical map of the disciplines. If nothing else, it’s the underlying logic that informs the rapidly proliferating genre of introductory textbooks in cultural studies, most of which attempt to stake out specific parameters for the project (e.g., appropriate objects for study, research methods, theoretical frameworks, etc.) in ways that mark it as just another disciplinary project. Viewed in this light, cultural studies isn’t a part of English (or communication, or sociology, etc.) as much as it is an equivalent, freestanding entity (albeit a much younger one).

I want to suggest, however, that the real difficulty with locating cultural studies on a disciplinary map is that it does
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not actually occupy a territory of its own—at least not in the same way that “real” disciplines do. Cultural studies is not a sovereign discipline-nation, nor is it a colony that “belongs” to some parent discipline’s “empire.” Instead, it’s a set of loosely affiliated—but widely scattered—nomadic groups that (at least in its academic manifestations) roam across the disciplinary terrain with a deliberate disregard for disciplinary borders. Rather than being something akin to England or Sri Lanka or Argentina, cultural studies is more like the Romani or Bedouins or Inuit—and, in comparable ways, it is often fetishized, romanticized, hated, feared, exploited, policed, attacked, and marginalized by those more stable disciplinary-national formations. For any given nomadic community of cultural studies practitioners, there is a particular territory where they are most likely to be found—but their “occupation” of that space is more mobile than stationary, the territory in question is likely to straddle the borders of multiple disciplines, and there’s never a portion of that terrain that the community can safely claim as their exclusive property. And while the territory over which any given group roams may overlap with that used by some other group, the shared nature of this space doesn’t necessarily result in equitable and/or amicable relationships between these groups. In fact, when viewed from a “global” perspective, most nomadic communities of cultural studies practitioners have a mottled pattern of affiliations (or lack thereof) with other such groups. Some will recognize one another as distant (or close) cousins in some imagined global “family” of cultural studies, but few (if any) of them will actually accept all other self-proclaimed bands of cultural studies practitioners as legitimate claimants to the name.
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Not Enough Turtles

Most important for my purposes here is the fact that this particular disciplinary organization of cultural studies is actually neither disciplinary nor organized. Real disciplines are not anywhere near as neat or straightforward in their structures as the nation-state metaphor might suggest, as even the most stable-seeming discipline has its own unavoidable fuzziness in terms of how it defines and delimits its borders. Nonetheless, part of what helps to transform a loose field of inquiry into a “real” discipline in the first place is the deliberate effort to impose and enforce a palpable sense of order and authority on the project. And despite the fanciful myths that undergird all those slick-covered textbooks, cultural studies does not have anything close enough to functional borders (or official histories, or organized hierarchies of leadership and authority) to make any comparable efforts on its behalf work well.

And it is this aspect of cultural studies’ looseness that makes it especially difficult for me (or anyone) to feel entirely comfortable speaking on behalf of the project. Upon close inspection, disciplines such as English or history or anthropology are actually remarkably fluid and unfixed, but they still possess enough stability and hierarchy for strong claims about such disciplines to be readily testable (with respect to their accuracy), even when those claims are made by isolated practitioners. To be sure, these disciplinary structures are ultimately tautological fictions. Most U.S. literary scholars, for instance, recognize the MLA as the primary disciplinary organization for academic literary criticism in the United States because…well…most U.S. literary scholars recognize the MLA as the primary discipli-
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nary organization for academic literary criticism in the United States. Sheer numbers and inertia win the day. But even if the MLA’s (or any other disciplinary association’s) present legitimacy is ultimately premised on nothing more than its past legitimacy (and, as the old story goes, it’s turtles all the way down), that circularity still works well enough to give the MLA a centrality and significance to the discipline that other literary studies associations simply don’t have.

In the case of cultural studies, however, there simply aren’t enough turtles: i.e., there is no self-legitimating tautology that has managed to sediment itself into place as the sort of productive tautology that “real” disciplines have. A journal such as Cultural Studies (for example) may have a justifiable reputation as one of the most important journals (or even the most important journal) in “the field” (assuming, of course, that it is reasonable to think of cultural studies as a field), but—even after more than twenty-five years—it still doesn’t have the same status as a “flagship journal” that, say, the Quarterly Journal of Speech has for rhetoric or that PMLA has for English. The relatively young Association for Cultural Studies (ACS) may yet manage to become a major focal point for cultural studies practitioners from around the world but, to date, it is still competing for attention and prestige with a host of other regional and national associations, and its biennial conference has yet to become the sort of “must-attend” event that other associations’ meetings are for members of their respective disciplines. (As noted before, I’m currently the Chair of the ACS, and I’d argue that the association’s conference [Crossroads in Cultural Studies] deserves to be recognized more broadly as a “must-attend” event for serious cultural studies practitioners. But that does not mean that it has achieved such
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a status just yet—especially since the logistics and economics of global conference travel make it difficult even for people who do think of the event this way to attend it regularly. Moreover, the ACS’ global nature makes it an awkward contender to become the sort of central disciplinary institution that, say, the MLA is, since such centers tend to be tightly tied to national and/or regional versions of a discipline.)

Lest I be misunderstood, I do not believe that cultural studies would be better off if only it could create for itself the same sort of institutional infrastructures that prop up “real” disciplines. The problem here is not that, say, art history or economics or political science somehow provide a model for institutionalization that cultural studies should emulate. On the contrary, cultural studies’ relative looseness—its turtle shortage, if you will—is a large part of what makes it such a flexible and powerful project. But an unavoidable side effect of that looseness is the absence of any clear ground on which anyone might stand and make strong claims about the project with any real authority.

By way of contrast, both insiders and outsiders, friends and foes, can (and routinely do) point to the MLA—especially its annual convention—as a reasonable representative of the current state of the field (at least in the United States) when it comes to academic literary criticism. Even those commentators who disagree strenuously with what they believe the association stands for would be hard-pressed to deny that the MLA represents the discipline’s mainstream. If anything, such critics’ concerns are based on their recognition (or their fear) that the MLA is too central to the discipline’s identity to be dismissed out of hand as irrelevant or insignificant. Cultural studies, on the other hand, has no such widely agreed-upon center. Arguably, it
doesn’t even really have legitimate contenders for such a center. The closest it might ever have had to such a thing was the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham—but even those cultural studies practitioners who might be able to legitimately claim some semblance of authority because of their affiliation with the CCCS during its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s have routinely and repeatedly disavowed the centrality of Birmingham to the broader project (more on this in Chapter 4).

Why Bother?

All this discomfort admittedly begs a sticky question: why even bother? If making strong claims about cultural studies is such a fraught and treacherous undertaking—one that stirs the pot, alienates one’s friends, and garners new enemies—what’s the point of doing it at all? I suspect that these are some of the concerns that lie behind many Sighers’ resistance to such efforts: that is, they recognize the sorts of tensions and confrontations likely to arise in trying to define cultural studies, and they have no desire to create such headaches for themselves. I certainly feel this discomfort myself, but I also do not believe that it’s sufficient reason to shy away from these questions. Once again, I want to insist that cultural studies isn’t supposed to be comfortable. This does not mean that cultural studies practitioners should start wearing metaphorical hairshirts or flagellating themselves while they work. Martyrdom isn’t exactly the point. But it is important to remember that cultural studies necessarily traverses difficult, politically charged terrain. Not because it’s an inherently masochistic project, but
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because the most important work it can do is typically located along the unstable fault lines of the culture. As Stuart Hall puts it, “dangers are not places you run away from but places that you go towards” (1992, 285).

In and of itself, of course, this is not an ethic unique to cultural studies. Many people knowingly take on difficult, thorny, messy tasks in the belief that the importance of those tasks trumps whatever discomfort they might engender. For example, I routinely teach courses on race and racism (Rodman 2014), and I would never claim that those are easy or relaxing classes. If anything, such courses make me more nervous than anything else I teach, precisely because they inspire the most volatile classroom discussions, and because the stakes—both politically and personally—feel especially high. But these are also the courses in my repertoire that most clearly and directly give me the opportunity to make a tangible difference (however small) in pressing “real world” political struggles. (Mind you, I can make a strong case for the sociopolitical value of all my courses, but the ones focused on race are the ones where those agendas are most readily apparent to my students from Day One, and where the consequences of my pedagogical mistakes have the greatest potential to produce lasting damage of some sort.) There’s nothing in my job description that actually requires me to teach those courses at all—much less to do so on a regular basis—and it would be fairly easy for me to give them up in favor of something far “safer.” But they’re also too important not to teach. If anything, they’re some of the courses I teach most often—and that I want to teach most often.

It’s in this spirit, then, that I approach the sticky task of writing a book about what’s wrong with cultural studies, in spite (or perhaps because) of the discomfort I feel in
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doing so. Put simply, if cultural studies matters enough as an intellectual and political project to be worth naming at all—and it does—then it matters enough to struggle over how that name gets used. If cultural studies were solely an academic phenomenon, I would feel much less urgency about defending the “brand” from appropriation and misuse. Disciplinary border skirmishes aren’t completely inconsequential—they still have a significant impact on individual careers and on the overall shape of the university as an institution—but the outcomes of such struggles rarely (if ever) matter much outside of academic circles. I have a hard time, for example, getting worked up about the various turf wars connected to communication, even though it’s the discipline that has been my intellectual and professional home ever since I was an undergraduate. Those squabbles have had very real consequences within the various universities where I’ve studied and/or taught. They’ve determined which departments could (and couldn’t) teach particular courses. They’ve shaped the parameters by which faculty searches could be conducted. They’ve placed limits on the intellectual territory that a department could stake out for itself. But for all the real impact that those squabbles have had, those consequences have nonetheless remained largely internal to the discipline. Travel off campus (or even just downstairs to a different department in the same building), and those disagreements don’t matter very much at all. So while there would probably still be something worth defending about a purely scholarly cultural studies, the stakes would be lower. Much, much lower.

The political aspect of cultural studies’ project(s), however, makes a significant difference here. Regardless of how effective cultural studies has (or hasn’t) been with respect to its various political agendas over the past half century or so,
its self-conscious efforts to change more of the world than just the tiny fraction of it occupied by universities makes the question of what is actually done in the project’s name more significant than your average intradisciplinary squabble. The issue at hand is not just a question of trying to make sure the label gets used “correctly” (e.g., a matter of definitional accuracy): it is that, ideally, the label performs the important work of helping to create and maintain valuable alliances between groups of people who might not otherwise recognize the commonality of their respective work.

Perhaps the most obvious parallel here is the long-running struggle around the use of “feminism” as a label for a range of intellectual and political efforts to combat patriarchy. (There’s a comparable set of parallels around struggles over “marxism” and “socialism.”) Since at least the 1990s, for instance, one of the major generational tensions around feminism has been centered on the question of whether younger women should explicitly embrace “feminism” by that name. On the one hand, there’s the “Just Do It” position, which is most often espoused by 20- and 30-something women who find “the F-word” off-putting (often because they’ve implicitly accepted the willful misrepresentations of feminism perpetrated by the movement’s conservative enemies), but who nonetheless live their lives by principles that look and feel an awful lot like feminism anyway. They assume that women shouldn’t be denied equal rights, equal opportunities, or equal pay for equal work solely on the basis of their gender. They openly challenge visible expressions of patriarchy and sexism. They steadfastly refuse to embrace stereotypical, old-fashioned gender roles. And so on. But they reject the “feminist” label as a needlessly divisive label and a gross misrepresentation of who they are. On the other hand, there are women who
argue that abandoning the “feminist” label doesn’t just roll back the clock on the advances made by prior generations (though it potentially does that too): that it also undercuts the nature of feminism as a collective project. As a label, “feminism” makes it possible to understand what might otherwise seem to be an unrelated range of isolated personal problems—this woman’s abusive husband, that woman’s lack of health insurance, and so on—as part of a broad pattern of structural and institutional inequities faced by women. More crucially, even while actual feminists disagree with one another over what the movement is (or should be) all about, the word—“feminism”—remains a valuable tool for helping women organize themselves as political collectives.

Arguably, cultural studies faces a comparable set of tensions, though those of us in the ranks of cultural studies practitioners who are openly concerned with “saving” the label from dilution and distortion are fewer in number than is the case with feminism. Or, perhaps, we’re simply far less vocal about our concerns. And that, I want to suggest, is a large part of cultural studies’ current problem.

The rest of this book, then, is my effort to give voice to my version of those concerns. At its best, “cultural studies” is an umbrella term that allows like-minded intellectuals (in the broadest and most politically engaged sense of the term: Hall 2013; Said 1994) from around the world to recognize—and act on—valuable connections between their respective projects that would otherwise never have been visible to them. Cultural studies is certainly no magic cure for everything that ails the world. Done well, however, it has the potential to intervene in vital political struggles in a dramatic and productive fashion. It is not the only project that can do such work. Nor is it always going to be the most
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suitable to whatever specific tasks might be at hand. But it is still valuable enough to be worth fighting for.

References


