At the heart of this ever-expanding discourse on "the failure of cultural studies"—regardless of how that failure may be understood and described by different critics—are two pivotal questions: a definitional question ("what is cultural studies?") and a prescriptive question ("what should cultural studies be?"). Generally speaking, the various explanations for how and why cultural studies has failed inevitably boil down to how much the answers to these two questions differ from one another: i.e., cultural studies X when it really should be Y, with the gap between "what it is" and "what it should be" being too wide for the field to overcome in the foreseeable future. What I want to argue here, however, is that the reports of cultural studies' demise—or even its decline—have been greatly exaggerated. This is not to say that cultural studies currently enjoys an entirely clean bill of health (it doesn't) or that there is no legitimate cause for concern about its future (there is), but that the real gap revealed by the current discourse around "the failure of cultural studies" is the one between cultural studies as it is and cultural studies as its critics misconceive of it. Where those critics who have attempted to explain cultural studies' shortcomings have stumbled was not over the speculative (and, in some cases, thorny) question of where the field should go from here, but over the relatively straightforward factual matter of what cultural studies actually is, and perhaps the most disturbing characteristic of the current discourse is the astounding ignorance it displays of the field's history, its intellectual investments, its political goals, its objects of study, and the like.

To be sure, "relativism" is the crucial qualifier in that last sentence: cultural studies has never been a monolithic project with clearly delineated boundaries, and this openness has always made it difficult to define the field with any rigor. As Larry Grossberg puts it:

"Cultural studies has always been changing. This is part of what makes it so attractive. Cultural studies is always remodeling itself as it responds to a world that is always being remade. This is possible, even necessary, precisely because it matters to cultural studies itself that the field remain open, with competing questions, projects, and positions."

While this flexibility has long been one of cultural studies' greatest strengths (at the very least, it's made it possible for the field to travel productively across both international and disciplinary boundaries), it has also been one of the field's most troublesome and persistent weaknesses (insofar as cultural studies' constant reshaping of itself has left it vulnerable to a broad range of misunderstandings). To a certain extent, then, this definitional problem is one that cultural studies has made for itself.

But only to a certain extent. The fact that the "cultural studies" label has been associated with a diverse and ever-shifting range of projects over the years has never meant that the field was so amorphous as to be com-
pletely undefined. In fact, one of the necessary and inevitable byproducts of cultural studies’ perpetual reinvention of itself is a substantial body of writing explicitly devoted to (re)mapping the shape of the field. What’s surprising—and distressing—about the recent discourse around “the failure of cultural studies” is how much of it shows a complete lack of familiarity with this definitional literature. One would think (or at least hope) that any self-respecting critic would make a token effort to acquaint themselves with the primary object of their analysis before setting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) to comment on it—especially if, in the final analysis, that commentary is a condemnation. When it comes to criticizing cultural studies, however, this sort of basic foundational research is exceedingly rare.

In the face of such a massive wave of willful (or at least easily correctable) ignorance about cultural studies, it’s tempting to respond by trying to explain, in as detailed and straightforward a way as possible, what cultural studies really is and why it’s not the problem child of academia that it’s been made out to be. On the other hand, there’s no good reason to believe that, having already ignored four decades of efforts to define and explain cultural studies, the field’s critics will suddenly pay attention to (much less be persuaded by) another few thousand words on the subject. Thus, instead of presenting yet another definitional treatise on the field, I want to take a somewhat different tack and critique three of the more common ways that critics continue to misread cultural studies—ways that, for ease of discussion, I will refer to here as misappropriations, misinterpretations, and distortions—before concluding with a discussion of some of the actual problems currently facing the field.

Strictly speaking, misappropriations of cultural studies take place less often at the level of meta-commentary about the field than they do at the level of people and institutions who hijack the “cultural studies” label and use it in ways that have no apparent connection to any of the work that has traveled under that banner in the past. While these misappropriations may originate with would-be cultural studies practitioners, they still play a crucial role in the ways that cultural studies’ critics have misread the field: cultural studies hijackers may not pass as “the real thing” to people working within the field, but they can easily fool outside observers. Reading some of the recent commentaries on “the problem of cultural studies,” I get the impression that many of the critics in question have drawn their ideas about the field, not from reading the work of scholars like Larry Grossberg, Stuart Hall, or Meaghan Morris, but from skimming the spines of the books on which purport to be the “cultural studies” shelves at their local Borders or Barnes & Noble.

The most common misappropriations of cultural studies are typically the result of people taking the field’s name too literally: i.e., assuming that “cultural studies” refers to nothing more specific than “the study of culture.” While this sort of hyper-literality would never pass muster if applied to other fields—not all studies of women, after all, are deemed to be examples of women’s studies, nor do all studies of America or Americans count as examples of American studies—it has become a shadow that cultural studies seems unable to shake. At times, this too-simple reading of the field is quite explicit (e.g., the idea that cultural studies belongs wholly within the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology because anthropologists are the people who study culture), or the claim that the field’s main problem is that it ignores major figures (e.g., Emile Durkheim, Victor Turner, Max Weber) in the study of culture (Sherwood, Smith, and Alexander 1993, etc.), but more often it’s simply taken for granted. For example, it is presumably only by equating “cultural studies” with “studying culture” that Robert H. Knight can get away with calling himself “Director of Cultural Studies” for the Family Research Council (an affiliate of the Heritage Foundation think tank), as there’s no obvious way to reconcile his group’s ultra-conservative agenda with the unmistakably leftist traditions that have characterized cultural studies ever since the foundational work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams in the UK in the 1950s. A less politically pernicious—but no less intellectually troubling—example of this sort of literal reading of the field comes from a conference I attended in 1995, where I witnessed a panel on “Cultural Studies Approaches to the Basic Writing Course.” During the question and answer session, two out of the three panelists (both of whom presented papers on the pros and cons of adding writings by women and people of color to their syllabi) admitted that they had no familiarity at all with cultural studies as a field, but thought the term described what they did pretty well anyway because they were asking their students to study texts from different cultures.

Part of what these examples demonstrate is that “studies of culture” encompasses far too broad a territory to serve as a meaningful or productive basis for defining a scholarly field. After all, given the range of common meanings for the term “culture,” anyone in the humanities, almost anyone in the social sciences, and a fair number of natural scientists can reasonably be said to be “studying culture” in one form or another. If this is all there is to the field, then most scholars have been doing cultural studies all along, and the term is effectively meaningless.

But while I want to reject the notion that “cultural studies” is a free-floating signifier that can mean almost anything, I’m also not interested in arguing for a rigidly orthodox vision of cultural studies from which future scholars dare not stray. As I want to hold on to the notion that the field needs to continue to change with the world around it if it hopes to remain a source of valuable intellectual, cultural, and political work. The problem with misappropriations is that they move cultural studies onto terrain where it’s never been before, but that they make such moves with
out any apparent recognition that cultural studies has forty years of history and tradition behind it that can't—or at least shouldn't—he sloughed off as if the field were only invented last week. To paraphrase Cary Nelson, far too many critics feel qualified to make sweeping claims about the success and/or failure of cultural studies who have no knowledge whatsoever that "the Birmingham school," for instance, ever existed (much less what sort of research went on there)—and that when they learn of it, they're surprised to find out that "such interesting work had gone on in Alabama" (1991, 24).

"Misinterpretations" of cultural studies are typically less ignorant of the field's history than misappropriations, but the violence they do to the field's public image is no less severe. Misinterpretations recognize that "cultural studies" refers to something more specific than the hopelessly expansive territory that is "studies of culture," but they still tend to make reductionistic equations between cultural studies and some overly broad branch of academia, with the usual suspects being the study of popular culture, critical theory, area studies, and leftist scholarship. To be sure, none of these are completely alien to cultural studies, but none is entirely coextensive with the field either. What I'm referring to as misinterpretations, then, typically depend on a flawed logic of equivalencies: e.g., (1) some examples of cultural studies are studies of popular culture, (2) some studies of popular culture are examples of cultural studies, therefore (3) cultural studies is the study of popular culture.

For example, the aforementioned claim by Todd Gitlin that cultural studies should "divest itself of its political pretensions" (1997, 82) comes at the tail end of one essay based on the premise that the field's sole raison d'etre is the study of popular culture. To be fair, Gitlin's larger argument isn't completely without merit: his critique of cultural studies' overstated case for the political resistance to be found in people's varied uses of popular culture, for instance, has much to recommend it, at least insofar as there is a sizable body of cultural studies work that falls into this trap. At the same time, however, not all (or even most) cultural studies research is about popular culture, and given that Gitlin's article makes it clear that he knows that "the Birmingham school" was located in England (and not Alabama), one would expect him to know of enough major cultural studies work that isn't primarily about popular culture (e.g., The Long Revolution (Williams 1961), Marxism and Literature (Williams 1977), Policing the Crisis (Hall et al. 1978), There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack (Gilroy 1987), etc.) to avoid the facile equation of cultural studies with popular culture studies. Moreover, not all (or even most) cultural studies work that deals with the popular is guilty of the sin of romanticizing resistance: Simon Frith, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris—to name only three of the more prominent examples—have all written extensively on popular culture from a cultural studies perspective without ever falling prey to the "consumption-is-resistance" school of thought.

Perhaps most damaging to Gitlin's argument, however, is that he frames it with thinly veiled accusations about how cultural studies has failed to be sufficiently self-reflexive to recognize the flaws that he sees in it,10 when his most accurate assessments of the field have actually been part of the field's own literature for more than a decade now: Judith Williamson railed against celebrating popular consumption as a form of progressive politics as far back as 1986, and (perhaps more famously) Meaghan Morris did much the same in "Baradity in Cultural Studies" in 1990.11 If there's anyone in this argument who's failing to be sufficiently self-reflexive, then, it would be Gitlin and his highly idiosyncratic reading of cultural studies' history: at best, his critique is valid for merely a fraction of the field (rather than the whole thing); at worst, the way that he selectively skips over and all examples of cultural studies work that don't support his basic argument serves only to undermine his own credibility as a reliable and informed commentator on the field.

A similar troublesome misinterpretation of cultural studies can be found in a recent Radical History Review article by Michael Denning (1992). While Denning seems to be more sympathetic to the field than Gitlin, he still manages to misrepresent cultural studies as "the name...for the academic left's intellectual agenda" (1992, 41) and to improperly characterize a diverse list of cultural-studies-friendly journals as "not scholarly" and "unreferred" (1992, 36). To be sure, cultural studies has historically been a leftist project (though the specific shape its politics have taken has never been guaranteed in advance), which makes Denning's logical fallacy only half as sloppy as Gitlin's: while not all cultural studies is about popular culture, cultural studies' politics, for all their variance over time and across space, have always been leftist in some manner, shape, or form. Nevertheless, not all left-leaning scholarship is cultural studies, nor is cultural studies merely the intellectual complement to what is presumably (from Denning's leaning of it, anyway) a non-intellectual Left. Similarly, to claim that most of the journals on Denning's list are "not scholarly" suggests that Denning hasn't examined the text between their covers very closely; and while at least one of the titles he mentions (Signifi Text) is not a refereed journal, several other titles on his list (e.g., Camera Obscura, Cultural Studies, differences, Dissourse, Public Culture) do, in fact, use peer review to make decisions about which essays they publish. Undoubtedly, part of Denning's confusion stems from the fact that the only source that he cites in support of his argument about the current state of the field is Roger Kimball (of Tenured Radicals (1990) fame): a commentator whose status as a knowledgeable and trustworthy authority on cultural studies is surpassed only by William F. Buckley's reputation as a champion of affirmative action and multiculturalism.12
While misinterpretations involve the conflation of cultural studies with bodies of work that it overlaps (e.g., popular culture studies) or that encompass it (e.g., leftist scholarship), distortions of cultural studies make the mistake of assuming that specific examples of the field can safely be taken to represent the whole thing. To be sure, such logic would not work very well for most scholarly fields—there’s no one figure or program, for instance, that could truly be said to be representative of the entire discipline of communication—but it’s particularly ill-suited to an endeavor such as cultural studies, which has always refused to be defined by any single methodology, body of theory, object of study, or political agenda. “Cultural studies,” as Stuart Hall has noted, “is not one thing; it has never been one thing” (1990, 11), and this multiplicity makes it impossible to take any “one thing”—be it a book, a scholar, a conference, or a department—and legitimately claim that it exemplifies all of cultural studies.

The most prominent distortion of cultural studies in recent years is undoubtedly the one arising from what has come to be known as “the Sokal affair.” A great deal of ink has already been spilled debating the ethics (or lack thereof) of Alan Sokal’s hoax and the intellectual standards (or lack thereof) of Social Text, and I’m not interested in adding more prose to that particular argument here. What I am interested in, however, is the way that Sokal’s stunt came to be widely understood as an indictment of (or, depending on which side one took, an attack on) cultural studies as a whole. For example, in the essay where he revealed his prank for what it was, Sokal interpreted Social Text’s willingness to publish his parody, not as proof that the journal’s editorial policies were flawed, but as evidence that it is “now dogma in cultural studies that there exists no external world” (1996, 62). Similarly, the first New York Times article on the incident (Scott 1996) presented Sokal’s prank as a clever (and overdue) deflation of “the trendy, sometimes baffling field of cultural studies”; the article also stated that Social Text had helped to invert cultural studies in the first place: a patently false claim, but one that certainly made it much easier for the Times to shift the stigma of the journal’s sins onto the field as a whole. Very rapidly, then, the controversy around Sokal’s hoax moved from debates about the specific incident at hand (e.g., what did (or didn’t) the journal’s editors do wrong?) to a meta-discourse about the field’s integrity as a professional and intellectual enterprise (e.g., what’s the problem with cultural studies?). It was as if Social Text’s mistakes could not possibly be understood as anything other than evidence of a deep intellectual rot that pervaded all of cultural studies. Such a misbegotten leap of logic would be almost unthinkable for other fields; for instance, had Sokal’s hoax been published in a major quantum physics journal instead of Social Text, it’s possible that the reputations of both Sokal and the journal would have suffered, but it’s highly unlikely that the New York Times would have seen fit to publish oped pieces condemning the entire discipline of physics (or even the subfield of quantum physics) as a result. In the end, then, the most outlandish example of faulty reasoning in the whole affair is to be found, not in Sokal’s satire, but in the dubious logic that takes the specific example of Social Text’s error—regardless of whether one sees it as an honest mistake or an inexcusable travesty—and concludes that the entire corner of the scholarly terrain known as “cultural studies” is bereft of intellectual standards.

What I want to suggest by way of conclusion, then, is that the real problems facing cultural studies today are not those laid out in the various misreadings of the field described above as much as they are problems of articulation, in both senses of the term described by Stuart Hall (1986): that cultural studies needs to (1) do a better job of communicating itself to a broader audience, and (2) work harder to forge and maintain productive alliances with other political projects. Given my argument to this point, the first half of this claim is perhaps the most obvious: cultural studies, to put it simply, has a major public relations problem and needs to do a better job of explaining what it is and what its goals are to the general public. While I’m not so naïve to think that those of us who do cultural studies can prevent the sort of misreadings discussed above simply by taking more time to educate people about cultural studies, the fact remains that public discourse about the field has, to this point anyway, been thoroughly dominated by critics from outside of it: while Alan Sokal’s take on cultural studies (for example) has made the pages of Newsweek and the New York Times, actual cultural studies scholars have generally been content to keep their discussions of the field within the ivory tower.

And this needs to change. If cultural studies is going to be the politically progressive force that it wants—and needs—to be, it must do more than simply change the ways that intellectuals and universities go about their business (though this is a task that it needs to accomplish along the way): it must also learn to speak meaningfully and persuasively to audiences who don’t read scholarly journals or attend academic conferences. To be sure, taking cultural studies to a broader public will indirectly lead to further misunderstandings of the field: after all, as new and different audiences pick up on cultural studies, they will inevitably do things to and with it that will offend purists. A “pure” and unsullied cultural studies that speaks only to itself, however, is more of a dead end than any of the misunderstandings of the field discussed above: at best, it’s a careerist trap that enables cultural studies graduate students to get jobs and cultural studies faculty to get tenure. And, in the end, those are pretty pathetic goals to put at the center of cultural studies, especially given that, ever since its inception, the field has been motivated, not by the abstract intellectual goal of widening the scope of human knowledge, but by the concrete political desire to make the larger world around us a better place. While “going public” (e.g., writing a column for an alternative newspaper, participating in local pub-
lic policy debates, etc.) will not staff all those misreadings of cultural studies back into Pandora’s box, it will prevent cultural studies’ critics from monopolizing the public discourse on the field and, potentially, help to expose their misrepresentations of the field for what they are.

The goal of making the world a better place leads directly into the second sense of articulation where cultural studies needs to improve: the need to forge productive alliances between the field and other political projects. In contrast to Gitlin’s argument that cultural studies needs to back further away from politics, I want to suggest here that the field needs to make its political agenda(s) more explicit. In particular, I think that we need to re-articulate the “cultural studies” label to the various forms of political work that we engage in outside the academy. It’s still relatively rare, after all, to hear US cultural studies scholars describe their non-academic projects as examples of what cultural studies is all about. Our research, our writing, even our teaching: we’re typically more than happy to point to these things and say “this is cultural studies.” But when we go off campus—away from the library, away from the classroom, away from our computers—even when we acknowledge that our research informs our activism (or our community involvement, or whatever political work we may do), we tend not to describe that work as “cultural studies.” Even as we bemoan the gap that exists between academic work and “real” politics, we are complicit in maintaining that gap by applying the “cultural studies” label only to the traditional range of tangible scholarly products (e.g., books, essays, journals, etc.). If we’re truly serious about cultural studies as a political project, then we need to stop insisting—explicitly or implicitly—that cultural studies is something that stops at the edges of our campuses.

Lest I be misunderstood, I should emphasize that I have no interest in creating a simple equation between cultural studies and political action: being a good activist (for example) does not automatically make one into a practitioner of cultural studies, nor should the question of what counts as cultural studies simply be reduced to inquiring after the political activities of the relevant parties. And while I recognize that the project of re-articulating cultural studies to political work raises a far more complicated set of questions than I can address fully in the space remaining here, I think we also need to recognize that, too often, the politics of cultural studies have been overshadowed (if not erased) by its status as an academic endeavor (i.e., cultural studies is typically not recognized as an intellectual form of political work as much as it’s seen to be a (politicized) form of intellectual work) and that this problem is not one that we can adequately solve simply by insisting (once again) that the field is driven by political concerns. If we want to keep cultural studies from becoming just another entry in university course catalogs, then we need to do more than just work on putting the politics back into cultural studies: we also need to work on putting cultural studies back into politics.

Admittedly, what I’m suggesting here does little—if anything—to make our scholarly work simpler: after all, there’s nothing remotely easy about articulating cultural studies to a broader public and to one’s political work—all while still doing the teaching and research and writing that helps to put roofs over our heads and bread in our bellies. But that’s also not the point. Doing cultural studies is not supposed to be simple, and the ultimate goal here is not to make our jobs as scholars and teachers easier: it’s to make the work we do as cultural critics and public intellectuals better, in the hopes that we can then help to make the larger world—and not just our own privileged little corner of it—a more just and equitable place to live.

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NOTES

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1. “Is there a chance of a modest redemption?” Perhaps, if we imagine a harder-headed, less wishful cultural studies, free of the burden of imagining itself to be a political project. A chastened, realistic cultural studies would discard itself of political pretensions. It would not claim to be politics. If we wish to do politics, let us organize groups, coalitions, demonstrations, lobbies, whatever; let us do politics, let us not pretend that our academic work is already that” (Gitlin 1997, 82).

2. “Cultural Studies...is a legitimation narrative for Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, Murdoch, Geffen, and the rest of the Culture Trust” (Frank 1985, 28).

3. “If life is unfair, cultural studies is a Ponzi scheme,” writes Robert Chrisman (1997, 55)—and given that he notes that “life is unfair” in the previous sentence, it seems safe to assume that his syllogism is intended to stand as an indictment of the field.

4. “One sometimes wonders if cultural studies hasn’t prospered because, under the guise of serious intellectual analysis, it gives the customers what they most want—easy pleasure, more TV. Cultural studies becomes nothing better than what its detractors claim it is—Madonna studies—when students kick loose from the critical perspective and grove to the product, and that, in my experience teaching film and pop culture, happens plenty” (Edmondson 1997, 48).

5. “Unsurprisingly, cultural studies is widely loathed by traditionalists and classicists. Also unsurprisingly, it is tremendously popular with students: far easier to do than deconstruction, the rage of the eighties, plus you get credit for watching All in the Family” (Mead 1994, 50).

6. A partial list of the major essays of this sort from just the past decade or so includes Bérubé (1992); Clarke (1991, 1-49); Franklin, Lury, and Stacey (1991); Froh and Morris (1993b); Gray (1996); Grossberg (1988, 82; 1989a; 1989b; 1993; 1995; 1996; 1997); Hall (1990; 1992); R. Johnson (1986/87); Morris (1990;
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