

PAPER DETAILS

TITLE: YENIDEN SAHNELENEN AMERIKA: DEĞİŞEN KÜLTÜR TEMSİLİ ÖRNEKLERİ

AUTHORS: İsil ÖZCAN

PAGES: 27-32

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/273656>

RE-ENACTING AMERICA: CASE STUDIES IN TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION¹

Işıl ÖZCAN²

ABSTRACT

How a nation understands itself and how such understandings are evaluated by critics and thinkers yield myriad definitions of a national culture. With an eye to the abundant ways of creating and representing national culture, this study looks at four recent examples of American Studies scholarship and the argument focuses on two questions: if there were such a thing as American national culture, where, exactly, would we find it within the messiness of everyday cultural practices: and, what could the cluster of practices called American national culture mean for Americans and for the scholar representing them?

Keywords: American national culture, Michael Kammen, George Lipsitz, Greil Marcus, Tom Lutz.

YENİDEN SAHNELENEN AMERİKA: DEĞİŞEN KÜLTÜR TEMSİLİ ÖRNEKLERİ

ÖZET

Bir milletin kendini nasıl tanımladığına ve bu tanımlamanın eleştirmenler tarafından nasıl değerlendirildiğine bakıldığında, milli kültürün pek çok farklı tanımı ortaya çıkar. Milli kültürün oluşma ve temsil edilme örnekleri üzerine yoğunlaşan bu çalışma, dört çağdaş Amerikan Etütleri çalışmasını inceler ve tartışma iki problem çerçevesinde şekillenir: eğer Amerikan milli kültürü diye bir olgu var ise, bunu gündelik hayatın karmaşıklığı içinde nerede bulabiliriz: Amerikan milli kültürünü oluşturan uygulamaların tümü Amerikalılar için ve eleştirmenler için ne ifade eder?

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerikan milli kültürü, Michael Kammen, George Lipsitz, Greil Marcus, Tom Lutz.

INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding the plurality of the United States of America, the discipline of American Studies continues its efforts to define American national culture and character. The field, of course, has undergone many transformations with regard to the ideological ends and means of such definitions; from the founding texts of the Myth and Symbol school to the recent works of New Americanists, American Studies has turned from celebration to critique of exceptionalism. With that in mind, what America is might be a difficult question to tackle for further reasons. For one thing, nation as a category has been dissolving for quite some time in critical discourse and making it difficult to treat nation as a distinct and determinate entity. Another matter is the scope and definition of America. Following Lawrence Buell's suggestion that we deploy the term America as "the cultural entity" and the United States as "the political unit" (Buell, 1996, p. 88), this study attempts at dealing with one among many ways of American Studies' ventures into the definition of America and investigates the ways in which we can arrive at a distinctly "American" character without re-endorsing American exceptionalism.

The contention of this study is that approaching a category as ever-changing and ever-forming as national culture from myriad viewpoints may offer valuable insights into the make-up of a nation. In fact, the abundance of definitions of and suggestions for American national character as seen in four American Studies texts that this study analyzes may attest to the relentless makings and re-makings of a nation. In other words, this study discusses

es some recent studies of the American character and national culture by covering four American Studies books with distinct subject matters and different theories and methodologies. Michael Kammen, Greil Marcus, George Lipsitz, and Tom Lutz represent America from their selected standpoints and offer re-definitions of America.

AMERICA IN ART

In *Visual Shock, A History of Art Controversies in American Culture* (2006), Michael Kammen looks at American public art from the 1830s to the early twenty-first century. In Kammen's picture, America is a place where public art is one of the main sites where the democratic national character is re-enacted, confirmed, and re-built. Heated debates may take place when Americans think that they are not represented appropriately in art. Their concerns may range from the size and style of works of art, the adequate representation of the uniqueness of the nation, historical accuracy, and the fairness of public funding. For example, since some Americans considered non-European aesthetic a key component of the American national narrative, they criticized the statue of George Washington built in 1839. The difficult question was one of style: how should "the father" of the country be represented? As a classical god, or as a loved and respected American statesman? The sculptor, Horatio Greenough, chose to place a Washington-like head on a half-naked Greco-Roman body. While the statue became a favorite target for public insults, more charitable critics referred to it as George Jupiter Washington. For many Americans, the style was pretentious and

¹An earlier version of this study was presented in American Studies Association of Turkey 33rd Annual American Studies Conference, Adapting America/America Adapted.

²Arş.Gör.Dr., Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, isil.ozcan@deu.edu.tr

³The recent work on Trans-National American Studies and Post-National American Studies is a case in point. See especially Rowe (2000). See Kaplan (2002) for a discussion of American national identity to the extent that it is shaped by U.S. international affairs.

un-American. Ironically, The Washington Monument (1855), despite its fusion of Egyptian and Greek styles, was received by most people as characteristically American, perhaps because, as Kammen suggests, it was big and simple, like ancient monuments. With The Washington Monument, Americans have built the tallest structure in the world and "big was beautiful because national competitiveness made it a point of pride" (Kammen, 2006, p.17).

In the early twentieth century, American patriotism did not approve of modern art. Many believed that it was imposed upon America by Europe and that it was based on a chaotic sensibility that produced art for art's sake. Those who affirmed modernism wished to turn attention away from Europe and concentrate it on American art. Modernism aroused fear of disorder in America where art was for the public, not for art's sake. Autonomous, enigmatic, non-representational art could lead to social chaos and cultural collapse; it could not provide society with a model of harmonious order. Representational public art in the form of murals during the New Deal period was capable of such harmonious order. The most popular murals were those that recreated the "moments of genesis" and development of a particular community or gave historical highlights of the national story of the formation of the United States of America (Kammen, 2006, p.125).

This formula failed in some instances. When Anton Refregier depicted the history of California with 27 panels in San Francisco's Rincon Post Office in 1948, the historical accuracy of his murals was publicly challenged. The local community did not wish to be reminded of the role of the Chinese workers in the construction of the transcontinental railroad, or the tragic labor strikes of the past. His depictions of European immigration and of pioneers populating the state after the mid-nineteenth century were also disliked. Critics talked about the depiction of the California Indians as defiant victims in contrast to the warlike and cruel appearance of the Spanish and English explorers. Refregier's vision ran counter to the public's self-image, and in 1953, he was put on trial for slandering the state's pioneers as well as for communist propaganda due to his apparent sympathy for labor. Both the artwork and its version of history were put on trial and the result was that both were publicly corrected.

Indecency in art was perhaps the single most important cause for public concern. Ironically, Hiram Power's plaster sculpture (later copied in marble and subsequently mass produced in miniature for sale to the public) depicted a young and chaste nude called "The Greek Slave" (1841) (Kammen, 2006, p.56). She was justified in her nudity, according to Northern viewers, since she was holding a rosary which seemed to mean that she was a naked African slave who had become a Christian and an American deserving liberation from her inhuman degradation by Southern whites. However, the "conscious sensuality" of a sculpture to be exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, Rodin's *The Kiss* (1886), led to its being placed by the Chicago fair authorities within an inner chamber the admission into which required personal application and special permission

(Kammen, 2006, p.58). In this case, conventional middle-class morality could not come up with a redeeming story as it did in "The Greek Slave" to justify the display of obscenity, that is, two naked figures kissing in public. Such response further crystallizes American perception in art in contrast to Europe: "in terms of long-standing transatlantic differences, the United States remained squeamish about nudity and 'decency' in art (and in art classes) long after they came to be taken for granted in Europe," where artistic "insensitivity" meant art's depiction of "cruelty and death" or its "sheer ugliness" in contrast to the American definition of insensitive, "offensive" art as dealing with "sex or sexuality" (Kammen, 2006, p.354, 374).

Michael Kammen does not give us a history of art in America. Instead, he examines America's public discourse over public art because, for him, such discourse illustrates the change in the public perception of the role of and expectations from art in American democracy. Nearly all the art controversies Kammen discusses begin with a pluralism and end in a consensus that leads to censorship or alteration in accordance with the ideology and cultural values of the times. Kammen's method is to trace the rhetoric of democracy that pervades these debates, to demonstrate the degree to which "public art discourse had become a site of struggle over the meaning of democracy" (Kammen, 2006, p.240). The problem seems to be that, in America, the democratization of art and society are assessed with the same criterion: consensus.

If we see the democratization of art as the public affirmation of the legitimacy of art's irreducible ambiguity, the possibility of multiple meanings, and the validation of pluralism in judgment, then, the public's quest for consensus-building contradicts such artistic democracy. Because, the consensus that solves art controversies usually removes, restricts, alters, or destroys art if the majority will feel better. That is to say, the public rejects ambiguity. The taxpaying citizens become in this way non-professional critics who also have a vote on what they pay for. In the consensus they form, art becomes adapted to their demands, thereby violating the artists' freedom of expression. Perhaps most important of all, aesthetics does not really matter in Kammen's analyses. An arena of conflict between high art and the middle class, art controversies position the artists as dissenters, as creators of the radical, the revisionary, and the public as the arbiter of taste, propriety, and the truth. Consensual democratization of art adapts American art to the middle-class perspective and American public's self-perception cannot easily be reconciled with the artists' perception of America.

AMERICA IN MUSIC

The second book of this analysis is *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (2007) by George Lipsitz. Lipsitz looks at the past two decades in America and argues that the history of multicultural America is inadequately registered in official records. He presents the history of popular music, both as cultural practice and as industry, as an alternative archive. The popular musical expressions of this period reflect and shape important historical realities. The shared memories, experiences,

⁴All four writers are authoritative scholars of American culture and history. For instance, Kammen is the recipient of the 1973 Pulitzer Prize for History for his *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (1972) and Marcus is the writer of the renowned *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (1989). Lipsitz is a pioneer in black studies and sociology, and Lutz, an influential cultural critic, is currently the editor of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

⁵See Kammen's 1999 book *American Culture and American Tastes* for his discussions of the American national taste in relation to consumer culture.

and aspirations of ordinary people, whose perspectives rarely appear in formal history, appear in their full and truthful complexity in popular music.

It would suffice to mention two case studies from the book. The first considers the banda music of rural Mexico and Mexican identity in the U.S. In the early 1990s, at a time when working-class Mexican-Americans and migrant Mexicans faced an extraordinarily difficult time in the U.S., Mexico's rural banda music became popular in Los Angeles radios. With tuba and bass drums, these largely instrumental songs became hits among Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. The sudden success of banda did not stem from its lyrics which rarely addressed explicitly political and social issues. It was through the practices that accompanied the music, such as dance routines and dress codes, that banda reflected and shaped new social relations and identities in an essentially hostile environment. Mexicans and the Mexican-Americans initially formed separate dancing clubs, and only later began to get together in larger parties. By creating physical spaces through dress and performance, banda "affirmed an intense affiliation with regional identities and Mexican cultural nationalism" and became a movement that "helped young people to address the issue of being Mexican" (Lipsitz, 2007, p.63). It turned into an act of solidarity where Mexicans "celebrated their origins and flaunted their identities in the face of hate crimes and harsh policing, low-wage labor and unsafe working conditions" (Lipsitz, 2007, p.58).

It would suffice to mention two case studies from the book. The first considers the banda music of rural Mexico and Mexican identity in the U.S. In the early 1990s, at a time when working-class Mexican-Americans and migrant Mexicans faced an extraordinarily difficult time in the U.S., Mexico's rural banda music became popular in Los Angeles radios. With tuba and bass drums, these largely instrumental songs became hits among Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. The sudden success of banda did not stem from its lyrics which rarely addressed explicitly political and social issues. It was through the practices that accompanied the music, such as dance routines and dress codes, that banda reflected and shaped new social relations and identities in an essentially hostile environment. Mexicans and the Mexican-Americans initially formed separate dancing clubs, and only later began to get together in larger parties. By creating physical spaces through dress and performance, banda "affirmed an intense affiliation with regional identities and Mexican cultural nationalism" and became a movement that "helped young people to address the issue of being Mexican" (Lipsitz, 2007, p.63). It turned into an act of solidarity where Mexicans "celebrated their origins and flaunted their identities in the face of hate crimes and harsh policing, low-wage labor and unsafe working conditions" (Lipsitz, 2007, p.58).

The second example concerns the multiple social functions Lipsitz ascribes to music: its role as an archive of urban history, as a repository of regret and resentment, as a mechanism for making the memories of the past a useful and creative part of the present. Ry Cooder's 2005 album *Chavez Ravine* is one example. The *Chavez Ravine* of the album's title was one of the neighborhoods in Los Angeles razed by urban renewal projects in the mid-1990s, leaving the residents displaced, dispossessed, disinherited. For Lipsitz, the album is a great example of an American Studies work; first, due to its collaborations with

artists who have first-hand accounts of urban renewal and who offer different perspectives on the matter, and second, due to Cooder's meticulous and extensive research about actual events of urban renewal.

The songs on the album echo the dynamism of the barrio before urban renewal. They honor the vernacular culture of the streets. They report the bittersweet history of Latinos and Asians living together in Los Angeles. They reveal the sad memories of the former Chavez Ravine residents who still try to locate within and around the newly built baseball stadium where their homes used to stand. For Lipsitz, these songs testify to the persistence and power of collective memory and the utility of music as a repository of social history.

Rap and hip hop manifest the social functions of music, too. In the late 1990s, there was a crusade against rap and hip hop. In legislative hearings, these genres were held responsible for youth crime, drug use, and hostility toward the police, misogyny, obscenity, and social disintegration in Black communities. The music's defenders claimed that rappers reported and recorded what they had seen with their own eyes. As "underground street reporters," they told the truth about the devastation caused by deindustrialization and disinvestment in inner-city communities, about the effects of economic restructuring, the failure to enforce civil rights law, the pervasiveness of police brutality (Lipsitz, 2007, p.166). For Lipsitz, the hearings took social realities out of their contexts; hid their causes and consequences by making them matters of personal and private morality. Criticizing rap music enabled conservatives and their allies to run away from their own responsibilities for today's social problems.

What Lipsitz finds significant is that pop songs demonstrate the dialogic nature of culture. As "surface manifestations of long and largely unrecorded histories," pop songs exhibit an "ongoing conversation with the past" and "mark the present as history" by registering changes as they happen (Lipsitz, 2007, p.xxiv). Lipsitz's method in this book is to look at the popular as the source of the radical, the plural, as the site of cultural struggle. Within the popular, there is no consensus, no conformism: there is only dissensus and cultural contestation. While the middle class suppresses social memory, the popular brings them out, uninhibited. Lipsitz disrupts consensus America by uncovering America's underground multicultural history in popular music.

AMERICA IN POPULAR CULTURE AND POLITICAL RHETORIC

The third book of this discussion is *The Shape of Things to Come, Prophecy and the American Voice* (2006) by Greil Marcus. Marcus's America is a land of promises and betrayals. As the New Jerusalem, Americans entered a covenant with God and decided to create a perfect community, "the city upon a hill." Like the Israelites, they knew that God would be their judge if they betrayed their covenant. However, "as the country took shape and announced itself a nation, the ground shifted. America became a country that was a nation because it had made a covenant with itself. It made certain promises about who its citizens might be, how they might live, and for what purposes" (Marcus, 2006, p.11). In the absence of God who will judge the nation, "passing that judgment on America became everyone's burden and liberation" (Marcus, 2006, p.8). If the country betrayed its promises, it would betray itself; each citizen would find

himself for herself betrayed by every other. The sense of betrayal produced American prophetic figures who prophecy one thing: "as God once judged the Children of Israel, America has to judge itself" (Marcus, 2006, p.12). The prophets of America repeated over and over the story of America as the Promised Land, or, as the land of betrayed promises. Their voice was of truth, but also of paranoia and dread.

According to Marcus, there are three landmark speeches that created the American rhetoric of apocalyptic times: John Winthrop's sermon on board the Arbella(1630), Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural (1865), and Martin Luther King's address to the March on Washington (1963). As the nation's founding prophets, they told that America constantly needs to re-focus on its exceptional mission, which is to fulfill its destiny as God's people, or risk total doom. On board the Arbella in 1630, John Winthrop spoke of salvation and delight, of ruin and damnation. In 1865, when Abraham Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural, he returned to the foreboding of the Puritans and retold "the American story and its guilt" (Marcus, 2006, p.28). He envisioned a punishment for the many sins of slavery and warned of the danger America will face from within. In 1963, Martin Luther King wanted to "renew the nation by leading it to finally keep the promises it had broken" (Marcus, 2006, p.31). King repeated "Winthrop's ancient, forgotten call for a people knit together as one, as members of the same body" (Marcus, 2006, p.32). His dream of liberty was the founding promise of the nation but it was as broken as it remained real.

These three landmark speeches warned of ruin and damnation, of the danger America will face from within, and the urgency of renewing "the nation by leading it to finally keep the promises it had broken" (Marcus, 2006, p.31). Their prophecies "judge[d] the nation, call[ed] on each member to judge it in turn" (34). To these landmark speeches we might add Barack Obama's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2008. The speech fell on the forty-fifth anniversary of Martin Luther King's speech and defined the present as "one of those defining moments": "The American promise has been threatened once more" warned Obama, "this election is our chance to keep the American promise alive . . . it's time for us to change America"(Obama, 2008, n.pag.). In prophetic words, Obama urged Americans to "pledge once more to march into the future"(Obama, 2008, n.pag.). The promises of the past, the betrayals of the present, and the utopia of the future are woven together in this latest prophecy.

According to Marcus, the prophetic discourse of national salvation and national damnation has become increasingly rare in political speech. In art and literature, as well as in certain areas of popular culture, however, the prophetic impetus continues to judge the country. In other words, what was once part of political speech has now become the story the artists pursue: in the works of Philip Roth, Allen Ginsberg, David Lynch, in the faces and gestures of the actor Bill Pullman and actress Sheryl Lee, in the music of Corin Tucker's band Heavens to Betsy and of David Thomas's art-punk band Pere Ubu, artist-prophets have been foretelling doom because America has broken its side of the covenant. Popular culture, with its prophetic eyes, judges the country. For example, according to Marcus, the films of David Lynch show that ordinary life in America is riddled with perversion underneath a fraudulent, yet elaborately woven, surface of civilization. Seemingly saved, yet actually damned, Lynch's America, as it appears in *Lost Highway* (1997), for ex-

ample, is not so much "a place for self-invention but for self-displacement" and crisis, in the manner of schizophrenia and paranoia (Marcus, 2006, p.143). For Marcus, one place where we can read the predicament of America in Lynch films is the faces of the characters. In *Lost Highway*, the face of the character played by the actor Bill Pullman is "a nihilist kingdom where anything can happen and nothing can be said" (Marcus, 2006, p.142). The actor's "blocked gestures," his almost meaningless and ordinary face tell stories of ruin, of betrayal (Marcus, 2006, p.15). His face is America: there is no safe place to stand, no words that aren't already lies, and no promises that can remain unbroken. There is even a re-enactment of a Puritan drama on his face: "an America defined not by hope but by fear, not by reason but by paranoia, not by mastery but by sin, crime and error" (Marcus, 2006, p.138).

In line with this, in *The Human Stain* (2001) and *American Pastoral* (1997), Philip Roth connects the American individual's personal drama to the nation's drama by exposing the secrets that lie at the root of American identity (Marcus, 2006, p.96). Roth's characters, Coleman Silk and Swede Levov are examples of how "the burden of creating a new nation shifts into the thrilling, terrifying obligation to create a new self" (Marcus, 2006, p.100). According to Marcus, Coleman Silk's attempts to re-invent himself in defiance of racial and social limitations and categorizations must be understood as heroic. His success, however, was also a blindness to the changes in American social history. What he represses and transforms returns as resentment and revenge, and eventually threatens to categorize him in accordance with new pieties of the times. Thus, Silk's attempt at transcendence, his promise of carefree freedom and happiness fail. And when Swede Levov's American Dream fails in *American Pastoral*, the failure is not only his: it is a betrayal, by everybody, of America itself. Betrayals of promises create the national drama, the engine of American history: for Roth, a sense of inevitable doom becomes the quintessential American identity.

Obviously, Marcus's concept of prophecy is not one in the sense of predicting the future. For Marcus, the prophets of America "were not there to predict the future . . . prophecy has more to do with the past than the future" (Marcus, 2006, p.11). America's future belongs to the fulfillment of the promises of the past. This makes America's covenant one that "the past made with the future" and that "every present maintains with both the future and the past" (Marcus, 2006, p.8). Therefore, American prophecy refers "always backward and forward to the New Jerusalem, somewhere in the past, somewhere in the future" (Marcus, 2006, p.25). For Marcus, avant-garde and mainstream art and literature, as well as popular cultural phenomena, can still be usefully understood within the framework of that tired paradigm described by the phrases: national promise, national prophecy, national guilt, national redemption, national hope, national utopia.

AMERICA IN ATTITUDES TO WORKING AND IDLING

Finally, in his 2006 book *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers and Bums in America*, Tom Lutz analyzes America's complexly distorted perceptions on work and idling. Lutz uses the figure of the slacker as a lens to examine the socioeconomic and psychological changes from the early republic to the present day. Lutz adapts American history to the slacker

perspective which defines and re-defines what it means to be an American when major social changes take place. In this account, the right to do nothing becomes another inalienable American right and the slacker becomes the necessary twin of the self-made American man. Lutz reminds us that, in America, work is considered “the prime moral imperative” (Lutz, 2006, p.10). Yet, if we look at America from the perspective of the slacker, we discover versions of the American work ethic that tend toward the slacker ethic.

In America, work is considered “the prime moral imperative” due to the Protestant work-ethic. The Puritans established the notion of the calling, and this “basic life task, a chosen field of endeavor ordained by God” has been central to American culture since the beginning (Lutz, 2006, p.26). In colonial America, work was the highest calling on the one hand, the lowest degradation on the other. It was a custom to exploit New England through bondage (slaves, indentured servants). By the time of the Revolution, rebellion against the symbolic father of England was followed by rebellion against fathers and their Puritan work ethic. For Lutz, “the work ethic Ben Franklin espoused in his Poor Richard epigrams and described in his autobiography was more than anything a program for making one’s way in a world devoid of authority” (Lutz, 2006, p.58). Franklin had major conflicts with his father about becoming tradesman or a man of letters. In his daily life, Ben Franklin had plenty of leisure time in contrast to the famous daily schedule he envisioned for a rigorous cultivation of the virtues for regular, regulated work. He was notorious for his daily “air baths” (Lutz, 2006, p.74) which consisted of lying uncovered and naked on a bed for an hour. John Adams, who worked with Franklin, complained about Franklin’s long salon afternoons, his fancy late suppers, and his lack of interest in work. For Adams, Franklin was punctual only at one thing: noting down the constant dinner invitations in his pocket notebook and attending them.

To illustrate with literary examples, Lutz writes that Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” is “the best-known American literary take” on industry and slacking. Winkle’s sleep represents America’s fondest fantasies of escaping the nuisances of everyday life, the new world of “profitable labor”. He also represents the nation’s deepest fears of losing life altogether by not working and staying behind in oblivion in a fast changing world. For Lutz, these are America’s defining pathologies: excessive working and reckless idling. Similarly, Melville writes one of the biggest paeans to slackerdom in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853). For Lutz, Bartleby is the prototype of the modern slacker who becomes a slacker because of the circumstances. He prefers not to because he realizes that industrial labor is repetitive, boring, seemingly pointless and there might not be a difference between doing it or not doing it.

In this account, Thoreau emerges as “one of the great mid-nineteenth-century loafers” amid the nation’s manic, obsessive-compulsive workaholic syndromes (Lutz, 2006, p.37). He rejects alienated labor and moves to Brook Farm to “find good, solid, satisfying labor in hoeing his own beans and building his own room” (Lutz, 2006, p.37). In *Walden* (1854), he “rails against working for a living and praises the study of nature, a study his neighbors mistake for idleness” in the middle of industrial fervor (Lutz, 2006, p.17). Likewise, Whitman praises “loafing, lounging, and idling as the royal road to social and aesthetic pleasure and fulfillment” (23). At the start of “Song of Myself” Whitman

writes, “I loafe and invite my soul, I lean and loaf at my ease observing a summer grass” (qtd. in Lutz, 2006, p.23). Whitman even pictures a nation of loafers. “Only think of it,” writes Whitman, “an entire kingdom of loafers! Adam was a loafer, and so were all the philosophers” (qtd. in Lutz, 2006, p.23).

In the late nineteenth century, work and idling defined the classes. Industrial workers asserted their right to leisure and demanded shorter working hours in their excessively regimented schedule. However, the upper-middle-class claimed that they were the real victims of overwork, the pace of modern, and industrial life. They were diagnosed with Neurasthenia, an authentic American disease. The cure for the debilitated bourgeoisie was a medically sanctioned period of pure slackerhood. After World War I, the nature of work ethic changed and Neurasthenia switched classes. In the 1920s, work meant feeling good and “the hedonistic work ethic” was born (Lutz, 2006, p.117). Jobs became something like “secular religion” where one may find “personal identity, salvation, purpose, and direction” (Hunnitt qtd. in Lutz, 2006, p.118). Nonmanual workers like writers and intellectuals prescribed rest to the now-Neurasthenic working class and praised industriousness for their own class. “[M]iddle-class men would become Neurasthenic only if they didn’t get enough work as machines replaced them. Neurasthenia could now be cured by the happiness, self-sufficiency, and dignity one could find only in one’s work” (2006, p.193). For Lutz, the bored and nervous characters in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) suffer from the “conspicuous near absence” of meaningful work in their lives and the novel is “nostalgic” for “honest work” that brings pleasure (2006, p.199).

In the 1950s and the 1960s, doing nothing was an attack on conformity, “a political and a philosophical project [,] . . . a repudiation of desire itself” (Lutz, 2006, p.41). Striving destroyed the world with forms of violence, pollution, tyranny, corruption, and doing nothing was wisdom. Tom Lutz himself was one of those who believed that “America’s success was the cause of a global crisis, and that to take part in it was evil [,] . . . refusing to work in this huge, evil machine was a moral victory” (Lutz, 2006, pp.43,44). The 1890s and 1990s were the golden age of slacker narratives in which the slackers acted as “idling mirror images” of Information Age workers (Lutz, 2006, p.283). These slackers claimed to have as much “self-expression, self-fulfillment, dignity, and autonomy” as the high-fly traders (Lutz, 2006, p.289). As for the America of the millennium, “mainstream culture is deeply infused with slacker variations, from Seinfeldian shows about nothing to celebrity Buddhism, and from South Park’s loafer children to the election and reelection of a president with a well-noted distaste for diligence, a spotty employment record, and the most extensive vacation schedule of anyone who has ever held the office” (Lutz, 2006, p.51).

In this discussion, Lutz shows that the slacker ethic is as much part of America at this point in history as the vaunted work ethic. In fact, they are the two sides of the same coin, because each offers a basis for identity in terms attitude to work. Both the slacker ethic and the work ethic define who we are with what we do; define how we feel about ourselves with how we feel about our jobs. So, in the slacker ethic, “to decide whether to work or be idle is a question not just of whether we do something or not, but of what kind of person we decide we are, or find ourselves to be” (Lutz, 2006, p.73). Being a slacker in a culture obsessed with purpose, pragmatism, and productivity is having a counter-cultural identity. Moreover, behind the slacker’s

self-absolution from worldly success and bourgeois desires lies a sense of loss: “a loss of innocence, a loss of ideals, a loss of purpose” (Lutz, 2006, p.54). The boredom, the depression, the exhaustion of the slacker signify that the country feels the same way about many of its values. However, the enduring success of the slacker shows that America is not coming to conclusions: the culture avoids conclusions, embraces its own contradictions, and bathes them in laughter in the sympathetic slacker figures of entertainment.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, accounts of American national culture that Kammen, Lipsitz, Marcus, and Lutz present us attest to the inexhaustible ways of understanding a nation and a culture. Not uniform nor definite, cultural practices of everyday life and the many forms of art may constitute affirmations and re-enactments through dissensus the multiform national culture of America. As the range of these scholars' interests expand to include various sites of cultural practices, our ways of understanding American national culture increase. Kammen's focus on America's public discourse over public art illustrates the change in the public perception of the role of and expectations from art in American democracy. The art controversies Kammen studies may be fuelled by a belief in pluralism yet most end in a consensus that leads to censorship or alteration that reinforce the dominant ideology and cultural values. By tracing the rhetoric of democracy that pervades such debates, Kammen demonstrates the degree to which “public art discourse had become a site of struggle over the meaning of democracy,” albeit one that assesses art and society through the sole criterion of consensus. (Kammen, 2006, p.240). Lipsitz, too, deploys art's force to crystallize the contours of some pervasive consensus and re-discovers multicultural America's most reliable official records through popular music which functions as an archive of urban history and as a repository of social history. In other words, Lipsitz interrupts America's consensus through a reading of America's popular music as the nation's underground multicultural history. Marcus's tracing of the rhetoric of national salvation and national damnation from colonial period to the present offers another sense of American history that is made and remade by the ironically refreshing paradigms of betrayal and doom: the American national drama is one that is revitalized as long as it is threatened with doom. For Lutz, similarly, the transformation of the slacker is always the American self in the making; cherished or damned, idleness defines American character as does the principled worker. The many ways a national culture forms and reforms itself, when unpacked in such multifaceted ways, attest to nothing but the essential occupation of a nation to define itself in ever new ways. Laying bare the ins and outs of such occupation is one of the primary tasks of the discipline of American Studies.

REFERENCES

- Buell, L. (1996). “Are We Post-American Studies?” in *Field Work: Sites in Literary and cultural Studies*, Eds. Garber, M., Paul B. F., Walkowitz, R. L., New York: Picador, pp.87-93.
- Kammen, M. (1996). *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Kammen, M. (2006). *Visual Shock, A History of Art Controversies in American Culture*, New York: Vintage.
- Kaplan, A. (2002). *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

- Lipsitz, G. (2007). *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.
- Lutz, T. (2006). *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers and Bums in America*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Marcus, G. (2006). *The Shape of Things to Come, Prophecy and the American Voice*, New York: Picador.
- Obama, B. (2008). *Democratic National Convention Speech*. Access: <http://www.zimbio.com/Democratic+National+Convention+Speech+Transcripts/articles/17/2008+Barack+Obama+Convention+Speech+Transcript>.
- Rowe, J. C. (2000). Ed. *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, Berkeley: University of California Press.