american studies and the creative present

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Recently, a senior was telling me about his experiences at three universities. Aside from majoring in English and minoring in Art, he writes poetry, shapes ceramics, makes picture frames, is a folk singer and has worked in a national art gallery. At twenty-one he is also one of the most perceptive, articulate students I have ever had in an American Studies course. He has spent six months—not just a free summer—working for SNCC in back-country Mississippi. He is serious-minded, engaged, committed. Very troubled, he said, "Looking back, I realize that my first few months in college I kept running from building to building looking for the education I'd never find."

The picture was agonizing to this university teacher because it was honest, emotional, accurate—and accusing. He is the future writer and artist in contemporary society, and I would like to talk about what American Studies could mean to him.

Because the work in my courses interested him, I encouraged this student to consider an M.A. in American Studies. Like so many of our brilliant, troubled or alienated students, he prefers the idea of getting at the past and its traditions from many directions at once. American Studies appeals to his natural preferences. But I knew that he was still trotting the campus in search of ideas, issues, concrete materials and creative means to express his concerns about the present. Here I had reservations. Despite my own dedication to the American Studies idea, I had to warn him that something would be lacking in the field: his own place, his own time *and* the active creative means for expressing himself. These are particularly important to his kind, for the future artist is much more socially and politically minded than he might have been in courtly Europe or expansive turn-of-the-century America. The young artist between the World Wars may have looked for the contemporary in Europe, but the young artist now looks for it in foreign policies, ghettos, freedom schools, pot, disaffiliation—in America itself.

Our field does not offer enough to a young man like this. Though not everywhere, American Studies has become too much a comfortable, somewhat interdisciplinary resumé of the American past. Though not by everyone, the contemporary aspects of American Studies are being short-changed. And generally, the field is not providing encouragement or credits for the future artist, ways to use his gifts of hand, word, clay, melody or camera. The result is that we are losing—or not even attracting—a great many seeking, adventurous students. Some join up for a year or two, then go back to specialized fields. Others throw the campus over altogether for an action program, a settlement house or a pad. I recall that when I first inquired into American Studies ten years ago, it promised a broader and more daring experience than it does today. It seems to me that the first national conference is the right place to think about the American Studies attitude toward the contemporary, and toward the arts and artists who will feel it most and record it best.

I began my own inquiry with *American Quarterly,* informally analyzing its three major sections: articles, book reviews and calendars of events. In the issues for 1965 and the first half of 1966 I found that the articles had to do only with matters that mattered in the nineteenth century. Only three of the eighteen major articles even ranged from the past into the present. One discussed conservative ideas of church and state from Orestes Brownson to T. S. Eliot. Another analyzed "pietism" in American character. The last, a prizewinning essay, showed how American myth has affected the writing of autobiography from Cotton Mather to William Burroughs. But none of the eighteen, including these three, had to do with present social or political situations, controversies or programs. The church-state relationship, pietism and literary uses of myth are interesting and important. But they are traditional and academic concerns.

I am not trying to denigrate academic concerns or tradition. American Studies is in the academic tradition. But the academies also have to be concerned about the volatile, difficult present, and one of the promises of American Studies is that it will take on the American present. The stated aim of *American Quarterly* is "to aid in giving a sense of direction to studies in the culture of the United States, past *and* present."

The book reviews in *American Quarterly* for the same period have the same limitations as the articles. I found only two reviews of books which dealt with the contemporary scene—one on jazz, the other on painting. Judging from the books chosen for review, I found that 1930 is considered a kind of terminal date, as if studies in American culture are not studies when they have to do with our times. Take the race situation, for example. In the Winter, 1965 issue three books were given a package review: *The Negro's Civil War, Jim Crow's Defense* and *Negro Mecca.* The subtitle of *Negro Mecca* is "A History of the Negro in New York City, 1865-1920." In these six issues only one other review of a book on this tremendous subject can be found. During this time there

was a flood of books dealing with present-day aspects of the situation: *Dark Ghetto, Freedom Summer, Three Lives for Mississippi, Mississippi from Within, Letters from Mississippi, SNCC: The New Abolitionists, Who Speaks for the Negro?* to name only a few.

What about the other most urgent and divisive issue in contemporary America? Along with race, foreign policy interests—and should interest—the potential American Studies student more than any other problem. It does not matter whether he is a future artist, high school teacher, journalist, federal government employee, diplomat or college professor. None of the books reviewed in *American Quarterly* during this year and a half had anything to do with contemporary foreign policy. The subscribers to and readers of *American Quarterly* are the teachers of these students. Are they not concerned with the very subjects which most occupy their students? True, there is plenty of commentary about Vietnam, the credibility gap, neo-imperialism and the Sino-Soviet split in *The New Republic, Ramparts, The National Review, The New York Times Magazine* and other journals, left and right. But American Studies, concerned with past and present, ought to be arguing more with itself about how the American past led to the American present. We might have something worthwhile to say about the present questioning, on all national levels, of the moral and material imperatives of war. The published version of Henry Steele Commager's testimony before the Fulbright Committee is one example of what sense American Studies can make about our own times. But it was not published in *American Quarterly*.

An artist-student, perhaps one of Mr. Commager's, paints a wild umber-red-orange-black depiction of napalm enfolding a hut in the Mekong Delta. Some of us want to shake him by the shoulders, perhaps quote him a bit of John Foster Dulles: "Under the conditions in which we live, it is not easy to strike a perfect balance between military and non-military efforts . . . [but] there is an imperative need for balance." ("Policy for Security and Peace," *Foreign Affairs,* April, 1954.) Others might want to buy the painting for their office walls. Some would say he's got the truth, he's cut through the objective hypocrisy of cultural indexes and historical generalizations. Look at President Polk planting insurgents in Texas, and look at the perverted tradition of the Alamo! This young man with an old beard, turning his back on "reason," is going to show up Monday morning in our classes. Whether we care to "set him straight" or to encourage his indignation, we have to *want* to work with him if we are going to do our jobs. If any group of thinkers and critics is equipped to interpret current American ideas and actions in the light of American traditions—to make sense of both—it is us.

Other important areas of concern, dissent and social trauma are missing from the articles, book reviews *and* the calendar of American Studies Regional Association events. I realize it is dangerous to interpret content from titles, but judging from the subjects named for American

Studies conferences during 1965 and the first half of 1966, I found that only two sets of meetings had much to do with the very recent past or the present. One, by the New York Metropolitan Chapter in April, 1965, dealt with poverty. The other, a series sponsored by the Michigan Chapter in March and May of the same year had to do with race. Among the Michigan speakers were Louis Lomax, Burton Gordin (Michigan Civil Rights Commissioner), John Killens and G. Mennen Williams. Like the books reviewed and the articles printed, American Studies conferences are pretty much limited by sound scholarship to safe, somewhat distant subjects.

Please do not interpret these remarks only as a criticism of the editors of *American Quarterly* or the directors of conferences. They are delivering the product the field apparently wants. My questions are about what the field wants.

It seems to me that the unique and important contribution of American Studies is demonstrating that ideas have consequences which can best be understood through their interconnections. If we have a "method," it is the approach to ideas and consequences in the round—a total approach something like the "total theatre" of Bertolt Brecht. From the communication point of view, American Studies wants more than most disciplines to include its audiences. As in total theatre, it assumes that the audience and actors are the same; the stage does not end where the seats begin. This understandably appeals to the present student. We should be delighted that it attracts my twenty-one year old senior. He stops running from building to building long enough to attend his American Studies courses. He senses what we should know: that the ideas and consequences surrounding students, teachers and artists 50 or 150 years ago surround us and him now. They are in the classrooms, the halls, the off-center coffeehouses, the pads, the streets, the backroads, the ghettos—even in the student unions. The murder of three civil rights workers in 1964 is therefore as important a part of American Studies as the lynching of tenant farmers in 1904 or the extradition of runaway slaves in 1854. Our involvement in Vietnam, Thailand, NATO, the Peace Corps, VISTA and Fulbright Programs and the rebuilding of Western Germany and Japan are as much influenced by pietism as was our settlement of upstate New York more than a hundred years ago. Anti-intellectualism has as much to do with the treatment of radical artists today as it did with the life of Edgar Allan Poe or the run of the Armory Show.

The American Studies tendency to downplay, even to ignore contemporary ideas and art expression shows us to be victims of the very American paradox we are so fond of analyzing. We would all agree that America has a habit of absorbing its own unacceptable radicalisms. As Paul Jacobs has pointed out, a major automobile company sells cars by asking its customers to join its "rebellion," while the executives of that

company criticize rebelling youth. Economically and socially, we continue to deplore socialism while becoming a welfare state. Looking at literary art for a moment, we devoutly teacher *Sister Carrie,* dismissing Dreiser's artistic ineptness and making much of his social radicalism. But how do we handle the Dreisers of today? Like our friends in English Departments, we dismiss or ignore—or what is worse—reject the Beat writers, William Burroughs, Terry Southern, Norman Mailer as either salacious, naive or artistically substandard. We push them aside for the same reasons that we push Dreiser, Hamlin Garland or Frank Norris to the front. We have to get past the paradox of rejecting today what we revere tomorrow. We haven't time to wait for critical distance; nor have the future artist and teacher. It is the job of maverick and radical talent in thought, art and craft to make life uncomfortable for us, and American Studies must give them a place to work their unsettling magic. In other words, the field can't afford to be aloof. And ironically, even while it remains too little a part of the academic structure, American Studies has already become too much a part of the intellectual establishment.

But in 1964, at the Modern Language Association conference in New York, American Studies proved itself dramatically. In one session out of three complicated days of forums, speeches and panels, the ASA offered John Cheever, Ralph Ellison and Norman Mailer. The large room was overcrowded, the rear and side aisles filled with standees. It was far and away the most popular meeting of the entire conference because it was the only meeting in which living artists of the modern language were heard from. Cheever and Mailer spoke less formally than Ellison—more insultingly—and they were the better received for it. I recall an especially electric moment when Mailer leaned forward and fixed the swollen audience with a remark about academicians with cavities where their brains ought to be. The roomful of academicians laughed and applauded. Why? Because most of us believed he was right. Our bellies were full, our agenda was staggering, our general disinterest was immense. Till this meeting there had been little or nothing in the job-hunting, handshaking circus to attract our enthusiasm. The session subjects had been detached, polite, overly familiar, uncreative. Suddenly, we had three artists who were busy creating the future tradition.

That session suggests something more about the meaning of American Studies for the creative present. One of our beliefs is that we have developed a dynamic, extraordinary culture over the past three hundred years. An equally important belief is that we are still developing it. Therefore, American Studies programs should directly encourage the young talent to contribute actively to the developing culture. From our own studies we know that contributions to tradition often come from unexpected individual talent in unexpected places. Why not from an American Studies curriculum? Why not offer students credit for active,

creative, contemporary work? It is not enough to take "Art and Architecture in American Life" for nine quarter credits, passively appraising slides of Horatio Greenough's sculpture, Frank Lloyd Wright's prairie homes or A. P. Ryder's haunted seascapes. It is not enough to take three credits in Modern American Poetry or Modern American Fiction. It is not enough to study the development of jazz or the genius of Charles Ives. If he has the talent, why not let the American Studies student get credits by using his hands, plaster and pallet, by writing jazz-beat cantos, by composing a Whiskey-Gap Sonata or a Blue Earth Barcarolle? There are practical ways of doing this without scandalizing curriculum committees. Other departments' workshop courses could be allowed for American Studies degree credit. Qualified members of those departments could be asked to help judge the product, or to guide the work. M.A. and Ph.D. students could be given the option of painting a mural, or composing a symphony on American themes, rather than putting together elaborate and wordy theses on those themes. Of course they would have to do research and place their creative objects in an interdisciplinary perspective. Is this an easy way out of learning how to write footnotes and organize critical arguments? I doubt it. Assuming the thesis or project advisor made the student shape his art out of American Studies substance, it would not only take a lot of sweat and thought, it would give him a more active sense of American traditions because it would call on his particular talents. I am not suggesting that all students be handed this kind of option. I am only suggesting that the minority who have these talents find out that American Studies is one of the rare places where they will be encouraged to develop them.

The necessary innovative spirit is already abroad in the land. In contrast to *American Quarterly,* the *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* healthily balances the past and the present. In its famous Fall, 1965, issue, "The Indian Today," studies ranged from the subjective ("Tight Shoe Night") to the objective ("The Isolated Eastern Cherokee"); from past history to present political action ("Nationalistic Trends among American Indians"); from traditional customs to contemporary attitudes ("Therapeutic Experience of Responsible Democracy"). In his introductory essay, editor Stuart Levine set the tone and approach:

> The material in this collection of articles is important. There are great practical problems, moral issues, even questions of national identity at stake. There are things we can learn from our "Indian problem" which we need to know in areas as diverse as cultural history and foreign policy . . . which might help us to deal with Indians more successfully in the future than we have in the past.

Generally, the journal qualifies academically—it transmits knowledge—without shirking the often forgotten human obligation of engaging in

man's affairs *as he lives them.* Its contemporaneity brings its academic content more to life.

The same can be said of the journal's fountainhead, the American Studies Program at the University of Kansas. Chaired by Stuart Levine, the program was a host at the successful first national conference of the American Studies Association in October, 1967. The Kansas program offers all three degrees. As Mr. Levine says, it "centers in the culture concept." Graduate students attend department meetings with voting rights. Such non-verbal products as pottery and films are accepted as parts of doctoral dissertations. Undergraduates write one of their own courses. The "basic philosophy" of the program is

> built on the idea of flexibility. We ask each student to name the kind of "man" he wants to be: an arts man, an urbanist, a specialist in the period 1890-1917, a colonialist, an historic sites archeologist, or whatever. He then writes his own program out of the strengths and resources of the University. If his program coheres, and includes courses which enable him to reach the level of significant research in the behavioral sciences, American history, and the humanities, it is approved.

The Program accepts "any two languages or research skills which will be of use to him in his research," Ponca and FORTRAN for example. In many other ways, the Kansas program points toward a more creative future for the field.

Let me illustrate further. The American Studies Department in Hawaii is trying out a four part project to help students use their talents. We are working within our regular budget and we have not had to consult any administration authorities. Our chief resource has been the enthusiasm of students. First, in certain American Studies courses the instructors are offering the option of substituting performance term projects for traditional term papers. Students have sometimes chosen to team up. Last summer two students did a well-researched multi-media dramatization of the protest at President Johnson's June 23, 1967, Century City Plaza speech in Los Angeles. They wrote the script themselves, used tape recorder, phonograph, placards and guitar. About twenty-five students this past year have taken this kind of option, with very exciting and informative results.

Second, the Department has hired a part-time student helper who works with students and instructors. He is an able writer with experience in the visual arts. One of his main jobs is to edit a magazine being sponsored by the American Studies Department. The magazine, the third part of the project, is publishing some of the student performance projects, soliciting material from the entire student body and not excluding contributions from the outside. It is a visible and permanent record of American Studies student performance but also an American Studies stimulus for the general campus.

The fourth part of the project is a series of laboratory theatre performances, original or published scripts chosen for their relevance to American problems in current courses. One possibility is a documentary drama on the American Indian, similar to Martin Duberman's *In White America,* and related to poverty, the Spring semester subject of a large American Studies course. These plays will be cast as much as possible with students taking American Studies courses.

Another possibility is a set of "Routines" by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, related to alienation and absurdity—two themes in my own Spring semester course, "Contemporary Social Ideas in Radical Literature." These productions will not require special budgets. We have a few large campus auditoriums with simple stages, curtains and lighting. They may be dramatic readings, multi-media performances or fully acted productions. To keep costs down, and the sense of experiment high, costuming may consist of street clothes, bathing suits or as in one of Ferlinghetti's "Routines," only enormous gauze bandages.

The four parts of the project are interrelated and self-generating. Our student helper has gathered four or five other student volunteers who, in addition to submitting material, work on typing, production and layout. They have been stimulated by the sense of having a real, active "thing" to do. They in turn have been contacting their friends. I know, because my office is unofficial editorial and production headquarters. As a result of such activities, a number of bright, imaginative and idealistic students have begun pushing the department to expand its present M.A. down to a B.A. and up to a Ph.D.

In its turn, the department is making allowance for such promising students by writing into its B.A. and Ph.D. proposals the possibility of tailoring a student's requirements toward the arts and the contemporary. We do not plan to eliminate traditional studies at all, but rather to broaden the student's elective choices, and to offer the performance alternative selectively within our own courses. From the evidence of the past year, I believe that we have been able to give to American Studies a vitality which has attracted talented, adventurous students who would otherwise have been much less excited about learning at a large institution.

Generally, what I am suggesting is that American Studies think more about the creative individuality of its students, understanding that at this time creative individuality is especially involved with the world around it. I do not believe for a minute that the model senior I began with has any right to shape his ceramics or his poems, or to work in Mississippi for voter registration, in ignorance of the past. He has to be a student and an artist and a citizen all together. But the amazing and exciting thing is that my model senior, and thousands like him, have the gumption, the vision and the means to be all three at once. And having all this, they are likely candidates for American Studies because our field

has, built into it, a great possibility for reaching across the generations to make learning, teaching and creativity live together. We begin where most disciplines end—we open up further as they close around their discoveries. But we must do more to keep the end open, to let the uncomfortable, the noisy, the uncatalogued, the unsanctified, the immediate, into our enterprise.

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