

an issue for alex

When the editorial board of *American Studies* was approached with the idea of issuing a festschrift for Alexander Kern, the response was uniformly enthusiastic. Alex's spirit, his wide-ranging interests, his enthusiasm and his tolerance for diverse approaches have had a good deal to do with the health and vitality of our field. He has, moreover, been a warm friend to this journal from its early days. To its editor, too: the work connected with producing this issue has had a personal, special and pleasantly unprofessional feeling. That some of the authors who sent in contributions are scholars I know and like—a favorite professor from my own undergraduate days, a favorite colleague from a school where I was twice visiting professor—was in part responsible for that feeling. So was seeing Alex: it happened that during the two years in which this issue has been in progress I had occasion to spend three separate days with him, twice with my family along, and once with Jean there, too. These happy times give me now an even better sense of the reasons for the esteem and affection of his own colleagues and students. The tribute to Alex, then, comes not merely from people who know him at Iowa, but from his friends in MASA and at Kansas, too.

The editorial board and the Iowa instigators decided not to follow the usual festschrift procedure in which colleagues and students of the person to be honored are each asked to submit a paper which is then published as part of a book. Too often, alas, the volume is leaden, the dead weight borne by the university press or monograph series which was shamed into producing it. The expense of production is invariably too high, and the edition runs to just a few copies: practically nobody outside the circle of contributors, immediate friends and family will buy it, because it is not about anything in particular and because the quality of contributions is uneven. Librarians hesitate to order it; the contents defy efficient cataloguing. Inadequately covered by indexing and abstracting services—which are set up to handle, on the one hand, “real” books by a single author or a closely collaborating group of co-authors, and,

on the other, magazines which are understood to carry a diverse range of articles—the *festschrift* accumulates a patina of dust on the shelves of the few libraries which purchased it. No, the editors decided, if we were going into the *festschrift* business, the articles submitted would go through the normal editorial process; they would be papers we would print normally in a good general issue of *American Studies*. That would be the best and most appropriate tribute.

This was, of course, doing things the hard way, but that seems to be a speciality of the house. John Cawelti was recruited to serve as guest editorial consultant. He and the committee of plotters at the University of Iowa made up a list of Alex's students and associates who might be approached to contribute papers. Cawelti and I then drafted a letter together, making clear the nature of the project and its ground-rules. The letter went out from his office, and submitted papers came to him for first screening. They were then shipped to the editorial office, where the contributors' names, academic rank and university affiliations were removed, just as they are normally, and the articles sent on their rounds among our editorial readers. The members of our editorial board and the other scholars consulted, in other words, did not even know—except in cases in which internal information gave the gag away—that they were reading essays submitted for the Kern *festschrift*.

The only rule we bent—and this one just a little—was that concerning specialization. We try, generally, not to take papers which could be placed in journals in the more traditional disciplines. If a piece speaks not to Americanists in general, but primarily to students of American literature, or sociology, or whatever, we usually say “No” or suggest that the author rethink his work in the light of our audience and its interests. Among the list of Alex's students and colleagues are some people not familiar with interdisciplinary studies, unaccustomed, for instance, to pointing the significance of their research to the body of theory and practice which forms the community of discourse for scholars in *American Studies*. Good papers of the sort which they produced are familiar enough to our editorial board; they are the kind which come back from our consultants with comments such as “This is a fine piece of work, but it belongs in a journal more specialized than ours.” In a couple of cases, then, we waived this rule on the theory that Alex's interests are catholic, the articles in question were excellent and our readers might see implications our consultants did not. As of the present writing, we feel no pangs of guilt whatsoever. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little journals.

Because every effort was made to keep this project secret from Alex, and because there were official arrangements made at the University of Iowa about which we have only secondary information, a list of people whose help deserves to be acknowledged is likely

to be incomplete. We are aware of the efforts of Jean Kern, Frank Lloyd, Eric Sandeen, John Gerber, John Clendenning, Robert E. Morsberger, Frederick Pratter, John Kern, Ursula Brumm, Kay Mussell, James Neatherlin and Amos St. Germain—all of whom we thank on Alex's behalf.

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