

# Paradigm Dramas Revisited: A Brief History of American Studies as Reflected in *American Quarterly*

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**Abstract:** This essay revisits Gene Wise's influential "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies" by examining the American Studies movement at four key moments: publication of Leo Marx's myth-and-symbol *Machine in the Garden* in 1964; Wise's presentation of the pluralistic "Paradigm Dramas" at a meeting of the American Studies Association (ASA) in 1975; Janice Radway's ASA presidential address promoting transnational scholarship in 1998; and the ASA's boycott of Israel, confirming a turn to political advocacy, in 2013. The history of the field is assessed by informal content analysis of articles published by *American Quarterly* during the four-year period leading up to each key moment.

There was standing room only, with a jostling crowd outside the door of a mid-sized conference room, when Gene Wise delivered a much-anticipated paper entitled “‘Paradigm Dramas’ in American Studies.” The venue was the fifth biennial meeting of the American Studies Association, in San Antonio, Texas, in November 1975. After twelve years of severe social, political, and cultural upheaval in the United States, the meeting reflected an on-going process of transformation of the ASA’s practices and goals by young, politically radical members. In his paper, which was widely cited at the time though not published until four years later (Wise 1979), Wise drew upon Thomas Kuhn’s then popular concept of disjunctive paradigm shifts to describe four successive phases in the development of the American Studies movement. Wise’s “paradigm dramas” included: first, Vernon Parrington’s lone struggle to produce a foundational text, *Main Currents in American Thought* (Parrington 1927-30); second, Perry Miller’s lifelong effort to define an “American mind” derived from New England Puritanism (Miller 1939; Miller 1953), which he regarded as exceptional enough to drive national spiritual and secular development; third, postwar institutionalization of American Studies as a mostly liberal, occasionally celebratory site for the study of national culture; and fourth, beginning around 1970, emergence of a generation of scholars critical of national identity who were open to multiple voices and hostile to the notion of American exceptionalism as an operational force.

My purpose in this article is to revisit Wise’s concept of paradigm dramas by extending the field’s chronology to the present. Much as Wise proposed four “paradigms” that for him marked stages in the discipline’s evolution, I am proposing four “moments” that I regard as essential to understanding developments in American Studies. The first moment is publication of Leo Marx’s *Machine*

*in the Garden* in 1964 (Marx 1964). Exemplifying the popular “myth and symbol” approach just before it came under attack, Marx’s book summed up the field’s original interdisciplinary project—a search for national identity. The second moment is Gene Wise’s 1975 “Paradigm Dramas” paper itself, which concluded that any definition of a unitary national culture denied expression to multiple voices of race, ethnicity, and gender—voices of previously silenced groups whose members were then seeking political power. The third moment, which further enlarged the discipline’s scope, came in 1998 at another ASA meeting, this time in Seattle, Washington. In a controversial presidential address, Janice Radway proclaimed a doctrine of transnationalism so complete that she contemplated renaming the association to exclude any reference to America or the United States (Radway 1999). Finally, the fourth moment is the pro-Palestine boycott of Israeli academic institutions enacted by vote of ASA’s membership in December 2013, thereby embracing political advocacy in place of formal scholarly neutrality. These four moments may seem unsurprising, even obvious. My intent is not merely to declare and define each moment but also to examine by a kind of thick description what was happening in American Studies just prior to each of these moments.

The major source for this review is the journal *American Quarterly*, first published in 1949 and associated with the ASA since 1952. A mission statement published in the journal’s third issue described an intention “to aid in giving a sense of direction to studies in the culture of the United States, past and present.” The journal’s “editors, advisers, and contributors” would be “concerned not only with the areas of American life which they know best but with the relation of each of those areas to the entire American scene and to world society” (AQ editorial board 1949, 194). Throughout its existence, *American Quarterly* (or AQ) has served as its founding editors intended, and

its contents yield an approximate reflection of trends in the field. To gauge the state of the discipline, I conducted informal content analysis of articles published in *AQ* during the four years prior to each of the four moments. I skimmed and summarized 650 articles and noted such details as each author's gender, geographic location, and disciplinary approach; the historical period covered by an article; the degree of emphasis on race, ethnicity, class, and gender; and the major subjects covered, methods employed, and theories followed. I wanted to see whether American Studies scholars who published in the field's leading journal were in the vanguard or whether they were caught by surprise. Did such leaders as Leo Marx, Gene Wise, Janice Radway, and the promoters of the anti-Israeli boycott represent standard practice at the time or did they call for unexpected changes? My ultimate goal is to explore how the field has changed over time.

### **Defining American Identity and Culture**

Let's consider each of these four moments in turn. In 1964, when Marx published *The Machine in the Garden*, the discipline was composed primarily of white male academics. No matter how socially progressive they regarded themselves, there were no women on the ASA's executive council or on the journal's editorial board. As early as 1957, a list of American Studies dissertations in progress had revealed that 35 of 195 Ph.D. candidates were women (Van Nostrand 1957). Even so, a survey of American Studies programs at about the same time reported, presumably without any humor intended, that the field's "eager Ph.D. candidates" were proving themselves "very handy men around the academic house," doing well "in these days of straddle programs and cross-departmental 'fertilization'" (Thorp 1958, 487). Out of 121 articles published by *AQ* from 1960 to 1963, only five had women as authors. Both of the two most obviously feminist articles

addressed antebellum diet and clothing reform, but one of these two authors, a sympathetic male, noted with approval that reformer Lucy Stone “reputedly looked quite well in Bloomers” (Riegel 1963, 392).

As for the frequent criticism that American Studies was a tool of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, a description of the discipline in 1950 rejected national chauvinism as a motive, maintaining that “American culture should always be presented in proper relation to other cultures past and present.” Even so, the main goal of the journal, as of the larger field it represented, remained “enrich[ing] the student’s understanding of his [sic] own country in its entirety” (Shryock et al. 1950, 287). Although early promoters of American Studies, whether they came from the humanities or the social sciences, professed a neutral objectivity in examining the culture and civilization of the United States, it was also true that many practitioners were engaged in questioning and defining American identity. As inhabitants of a relatively young nation (a condition mentioned whenever American Studies scholars congregated), Americans in general had long been obsessed with interrogating their status—a practice stimulated anew both by the rise of fascist regimes in Europe during the 1930s and by the perceived threat of Communism during the postwar era. As one contributor to *AQ* phrased it, American Studies was an expression of “our interminable quest for national self-identification” in the face of “the empty sky, the unbounded wilderness, the mobile populace, the ever-new frontier” (Kariel 1962, 608, 609). The situation of the new academic field mirrored that of the American nation it attempted to define. New American Studies programs and departments struggled against traditional disciplines, both intellectually and institutionally, and a contributor to the journal lamented that “as yet there is no generally recognized theory of American Studies, and thus we do not

really know who we are, and what we are doing" (Sykes 1963, 253).

Into this milieu came *The Machine in the Garden*, summing up what the field had accomplished and how it conceived American culture. Seeking to understand through literature the historical event of technology's intrusion into America's pastoral landscape, Leo Marx applied the "myth and symbol" approach Henry Nash Smith had pioneered in *Virgin Land* in 1950 (Smith 1950). Marx had taken fourteen years to expand his dissertation into a book, partly in order to gather historical evidence to supplement his literary examples, a "large sample of [hundreds of] technological images from paintings, newspapers, magazines, folklore, political debates, and ceremonial oratory (Marx 2000, 374)." Even so, he continued to operate on a belief that the nation's most acclaimed antebellum writers Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville had perfectly distilled the key symbols of a national imaginary that, he believed, was unconsciously shared by most ordinary Americans in the early nineteenth century and beyond. Marx's approach, which owed much to Smith's example, had already been questioned by Laurence R. Veysey, who doubted whether "a study of internal evidence in novels—when deliberately divorced from a comprehensive analysis of the society at large—[could] produce trustworthy evidence for an assertion that here lie the basic ideas, or myths, which shaped the development of that society." It seemed to Veysey that "most litterateurs," as he dismissively referred to them, were "pathetically shielded from the dominant currents of nineteenth-century American life" (Veysey 1960, 36).

Even so, Marx's focus on canonical literature was typical of the practices of many self-identified American Studies scholars. Nearly 40 percent of the AQ articles published during the four years leading up to *The Machine in the Garden* offered interpretations of

classic literature, and not always from interdisciplinary perspectives. Often, as in the articles “Richard Harding Davis: Critical Background” (Osborn 1960) and “Stephen Crane’s Social Ethic” (Westbrook 1962), the intent was more informative than interpretive, and they could just as easily have appeared in a more straightforward disciplinary journal such as *American Literature*. Another 17 percent of articles came from intellectual historians, whose work, such as an article on “Natural Selection and Utilitarian Ethics in Chauncey Wright” (Chambliss 1960), also exhibited little evidence of interdisciplinarity. Marx’s emphasis on overarching literary images, dismissed by Veysey as “great ‘given’ entities...like Jungian archetypes” (Veysey 1960, 35), had already gained traction in American Studies scholarship. In 1961, a letter to the editor of *AQ* listed titles of some thirty recent dissertations, articles, books, and conference presentations, each of which began with the phrase “image of” — ranging from “The Image of the Negro in New York State” to “The Image of America as Presented by the Voice of America,” and most of which suggested there was one common overriding image of the specific reality being considered (Maass 1961). The reviewer of a collection of fifteen new American Studies essays found each of them moving from the specific to the general. He observed that each “sees its subject,” whether Charles Lindbergh or the Oneida colony, “as embodying in some way the underlying assumptions and contradictions of a whole culture” (Sanford 1960, 111).

Marx was not alone in defining a unitary mainstream culture regarded as encompassing all Americans—one in which African Americans and Native Americans seemed to exist as an afterthought, and Latinos and Asian Americans not at all. When Marx’s book was published, the only person of color on the ASA council

was John Hope Franklin, who had served a brief term as president three years earlier. It was rare for articles in *AQ* to address minority peoples and cultures, and when they did so, the authors were nearly always white. The typical approach was to investigate how whites viewed people of color, or through which “images” they were perceived, as in blackface minstrelsy (Browne 1960) or the film *The Birth of a Nation* (Carter 1960). In one instance of a white scholar directly studying an expression of African American culture, an article on 1920s jazz, Chadwick Hansen lamented the loss of purity (or “authenticity,” as we now would say) when black musicians sought to “acculturate” to white middle-class society by playing a hybrid “sweet” music partially derived from white popular songs. His treatment was that of a white scholar judging minority cultural practices from outside, sympathetic but operating with an opinion about which marginalized expressions would best enrich mainstream society (Hansen 1960). Even Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., who contributed the only article on Native Americans, a scathing account of missionary boarding schools, focused not on Indian culture but on its destruction in the service of “an upward unilinear development of human society,” with America, understood by educators as white, wrongly conceived as “its highest incarnation” (Berkhofer 1963, 186).

More than half of *AQ*’s articles addressed the nineteenth century, especially the search for an American identity distinct from European precedents. Eleven articles defined the American character (with distinguishing features ranging from the effects of migration and mobility [Lee 1961; Pierson 1962] to a sense of isolation [Rovit 1961] and, somewhat more perceptively, a misguided belief in the discontinuity of American experience [Cunliffe 1961]). Nine articles discussed the West as the quintessentially American re-



gion, with ramifications throughout the society and culture. One contributor argued that the West's mythology of "primitive vitality" was used by the I.W.W. to motivate the labor movement (Tyler 1960, 175). Although American Studies was hardly a center of chauvinistic nationalism, most of its adherents did regard the U.S. and its culture, for better or worse, as a unique, even exceptional historical development that was trending toward coherence.

Even scholars who cast a wider documentary net than Marx, such as one who surveyed 6,000 volumes of poetry to assess "the dominant character of the age" (Walker 1961, 447), regarded themselves as working to define a single mainstream American culture. Only rarely did this general orientation toward defining a national culture slip into a mode of celebratory cultural elitism. In one exception, an article on the antebellum sculptor and design theorist Horatio Greenough echoed Matthew Arnold's elitist nineteenth-century definition of culture. According to this study, Greenough's critical writings had "set the standards for the public taste by which the world identifies us and by which we know ourselves as a nation" (Brumbaugh 1960, 417). Although most American Studies practitioners would have rejected this conclusion, arguing instead for a more democratic culture conveyed by such mass-produced artifacts as the dime novels Henry Nash Smith had analyzed, they would have accepted the notion of a general American identity recognized both at home and abroad.

### **Diversifying a Discipline and its Practitioners**

Such a statement of American exceptionalism, based on white middle-class values, would have been impossible in 1975 when Gene Wise proposed his four paradigm dramas. As he ob-

served in his presentation, an acute awareness of race, class, and gender had come to American Studies as to all of American society during the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1971, the president of the ASA, Robert Walker, had minimized the degree to which the social and cultural radicalism of the Civil Rights and Vietnam War years had made inroads among ASA members. Offering a "Report from the President," Walker praised the membership for having avoided "a wasteful and destructive confrontation" as younger members, especially politically radical graduate students and assistant professors, expressed their grievances and both sides aired their differences. He claimed that a "very large majority of the membership" had "expressed a strong will that the ASA remain a professional association and avoid stands on political issues external to immediate professional concerns" (Walker 1971, 260). Although his assertion of what might be defined as a neutral academic objectivity would probably have met with the approval of most ASA members at the time, over the next forty-five years the ASA was to experience a series of changes in theory and practice driven by increasing concerns about race and gender inequities, and by a desire to protest and overcome repressive social conditions.

By the time of Wise's paradigm presentation at the ASA meeting in San Antonio in 1975, a cultural and institutional upheaval was already under way within the discipline itself. Walker reported that a national meeting held in Washington, D.C., in the autumn of 1971 had encompassed both "the persistence of traditional sessions with papers bearing the fruits of research delivered with verbal footnotes" and new experiments with panels, workshops, films, and "rap sessions" that appealed to protestors but whose "formlessness" and inflated "rhetoric" angered more conservative members (Walker 1972, 116). Despite a sense of ongoing change that was bringing

greater visibility and influence in academia to women and to members of racial minorities, white male scholars still dominated both the association and the journal. Women were the authors of only 18 percent of *AQ*'s articles from 1972 to 1975. But the early 1970s also witnessed the formation of a feminist Women's Committee that promoted faculty hiring of women "until the ratio of women on the faculty approximates the ratio of women students in programs with terminal degrees" and demanded "equal pay for equal work" as well as pregnancy leaves, parental leaves, and day care centers. The ASA council adopted these demands in a set of "Resolutions on the Status of Women" in 1972 (ASA council 1972, 550-51). In that same year, Mary Turpie became the first woman on *AQ*'s editorial board since 1954, when the anthropologist Margaret Mead, an intellectual celebrity, had completed a two-year term. By 1974, only two years later, women made up a third of the editorial board's membership and a quarter of the members of the ASA council.

An ever-increasing number of *AQ* articles addressed topics related to race and gender, with about 20 percent devoted to race and 8 percent to women's history during the four years leading up to Wise's paradigm paper. Articles on race came mostly from white scholars whose work was not likely to appeal to radical social and political sensibilities of African American activists. For example, an article that explored "the metaphor of invisibility in [the] black literary tradition" leading up to Ralph Ellison seemed mostly engaged in shoring up the myth and symbol approach by applying it to a timely topic (Lieber 1972). Another white author investigated the rhetoric of antebellum black leaders and concluded that on the whole the theme they raised with "the greatest consistency was not abolitionism or civil rights but self-improvement." He admitted that his findings countered the desire of "present-day historians"

to find longstanding “traditions which anticipate today’s concerns with revolutionary politics or black nationalism” (Cooper 1972: 605).

Although American Studies had always promoted an interdisciplinary approach, most articles were largely historical, with 8 percent delving into the colonial period, more than 50 percent covering the nineteenth century, and 10 percent addressing the years between the world wars. About a quarter of the articles dealt with the post-World War II period. Although cultural, intellectual, and social history bulked large, about a fifth of the articles continued in the formerly dominant vein of literary history. But this was no longer Leo Marx’s literary history. For example, an article on Mark Twain and phrenology did highlight the famous author and his work. But instead of suggesting that Twain’s work rose above the culture and represented what ordinary Americans could only vaguely perceive, the author found Twain to be enmeshed in a pseudoscientific outlook no different from anyone else’s (Gribben 1972). Only six articles referred to myth and symbol, usually negatively, as in a famous attack by Bruce Kuklick, who faulted its practitioners for ignoring historical facts while rummaging through elite literature seeking metaphors with present-day significance and projecting them onto the past as concerns of ordinary Americans (Kuklick 1972). Only three authors even alluded to the “American character.” Occasionally a scholar might suggest the existence of an American “popular mind,” but the phrase indicated a general impression derived by examining “the diaries, the letters and the commonplace jottings” of “ordinary people.” Such an informed impression could counter the “inferential leaps” of scholars who wrongly assumed the general applicability of written texts emanating from a cultural elite (Saum 1974, 478).

Whether or not authors made race central to their work, they mostly no longer assumed American culture was unitary and, presumptively, white. For example, instead of making grand statements about Americans in general, the author of an article on attitudes about the automobile limited the range of his analysis by focusing on three intersecting parameters: urban areas, in the South, in the 1920s. (Brownell 1972). A few scholars began to conceive whiteness as a separate racial category, as in Alexander Saxton's groundbreaking article on "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology." According to the author, this form of entertainment, wildly popular down to the end of the nineteenth century, performed a "dual task of exploiting and suppressing African elements" of culture in the "ideological" service of white "class identification and hostility" (Saxton 1975, 8, 4). Another example was a study of racial attitudes of white army officers during the late-nineteenth-century Indian wars. Their "sense of pity and compassion for the native Americans they had set out to destroy" and their "wistful appreciation" of the "folkways" of "primitive society" led the author to wonder whether there was something distinctive about how white Americans had "dispossessed" the natives, something that defined the American approach to domestic colonization as yet another "peculiar institution" (Leonard 1974, 179, 190).

An earlier generation of liberal scholars, shaped by the Great Depression, by World War II, and by postwar anti-Communism, had advanced a positive definition of American civilization, but younger scholars who had experienced the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the women's liberation movement were skeptical about America, did not identify personally with its mainstream culture, and instead sought to critique it, often citing a historical dynamic of conflict rather than consensus. For example,

one *AQ* author traced the efficiency movement of early twentieth-century reform city governments to the imperialist system devised by the U.S. military for governing Cuba (Gillette 1973). Another suggested that the “reactionary neoclassical architecture” adopted for early twentieth-century city halls, courthouses, and other government buildings reflected the conservatism of the Progressive movement (Hines 1973). Yet another, when examining voluntarist Protestant religious organizations in the late 1800s, avoided the generalist argument someone like Perry Miller might have made, that such groups expressed a dominant American quality, and instead regarded them as an expression of a particular white upper-class leadership group, powerful but embattled in a sea of diversity. In other words, they existed as “a form of ethno-class identification during a period of increasing ethnic heterogeneity and economic differentiation” (Singleton 1975, 550).

Summing up the intellectual discontent Gene Wise was soon to identify as typical of American Studies scholars in the mid-1970s, Robert Sklar advised his colleagues to ignore the “creators” of elite high culture, whose expression had bulked large in the early years of American Studies. He urged them instead to attend to “audiences, [to] the way the popular arts are received and used, and how they are produced.” For guidance they could turn to several new “specialities,” such as “popular culture, oral history, urban anthropology, women’s studies, and quantitative social history,” that were “already reshaping the study of American culture and society.” And in place of the moribund myth and symbol approach, Sklar advised scholars who needed theoretical guidance to abandon Cold War prejudices and embrace “the Marxist intellectual tradition,” which encompassed “one of the most extensive [and diverse] literatures of cultural theory in modern scholarship” — as exemplified by the theo-

ries of Roland Barthes, E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Antonio Gramsci, T. W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Raymond Williams, and George Lukács (Sklar 1975, 249, 246, 260-61). Just as there was no longer a unitary mainstream American culture, there was also no longer a single way of examining American cultures. The complexities of European theory were taking precedence over the more accessible “commonsense” approach of the field’s founding scholars.

Sklar’s passionate discussion did not address race. Indeed, for Sklar, there was no reason why a reliance on radically new theory required that. Although nearly everyone involved in American Studies abandoned the notion that elite culture best expresses society in general, there remained a wide belief in the existence of a mainstream as the most obvious influence on ordinary lives. This position was well articulated in Daniel Walker Howe’s introduction to *AQ*’s second themed issue, which addressed the concept of “Victorian Culture in America.” Forced to explain how the adjective “Victorian,” which derived from the name of the long-reigning British monarch, could refer to the United States, Howe postulated a “sense of Atlantic community” fueled by the “economic interdependence” and “cultural connection” of the U.S. and Britain and controlled by the “bourgeois evangelicalism” of a transatlantic “urban middle class” (Howe 1975, 507-508). Ironically, given Paul Gilroy’s famous definition two decades later of “the Black Atlantic” as a site of racially configured oppositions to the mainstream (Gilroy 1993), Howe’s formulation might be regarded as a brief description of a transnational “White Atlantic” against which those on the margins would have to struggle. But such opposition, though manifestly in the air at the time of Gene Wise’s paradigm intervention in San Antonio, was not yet standard operating procedure in the American Studies movement.



### Shifting Transnational Gears

The third American Studies moment to be considered is Janice Radway's ASA presidential address in Seattle in 1998. Unlike most pro forma presidential addresses, Radway's was unexpected and controversial. The setting was a gloomy ballroom with a water-stained ceiling. She spoke from a long dais, raised above the audience and distant from the first row of seats. Council members fanned out to left and right, arranged like an anonymous politburo. Radway's message was unsettling to some who heard it, and even more so to others who only heard about it afterward, by second- or third-hand report. Conjecture spread when Johns Hopkins University Press, the ASA's publisher, refused to release the text of Radway's address prior to its scheduled publication in *AQ*.

Although Radway offered an accurate, respectful history of the American Studies movement, she also asserted it was time for a radical change in the ASA's mission. It was time, "at this particular moment, on the brink of a new century, and at the edge of the so-called 'American' continent," to focus almost exclusively on an anti-imperial transnationalism based on "critical race theory, Black Atlantic studies, women's studies, post-colonial theory, subaltern studies, and transnational feminist and queer studies." It was also time to consider renaming and thus reconceiving the discipline as "inter-American studies" or "intercultural studies" (Radway 1999, 3, 7-8). As interpreted by David Nye, a cultural historian of technology who responded publicly to Radway's remarks after hearing them in Seattle but before her text was made available online, her agenda for the discipline "placed under erasure" the "interdisciplinary combinations" that had always been the hallmark



of American Studies. In her projected transformation of the field, there would be no room for such combinations as “environmental history, literature, and art; industrialization and design; business and labor history; media studies and popular culture; anthropology and science; photography and technology.” It seemed to Nye that anyone who did not “focus on ethnic and racial minorities” was being “read out of the profession” and relegated to the traditional disciplines. The implication for Nye and some other ASA members whose scholarship did not reflect this ethnic, transnational turn was to get with the program or get out (Nye 1998).

Radway’s position radiated a degree of irony. Her own two monographs, one about female readers of romance novels (Radway 1984), the other about the Book-of-the-Month Club (Radway 1997), had emphasized the production, consumption, and especially the reception of books targeted for white middle-class audiences. Her own career was typical of what she wanted the ASA to move beyond, even to rename. “Do as I say,” she seemed to suggest, “not as I do.” Whatever the case, Radway’s transnationalism was way ahead of the four-year trajectory leading up to her controversial address. The fact that a woman was serving as president of the ASA was in itself no longer noteworthy. Radway was the tenth woman to head the organization, and only two men had been elected president since the first woman, Lois W. Banner, in 1986-87. The ASA council and *AQ*’s managing and advisory boards were fully integrated by gender and included more than token numbers of people of color. Authorship of *AQ* articles was evenly divided by gender.

More to the point, however, and a mark of the continuing relative conservatism of the field, although nearly a fourth of the articles published from 1995 to 1998 directly involved women’s

history and gender studies, there was a pronounced emphasis on mainstream white middle-class history throughout the journal. Thirteen percent of the articles examined the history of consumer culture, and 21 percent dealt with various expressions of mainstream culture. Those articles included such topics as the redefinition of manual labor as middle-class exercise (Newbury 1995), the mass production of cheap oil paintings (Zalesch 1996), the rise of do-it-yourself home repairs as an expression of middle-class masculinity (Gelber 1997), and the use of advertising to redefine bicycles as acceptable for female riders (Garvey 1995)—all in the nineteenth century. While one article portrayed antebellum business clerks as patronizing the New York Mercantile Library in their leisure time to acquire moral autonomy and self-control (Augst 1998), another described the idleness of the wealthy writer N. P. Willis not as the “maintenance of patrician privilege” but as the “formation of new ideals of mobility and acquisition” (Tomc 1997, 781). Such articles seemed to be about defining middle-class identity, admittedly no longer as a universal or general “American character” but for a particular white socioeconomic group at particular moments. The occasional exception, such as Nan Enstad’s stunning portrayal of female New York shirtwaist workers who appropriated and subverted middle-class fashion in the service of political activism (Enstad 1998), only confirmed the norm of attention to middle-class culture—however critical, even hostile, that attention often was. Just as significant to understanding American Studies at the moment of Radway’s intervention is the fact that the discipline remained mostly historical. More than half of all articles published between 1995 and 1998 addressed subjects and topics from 1800 to 1914, 21 percent treated the period from 1914 to 1945, 15 percent were on the postwar era, and only 10 percent involved contemporary topics.

To some extent, *AQ* may have been lagging behind the general state of the field. Radway's immediate predecessor, Mary Helen Washington, in her presidential address in 1997, had described a recent "sea change in the involvement of scholars of color in ASA." During this "demographic shift," the ASA had "moved from its de-racialized past, from its token invitations to scholars of color, to being nothing less than the principal gathering place where ethnic studies constituencies meet each year in our own border-crossing dialogues." In the very title of her address, Washington asked a startling but obvious question, "what happens to American Studies if you put African American Studies at the center?" (Washington 1998, 6, 20). Although the proportion of *AQ* articles oriented toward race and ethnicity lagged behind the proportion of such papers presented at ASA meetings, the number was increasing. Nineteen percent of *AQ* articles leading up to Radway's address focused on African Americans and six percent on Asian Americans, with two articles on Native Americans and one on Hispanics. As of yet, the pages of *AQ* revealed little or no awareness of intersectional complexities. An article discussing issues of race, ethnicity, gender, or class typically focused only on members of a single group.

Despite the journal's overwhelming emphasis on happenings within the United States, there was already some movement toward Radway's transnationalism, with 14 percent of articles having such a component. A theoretical piece by Betsy Erkkila in 1995 had criticized mainstream American Studies for being an "imperial" endeavor that still assumed "a single, unified, and already constituted culture," one that had expanded only slightly to "include and incorporate sexual and racial others." She further questioned the increasingly fashionable use by scholars of "the deconstructive and poststructuralist theories of Derrida and Foucault." According to

her, such theories operated as “a new form of intellectual colonization” by denying autonomy and agency to “women, gays, blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans, and other minorities,” and thus “silencing and deauthorizing their claims to a voice, a presence, and a representation in American literature and culture.” In fact, however, contemporary America was “a site of cultural conflict, struggle, and exchange across borders that are themselves historically constituted, permeable, contested, and in flux” (Erkkila 1995, 588, 565, 567, 588).

In another theoretical piece published in 1996, which seems to have directly inspired Radway, Jane Desmond and Virginia Domínguez had called for a “paradigmatic shift” to a “critical internationalism.” It was time, they argued, to turn the “looking glass” around and “create mechanisms, dialogues, spaces, and processes” by which “East and South Asians, Africans, Latin Americans, Middle Easterners, even Eastern and Western Europeans” might “gain opportunities to study those who are accustomed to studying, representing, and characterizing them” (Desmond and Domínguez 1996, 475, 483). More radical was Paul Lauter, whose 1995 presidential address generally defined American Studies “not as a discipline” with “a remote and academic standpoint” but instead as a “framework” for “changing or policing the society in which we live” (Lauter 1995, 186). At that time social advocacy was no more typical of American Studies than was transnationalism, but both were occasionally being expressed and were eventually to transform the discipline. Even so, Radway’s assertive intervention had come as a surprise, even a shock, to scholars who believed their own interests were being not only marginalized as irrelevant but also potentially excluded by definition from whatever refocused and renamed discipline might replace American Studies.

## **Embracing Social Activism**

The fourth moment in this survey of the field came in December 2013 when the American Studies Association voted to boycott Israeli academic institutions. The move provoked considerable discussion and protest, indeed far more controversy than had followed Radway's address in support of transnationalism. The resolution prepared by the ASA council and approved by ASA membership through an on-line referendum cited Israel for occupying Palestine, denying intellectual freedom to Palestinian academics, expanding Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory, and building a wall between Israel and Palestine (ASA council 2013). The anti-Israeli boycott passed by about two-thirds of those who cast ballots. However, slightly more than two-thirds of the ASA's total membership did not participate in the referendum. Thus only about 22 percent of the full membership voted to approve the measure. Presumably some of those who did not vote did object to the measure. Some members viewed the boycott as anti-Semitic. Others pointed out that the Israeli government was not the world's most egregious suppressor of human rights. Others objected to the politicizing of an academic organization that had always been dedicated to free inquiry and the increase of knowledge. Seventy-two ASA members signed a letter to the council protesting the boycott's violation of academic freedom (Antler et al. 2013), and eight past presidents of the ASA addressed a public letter to members urging them to vote against the resolution (Fishkin et al. 2013). Wide coverage of the boycott by all segments of American media, mostly negative, rendered the ASA briefly notorious. As only the second academic professional association in the United States to enact such a boycott (after the Association for Asian American Studies), the ASA seemed to supporters of the measure to be poised in the vanguard of a movement. But very few professional organizations

followed suit, most of them representing scholars in ethnic studies. Whatever one's opinion of the anti-Israeli boycott, it seems obvious the ASA's official position contradicted its longstanding mission statement. Published by *AQ* in every issue, the statement did not mention social activism but instead pledged members "to promote and encourage the study of American culture—past and present."

Unlike Radway's transnational address, which was too far in advance of the discipline to represent it at the time, the boycott of 2013 did represent the discipline as a whole as portrayed in *AQ*'s pages. During the four years before the boycott, American Studies was no longer a mostly historical discipline. Historical articles comprised less than half the total, with 13 percent on the nineteenth century, 16 percent on the first half of the twentieth century, and 19 percent on the post-World War II era. Only two articles out of 160 addressed the colonial era. More than half of *AQ*'s articles from 2010 to 2013 addressed contemporary society and culture, and half of those articles directly engaged in social advocacy or political activism. Fifty-four percent of the articles emphasized issues pertaining to people of color, as opposed to only 29 percent during the previous four-year period under examination, thereby reinforcing Mary Helen Washington's earlier comment that American Studies was becoming ethnic studies. However, the percentage of articles addressing African Americans remained constant at 19 percent, while Native Americans, Pacific Islanders (including Hawaiians), and Latinos/as each figured centrally in about 10 percent of the articles. Asian Americans were discussed in 6 percent.

Any reader of *AQ* realized immediately that its pages reflected the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the United States—and the complicated cultural *menudo* that resulted. Unlike

the situation in earlier decades, authors often belonged to the minority groups they studied. No longer did whites write by presuming to project themselves into the psyches of others; nor did they contribute studies of white representations of other groups. As Curtis Marez, *AQ*'s editor, observed in 2010 when introducing a special issue on "the indigenous turn in American studies," the intention was "to shift the analysis...from an exclusive focus on 'first contacts' between Europeans and indigenous people in order to clear space for other kinds of critical, comparative narratives about relations among indigenous peoples and other kinds of colonial subjects, migrants, refugees, and racialized groups" (Marez 2010, v). The stories of minorities were no longer told from a mainstream white middle-class perspective. The goal in representing any ethnic group was to portray subjects "in the role of active, mobile, and even cosmopolitan actors on the world stage in ways that complicate static or incomplete definitions of...identity" (Lai and Smith 2010, 408).

Authors often addressed transnationalism or empire and post-colonialism. Such topics as film, visual culture, education, the body, queer theory, and animal studies were on the rise, while articles on mainstream middle-class consumer culture, which had dominated *AQ* during the previous moment prior to 1998, were in decline. The journal added two new special features, one known as "Forums," which brought together articles on such topics as "Academia and Activism" (Greyser and Weiss 2012), "Visual Culture and the War on Terror" (Delmont 2013), and "Chicano-Palestinian Connections" (Pulido and Lloyd 2010). Participants in the latter Forum invited readers to compare the Israeli wall with that being constructed along the U.S./Mexico border. The editors brought together an array of contemporary reflections, including the personal notes of a Latina graduate student traveling in Palestine (Saldívar 2010). All contribu-



tors invoked “the shared history of resistance of the Palestinian and Chicano people,” as phrased by a self-described “revolutionary organizer” (Criollo 2010, 847). Calculated to provoke assent from like-minded readers, such comparisons smoothed over the sorts of differences that might have emerged from taking the long view of history.

The other new special feature, known as “Currents,” offered “timely forms of writing” on “contemporary issues of importance to scholars in American studies” (Banet-Weiser 2012, 115). The first of these, “Queering Prison Abolition, Now?,” presented the views of a law professor, a graduate student, and a queer activist on that and other legal issues pertinent to the LGBTQ community (Stanley, Spade, and [In]Justice 2012). In the following year, two “Currents” essays by three professors from the University of California system responded to an incident of crowd control by pepper spray at the Davis campus (Rodríguez 2012; Maira and Sze 2012). In addition to these new features, the regular “special issues,” which had been published annually for many years, now often addressed contemporary topics such as the global subprime economic crisis of 2008 (Chakravartty and Ferreira da Silva 2012). As ASA president Matthew Frye Jacobson proclaimed in 2012, in a presidential address at a national meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico, his purpose was no longer to inquire about “the state of our field,” as so many of his predecessors had done, but instead to ask “what is the view from where we are standing—from our historical moment, from our neighborhoods or cities, from our institutions?” Jacobson exhorted his listeners to place their scholarship directly in the service of political action (Jacobson 2013, 269).

For the most part, scholars publishing in *AQ* in 2013 rejected the search for national identity that had motivated the founders of the discipline from the 1930s to the 1950s. They denigrated



the earlier “mainstream historical narrative” for its easy dismissal of “indigenous genocide, African enslavement, colonization, white supremacy, and racism” as “blemishes” to be removed or as “anomalies” to be explained away in the service of “a more ‘perfect union’” (Criollo 2010, 847). Indeed, when Sarah Banet-Weiser became *AQ*’s editor in 2010, she invoked a “reimagining of the field and of ‘America’ itself [rendered ironic by quotation marks] through transnational, global, and hemispheric inquiries.” Reconstructing “a networked American studies” as a multidimensional array of nodes of anti-neoliberal communication, Banet-Weiser envisioned “‘America’” as “a series of migratory and mobile circuits, markets, cultures, and connections that complicate conventional maps of state boundaries and the geography of disciplines.” Within this flux, in which “categories such as the ‘nation,’ ‘race,’ ‘gender,’ and the ‘global’ are increasingly unsettled, as well as rewritten, by shifting flows of culture and capital,” American Studies activists moved, observed, intervened, and operated. Ultimately, she envisioned *AQ* as addressing the question of “what counts as ‘America’ and therefore what counts as American studies” (Banet-Weiser 2010, v). This agenda may not have reflected what the 1940s founders of American Studies meant when they gestured toward defining American identity—but how different really was the root motivation?

In conclusion, let’s consider that question of identity, or, to complicate things just a bit, identities. It goes without saying that increasing diversity in American Studies, both in its practitioners and in its topics of scholarship, has mirrored both the increasing ethnic and racial diversity of the United States and the increasing empowerment of many members of so-called minority groups. Among members of the ASA council and *AQ*’s advisory and managing editors in 2013, there were twice as many women as men, a considerable

change from even the recent past. More than half of the council and board members identified themselves as belonging to racial or ethnic minorities. Just as noteworthy is a shift in the geographic distribution of educational institutions represented by *AQ* authors. From the 1950s to the 1990s, 40 to 50 percent of *AQ* authors were located in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic regions, with 20 percent in the Midwest and 15 percent in the South. California fluctuated around 10 percent and other western states around 7 percent. By 2010, the pattern was completely reversed. Only 23 percent of authors came from the Northeast and mid-Atlantic regions, with 18 percent from the Midwest and only 7 percent from the South. But an impressive 30 percent came from California, and another 8 percent from other western states.

The location of the journal's editorial offices, which in 2003 had moved from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, may have played some role in this shift in authorship. Articles on race and ethnicity tended to focus on groups whose origins or homes lay in the Pacific region rather than the Atlantic, on such contemporary topics as the working-class backgrounds of Asian American fashion designers in New York City (Nguyen 2010), the solidarity of Vietnamese Americans and African Americans in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (Tang 2011), and tensions between indigenous cannery workers in American Samoa and immigrants from Western Samoa, Tonga, and the Philippines (Poblete-Cross 2010). Although 35 percent of articles concerning people of color still specifically addressed African American experience and culture, the field rejected the white/black binary that had long informed socially progressive scholarship as much as popular prejudice.

The geographic center of the discipline continued to shift westward. In March 2015, a new editor, Mari Yoshihara, announced the relocation of *AQ*'s offices from southern California to the University of Hawai'i as part of the field's ongoing "turn to the Pacific." She admitted that Hawai'i, to "those on the continental United States and other parts of the globe," might not seem "the most natural center for American studies." However, she continued, its "indigenous and local resistance, regional solidarity and transnational alliances, and dynamic cultural practices" made Hawai'i a perfect place from which to "engage, challenge, or ignore 'America'" [with the word again set off by ironic quotation marks] (Yoshihara 2015, v-vi). Yoshihara used her bold, somewhat defensive rhetoric, whose tone echoes much recent advocacy scholarship in American Studies, to express a new American identity composed of diversity and dissent in the midst of social, ethnic, cultural, and geographic transformation.

This sampling of articles published by *AQ* reveals the scope of American Studies as radically different today than in the 1960s or even the 1990s. A somewhat passive goal of defining national identity has yielded to an active goal of promoting diverse, sometimes conflicting, identities. Still, emphasis on identity has remained the discipline's overriding constant. The more things change, the more, to some extent, they stay the same. However, the pose of scholarly objectivity typical of the field's early decades has yielded to a politically activist concern for representing minority positions and, as witnessed by the anti-Israeli boycott, for effecting social and political transformations within and beyond the borders of the United States. Although early American Studies scholars such as Leo Marx often expressed liberal, even progressive, political views, they did so from relatively settled positions within what they understood as a mainstream culture whose further development would alleviate and someday erase

inequalities of gender, ethnicity, and race. There was no sense of positioning oneself outside or in opposition to such a mainstream.

Everyday life in the United States today is marked by increasing ethnic and racial diversity, by obvious contrasts and frequent conflicts, and by forms of new media that promote fragmentation of popular cultures into ever smaller splinters. As revealed institutionally by *AQ*, the discipline of American Studies has foregrounded the intersectional study of multiple inequalities and has chosen to work vigorously to oppose them. One might ask, paraphrasing Mary Helen Washington's question from 1997, what happens to American Studies if the concerns of racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community, disabled people, and various other minority groups are placed at the center? The obvious answer is that scholars working in a wide range of broad areas – whether popular culture, or technology and the environment, or consumer society, or patterns of work and leisure – who choose not to foreground intersectional connections of their chosen topics with race, ethnicity and gender, or expose their connections to or complicity in imperialism, post-colonialism, or neoliberalism, are relegated to the periphery. The concept of identity, however construed, remains at the center of American Studies. In this sense, the discipline continues to provide a space for those seeking to understand what it means to be American.

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NOTES

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2 The author was among a considerable number of attendees who were unable to hear Wise's presentation because rumors of its path-breaking importance had spread in advance.

3 *American Quarterly* is abbreviated as *AQ* throughout text and notes.

4 This was a more concise version of a rambling editorial statement from the first issue. With only two or three minor edits, the statement remained the same into the 1970s.

5 Owing to changes in the typical page count per issue at varying times, each four-year period did not yield the same number of articles. From 1960 to 1963, *AQ* published 120 articles; from 1972 to 1975, there were 101; from 1995 to 1998, there were 70; and from 2010 to 2013, there were 160.

6 Initially I intended to trace changes in topics and themes in American Studies scholarship over fifty years by surveying three types of sources: *AQ* articles, titles of papers presented at ASA na-

tional meetings, and book advertisements in national meeting programs. However, there was no national ASA meeting in 1964 (the first was not held until 1971, with earlier meetings being limited to regional chapters). In addition, I could not locate the program book for the 1975 San Antonio national meeting despite a careful search in the papers of then ASA president William H. Goetzmann at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, and an examination of the finding aid for the American Studies Association Records at the Library of Congress. Thus I was forced to rely on *AQ* articles for the data of this survey. Journal articles probably do not register trends as quickly as conference papers, and journal articles approved by a single editor with an eye for particular topics are probably less representative of the overall discipline than conference papers approved by the diverse members of a program committee. Even so, I believe my informal survey yields significant results. On the early history of the American Studies Association, and especially a clear depiction of the differences between regional and national associations, see Deloria and Olson 2017, 79-112.

7 Even ten years later, during academic year 1974-75, only 22.5 percent of full-time faculty members in all disciplines in the United States were women, earning on average about 83 percent as much as their male colleagues (Curtis 2011, figures 2, 9).

8 See also Taupin 1963, 85.

9 Use of masculine pronouns to refer to people in general was then almost universal.



10 Veysey anticipated two more frequently cited critiques of the myth and symbol approach: Kuklick 1972 and Kelly 1974.

11 Chambliss also contributed “Chauncey Wright’s Enduring Naturalism” (1964).

12 Veysey was referring specifically to Smith’s *Virgin Land*, but his criticism was equally relevant to Marx’s *Machine in the Garden*, published four years after Veysey’s article.

13 Between 1960 and 1964 there were no articles on Asian Americans. The sole article on “Spanish Americans” (as the author referred to his ethnic group) was a straightforward literary survey concluding that the Mexican writer Luis Inclán was “akin to the American writers of the West” (Paredes 1960, 70).

14 Radway pointed out this irony, not in the original address but in an endnote to the published version: Radway 1999, 28n19.

15 For the result of the referendum see Flaherty 2014.

16 Other organizations approving anti-Israeli boycotts included the African Literature Association, the Association for Humanist Sociology, the Critical Ethnic Studies Association, the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies, the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, and the Peace and Justice Studies Association (USACBI 2013).

17 Indeed, Curtis Marez, president of ASA at the time of the boycott, had served as *AQ* editor from 2006 to 2010, so the continuity was hardly surprising.

18 Mary Helen Washington took the word menudo from John Sayles' film *Lone Star* (1996), where it referred to the cultural stew created by the meeting of whites, African Americans, and Mexican Americans in Texas. See Washington 1998, 12-13.

19 Gender and ethnicity were determined by careful searching for each individual, often on multiple websites.

20 On Marx's progressivism and activism see Meikle 2003, 152-55.