

Ready to SOAR: An Americanist Journal

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Welcome the Society of Americanists Review, or SOAR, to your screens and shelves. As its acronym implies, the digital-era journal contains ideas that gloriously ascend on the wings of fervid scholarship and compel attention to the exciting directions they take. This innovative publication reflects the goals of the Society of Americanists (SOA) embedded in its title as a forum for the profession of Americanists devoted to the study of the United States in its global as well as local contexts. Its distinctive niche in the organizational landscape of learned societies is to represent the work of Americanists and advance analytical approaches to the research and interpretation of the United States. As a publication, its special place is to represent disciplinary practice by Americanists to identify and explain beliefs, themes, patterns, trends, behaviors, traditions, and concepts that characterize the United States as a nation, an experience, a rhetoric, and peoples – past, present, and future, in and out of North America, and in thought and action (Bronner 2017). In short, as an intellectual enterprise, the society and the journal are uniquely constructed to seek an understanding of Americanness.

The keyword is “Americanist” and by extension the study of the society and culture of the United States that elsewhere has been labeled Americanistics in contrast to the more dif-

fuse, and often intellectually suspect “American Studies” (Aaron 2007; Bronner 2018; Kroes 1987; Strunz 1999; Watts 1991). SOAR is not the only one with “Americanist” in its name (see Narecki 2017), but SOAR’S ambitious plan is to develop the journal into the most far-reaching. As the booster rocket of an association for all Americanists world-wide, the journal aims to lead a renewed movement for integrative work on Americanness wherever it emerges. The diverse, international composition of the journal’s editorial board and the SOA’s governing council exemplifies this goal.

The SOA has its origins in a dialogue in 2014 among former presidents and alienated leaders of the American Studies Association (ASA) to create an innovative learned society devoted to the rigorous, unprejudiced analysis of American society and culture and to promote the profession of Americanists (see Kulik 2013). The conferences of the Eastern American Studies Association (EASA) were especially hospitable to these concerns for the direction of American Studies, but the question was raised about initiating the goals of a new society within its regional identity. In 2015, EASA organized an ad hoc committee, and appointed me as chair, to explore different administrative options. Based upon the committee’s report, EASA’s Executive Board agreed to cooperate with the creation of a separate Americanist organization that would be international in its reach, scholarly in its mission, and inclusive in its composition. The EASA board unveiled the new organization in conjunction with its spring 2017 meeting scheduled for March 31-April 1 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (with a theme of “Milestones, Markers, and Moments” which addressed organizational as well as historical and cultural milestones), a state-capital location abounding with academic and public institutions devoted to the integrative study and presentation of American history, society, and culture. The SOA

emerged as a global umbrella organization to represent the interests of Americanists, and declared goals of integrating studies of American history, society, arts, and culture in all their aspects; facilitating discussion of scholarly and professional issues among its members through activities such as an annual conference and communications; and promoting the profession of Americanists devoted to the study of the United States in global and local contexts. To help spread the word, the SOA based at the Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, introduced a website and social media presence to foster interaction globally (<https://sites.psu.edu/americanist>).

Why distinguish Americanists? Dictionary definitions note a primary meaning of Americanist as “a specialist in American culture or history” (Merriam-Webster), “student of America” (English World Dictionary), or “specialist in American Studies” (Dictionar Roman). With the “ist” suffix, Americanist connotes a professional status equivalent to a linguist or psychiatrist, and for students and scholars with an American Culture, American History, American Studies, American Ethnic Studies, or Transnational Studies degree, the term Americanist identifies them with an intellectual legacy in the founding vision of broad-minded scholars in various countries after World War I (see Dorson 1976; Oppermann 2018).

The choice of “Americanist” has been inspired by a number of visionary public intellectuals, but I might single out Harvard University’s Daniel Aaron (1912-2016), one of the founding pioneers of American Studies, who in 2007 titled his autobiography *The Americanist*. He honored me with his time and wisdom in many Barker Center for the Humanities meetings when I taught at Harvard in the 1990s. Beyond this personal connection, Aaron had a profound influence on the evolution of the discipline, first as a student in

the groundbreaking program called “History of American Civilization” at Harvard, and later as a professor in the program mentoring aspiring Americanists. As I shared my recent experiences teaching American Studies in Japan, and the impressive colleagues devoted to the holistic study of the United States, he recalled the founding concept of globalization and inclusiveness, which had yet to be fully realized. Aaron poetically described the Americanist “snagged in a thousand snapshots and, like [Walt] Whitman, feels...to be part of the unconscious scenery of a thousand more” (2007, 4). *The Americanist* not only documented American experiences but also explored “the byways of American social and intellectual thought” to give background to the question of Americanness within the United States as well as beyond its national borders. *The Americanist*, Aaron declared, is an “all-purpose synthesizer” (2007, 189). In addition to the synthesis of cultural evidence, often non-“traditional” (e.g., popular culture, oral traditions, material culture), this sense of synthesis extends to work in various disciplines as warranted to address issues, themes, and questions involving thinking and acting that invoke, or evoke, America around the world.

I should point out that some anthropologists also apply the term “Americanist” to their work to indicate a specific focus on Native American language and archaeology. But this research-teaching area can, and should, be integrated into an inclusive study of American society and culture (see Gleach 2010). And I might say that a personal goal is to see Americanistics as reflected in the contents of the journal take on more social-scientific perspectives than has been evident in the sometimes narrow humanistic legacy of American Studies. In sum, an Americanist is a scholar with a distinctive identity related to the integration of sociocultural material and analytical approaches to investigate aspects, and the whole of, the United

States (and related areas before the nation's founding) and their local and global representations and implications. Join me and other Americanists, then, in a compelling movement, the thrill of a rousing launch, and the mind-opening lift of ideas as SOAR takes flight.

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