American Studies: Knowledge, Nation, and the Academy, 1937-2001

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In 1937, when he found out that his childhood friend Oscar Tarcov was about to enroll in a graduate program in anthropology, Saul Bellow wrote him an enthusiastic letter. “So you’re going into anthropology,” Bellow noted with satisfaction. “Sweet Jesus! It’s a hell of a lot better than the English department. And if you are not going to train yourself in a money-making technique you could choose no better field. It is the liveliest, by far, of all the social sciences.”

History might not be as lively a field as anthropology, but it is livelier than many people would think. The best evidence for this is the amount of people I have had the pleasure to work with while researching and writing this dissertation. Most importantly, I would like to thank Sarah Igo, Paul Kramer, Christopher Loss, and Cecelia Tichi, under whose benign supervision this project took shape. I am equally grateful for the support, both intellectual and material, I have received from the Department of History, the Graduate School, the Robert Penn Warren Center, and the Jean and Alexander Heard Library at Vanderbilt University. Travel to archival locations was made possible through generous support by the Social Science Research Council, Smith College, Duke University, Southern Methodist University, and the University of Connecticut. The many archivists and librarians I have had the pleasure to work with over the past five years are too numerous to list here, but I trust that the list of references at the end of this thesis will give readers a sense of just how much help I have received.

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Introduction

I

The academic field of American Studies was perhaps never more widely discussed than in December of 1954, when it became the subject of a long article in *Mademoiselle*, "the magazine for smart young women."[1] Although this unlikely piece of publicity took many Americanists by surprise, it was not first time that individuals associated with American Studies had made it into the pages of the popular press, and it would not be the last. Seven years earlier, the same magazine had already featured a short profile of a "peppery professor of history and literature," F. O. Matthiessen, in a suggestively titled article about female college students and their favorite teachers.[2] And in 1961, *Today's Secretary* ran a long piece about the work habits of the journalist Max Lerner, who had been the driving force behind American Studies at Brandeis University.[3] However, it was only in 1954 that American Studies itself, rather than one of its more famous practitioners, emerged as the main object of interest. In the article published that year, readers could look at photos of professors wearing bowties and tweed jackets and read about what this field was, where it had come from, and why students were excited about it.

American Studies, the article explained, was based on the assumption that the culture of the United States needed to be studied in all its breadth and variety, taking into account "anything from cowboy yarns to sermons to Emily Dickinson's private papers." Emerging in the years after World War I, the piece noted, the field's career had closely paralleled the rise of the United States as a world power. During the 1920s, when the country had seemed so provincial

[1] Rachel Mellinger, "American Culture: The High and the Low-Down," *Mademoiselle* (December 1954).
[2] Nancy Garoutte, "The Men on Their Minds," *Mademoiselle* (September 1947).
[3] Barbara Wiest, "Sitting in Judgment," *Today's Secretary* (November 1961).

that American artists had often felt the need to decamp to London or Paris, a small band of professors had rebelled against this trend by championing the serious study of American letters. The Great Depression only strengthened this impulse, as Americans increasingly looked inward and began to examine their values and ideals as never before. But it was not until 1945, the article stressed, that American Studies fully took off. As American soldiers returned from overseas, "curious about the institutions and traditions they had been fighting for," and as policy makers became aware of the need to explain to "a world of skeptical peoples who Americans were and what they stood for," American Studies started to boom, attracting both people and money. If the prewar programs almost all had been created at private schools in the East, the most prominent postwar curricula came out of big state schools in the Midwest, especially the University of Minnesota.[4]

Compared to other majors, the article pointed out, students liked that American Studies was "freewheeling and eclectic," and its "broadly speculative temper" attracted undergraduates who dreaded the narrow specialization other disciplines seemed to demand. The idea that it was possible to examine "comic books and cowboy lore between sessions with Thoreau and Jonathan Edwards" struck many as exciting and novel, a breath of fresh air compared to the obscure poems they read in their English classes and the dry chronologies they were told about by their history teachers. "It's exciting to find the ideas in the great books expressed in the popular literature of the day," one student explained. "You can see for yourself, from reading the contemporary novels, in what way a book like *Moby Dick*, for example, reflected the current themes and in what ways it soared into the original." Non-majors who found their way into an American Studies class often came away with a new appreciation for how interesting their

[4] Mellinger, "American Culture," 92-93.

country could be. Doubtful that they would ever want to learn more about the War of 1812 or the American Revolution, their minds quickly changed when they discovered what such topics could yield when their professors showed them "cartoons, controversial paintings, a few recorded campaign ditties" instead of relying on the usual textbooks.[5]

But what did students actually learn in the classes they took, spread out as they were across disciplines and departments? Did they graduate with a coherent education under their belts or did the eclecticism of the field provide them with little more than a grab bag of ideas and facts? Was American Studies, the article asked, "more than a pleasant academic smorgasbord?" Most professors insisted it was, pointing to the "checks and balances within each program" that would help students avoid the stigma of dilettantism. Although American Studies programs gave students significant leeway in choosing the classes they wanted to take, they all had course requirements meant to ensure that individual interests would be balanced by a stock of shared knowledge. "Parlor-conversation knowledge" was not what the faculty wanted their students to take away from their courses, and formats like the "correlating seminar," in which a particular topic was discussed from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, aimed to expose them to rigorous training. Whenever someone did attack the field for being little more than "a catchall for academic dilettantes," Americanists were quick to point out that the majority of such programs were only open to honors students.[6]

At the end of the article, the author also touched on an issue that was never far from the minds of those who wanted to see American Studies succeed. While their students were "never more curious about themselves as a nation than now," innocently enjoying the pleasure of seeing themselves reflected in the materials they read and discussed, the faculty were seldom as carefree

[5] Mellinger, "American Culture," 115-16.
[6] Mellinger, "American Culture," 116-17.

as the young men and women who sat in their classrooms. If its variety of courses and its breadth of materials were the field's main virtues, its main problem was the ever-lurking danger of chauvinism. "American Civilization," "American Culture," or "American Values," as American Studies sometimes was called, seemed to them always threatened by the prospect of becoming a venue for the uncritical celebration of American greatness. Focusing all their attention on the United States, students could end up losing sight of how the country was connected to the rest of the world, just as professors, trying to show the relevance of their research and teaching, might be tempted to exaggerate its significance and uniqueness. Originally created to prove to the world that American culture was as worthy of serious study as European civilization, American Studies never seemed safe from slipping into jingoism and flag-waving. For many Americanists, the possibility of the field becoming "a gleam in a rich alumnus' eye," or of students taking American Studies "as a form of patriotic exercise," always seemed to lie somewhere in waiting.[7]

II

The author of the *Mademoiselle* piece was right to comment on the paranoid relationship American Civilization had with American civilization. Eager to teach students about the distinguishing features of the United States as a nation, academics in the field never lost the sense that they were walking on politically treacherous ground. From the time the first programs were launched, professors in American Studies had felt the need to defend their work against suspicions of parochialism and insularity. As early as 1940, when Smith College introduced a major in American Culture, the faculty behind the program had found it necessary to stress that there was no need to fear "the chauvinistic and reactionary implications" that some observers

[7] Mellinger, "American Culture," 93, 117.

saw in the field, explaining that the concentration stood in opposition to "any kind of smug 'America First' isolationism."[8] A decade later, a major historical journal warned scholars in American Studies to be careful lest "fair-seeming supporters" misused it for purposes that did not conform to the ideals of a liberal education. "To the jingoist," the piece warned, "how inviting such programs are! How apt for his purposes!"[9] In 1964, in response to a letter by an alumnus, a professor at Amherst College had to explain to the school's president that scholars in American Studies were trying their best to keep "chauvinism and provincialism" out of their teaching. "We do not know entirely how to prevent this," the professor admitted, but he could not imagine that "curtailing or tearing down" American Studies would in any way help students expand their mental horizons.[10]

Academics in neighboring disciplines rarely gave up the reservations they had about American Studies, no matter how carefully their colleagues who worked in the field explained what they did. In the late 1960s, when C. Vann Woodward edited one of the first major volumes on the comparative study of American history, he suspected that the "recent vogue" of American Studies, with its tendency to reinforce "national boundaries to the study of culture," had been partly responsible for the provincialism he detected in current work on American history.[11] In 1994, when asked about the state of graduate education in fields concerned with the United States and its past, Bernard Bailyn made a similar observation. "The worst programs are those in American Studies or in the History of American Civilization," he said in front of an audience at Dartmouth College, describing the research being done in such programs as "narrow" and

[8] Daniel Aaron, "The Major in American Culture," *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1940), 237.
[9] Arthur Bestor, "The Study of American Civilization: Jingoism or Scholarship?," *William and Mary Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1952), 4-5.
[10] Theodore Greene to Calvin Plimpton, 14 May 1965, Greene Papers, Box 1, Folder 28.
[11] C. Vann Woodward, "The Comparability of American History," in *The Comparative Approach to American History*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 11.

"parochial."[12] Despite a decades-long effort to internationalize the field and decouple of it from the nation-state as its primary framework, such comments are still common today, and academics from adjacent fields can still be heard musing about how "weird" and "discomfiting" it must be for teachers in American Studies to be "implicated so explicitly" in the subject they study.[13]

These arguments over the relationship between American Studies and its object of study form the point of departure for this dissertation. At its core, it explores how, when, and why academic knowledge has come to be defined by the nation. Based on the conviction that we do not sufficiently understand the assumed affinities between knowledge and nationalism, it aims to provide an account of the historical processes through which higher learning and national belonging have become intertwined. As an institution, the university is far older than the nation, its structure and purpose preceding national identities and national interests. Yet when the modern nation came into its own, the university quickly became enmeshed in its web of obligations and possibilities. Whether in the emerging nations of nineteenth-century Europe or the postcolonial states of twentieth-century Asia, nation builders have often looked to universities for expertise and legitimation, just as they have feared them as sites of critique and resistance. In turn, academics have as frequently embraced the nation as they have pushed it away, sometimes enlisting its prestige and resources, at other times viewing it as anathema to their identity as cosmopolitan thinkers. In its broadest context, this dissertation aims to understand what happened when the medieval institution of the university met the modern

[12] Bernard Bailyn, *On the Teaching and Writing of History: Responses to a Series of Questions*, ed. Edward Connery Latham (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 26.
[13] Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 65.

institution of the nation, and how this encounter resulted in what academics today describe as "methodological nationalism."[14]

For the past twenty-five years, scholars from across the social sciences and humanities have worked to undo this connection between the nation and knowledge. By examining ideas, actors, and goods that defy territorial borders, these scholars have helped to challenge the assumption that the nation ought to provide the natural framework for the production of knowledge. In doing so, they have shed light on phenomena that were illegible when seen through national lenses: they have uncovered the global reach of activist networks, they have traced the circulation of knowledge among far-away places, and they have followed goods and organisms down sea lanes and land routes. Together, they have redefined how we think of empire, race, and migration, causing disciplines as different as English and sociology to rethink some of their most fundamental assumptions. What they have seldom explored, however, is the question of how the methodological nationalism their work seeks to dismantle became such a powerful framework in the first place. Correctly noting that many disciplines had since their earliest days taken the nation as their default point of departure, they rarely investigate how this intellectual commitment emerged to begin with. Why was there, in other words, a national paradigm before there was a transnational turn?[15]

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[14] For one of the most influential descriptions of and critiques of methodological nationalism, see Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism, the Social Sciences, and the Study of Migration: An Essay in Historical Epistemology," *International Migration Review* 37, no. 3 (2003): 576-610. For historical accounts of the development of nationalism, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

[15] Some of the fundamental methodological issues in this context are outlined in Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1991): 1031-55, Michael McGerr, "The Price of the 'New Transnational History,'" *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1991): 1056-67, and in the contributions to Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). In addition, see also Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, "World History in a Global Age," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (1995): 1015-33, Louis A. Perez Jr., "We are the World:

One area of scholarship concerned with this question focuses on the nineteenth century, when academic knowledge became a useful instrument in the creation of national communities. Historians during that time, increasingly professionalized and moving into positions of influence in universities and government agencies, began to craft narratives that supplied diverse populations with a shared past and a sense of belonging. Philologists and lexicographers, from the Brothers Grimm in Göttingen to Noah Webster in New Haven, started to trace the origins of words back through the centuries and prescribe rules for their use, subsuming regional dialects under the umbrella of a common national language. Professors of literature, increasingly interested in vernacular writing and tired of the refined impracticality of Latin and Greek, began to consider it part of their educational mission to help ease social tensions by uniting different classes around the idea of a shared national culture. Folklorists and ethnographers, roaming the countryside in search of peasant stories and songs, started to turn the customs and beliefs they collected into a colorful thread in the national fabric. Even the emerging social sciences contributed to this process, despite their scientific pretensions. Identifying distinct forms of government and institutional patterns, they put on offer their own invented traditions and usable pasts, giving otherwise vague notions of national peculiarities a façade of objectivity.[16]

Internationalizing the National, Nationalizing the International," *Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 558-66, as well as the reflections collected in the AHR Conversation "On Transnational History," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1441-64. For recent examples of historical research that challenges methodological nationalism, see Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Global South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), Benjamin Allen Coates, *Legalist Empire: International Law and American Foreign Relations in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2016), Hidetaka Hirota, *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Richard Candida Smith, *Improvised Continent: Pan-Americanism and Cultural Exchange* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), Robert C. McGreevey, *Borderline Citizens: The United States, Puerto Rico, and the Politics of Colonial Migration* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), and Bathsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

[16] David Levin, *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon

A different vein of research has highlighted the use of academic knowledge as an instrument of control over foreign societies and economies. While some of this scholarship examines earlier time periods, when fields such as archeology became tools of domination in the hands of imperialists, most of it is concerned with the twentieth century, during which a series of developments tightened the bond between academic work and national interests. The demand for expertise, which governments had fanned after relying on academics to diagnose social ills or help recruit soldiers, quickly reached all corners of campus, allowing academics to forge new relationships with state actors and corporate interests alike. Scholars of Latin America soon found themselves writing reports for the State Department or advising businesses trying to enter markets in Panama or Peru. After the Russian Revolution, academics with knowledge of the country began making careers explaining the Soviet Union to American policymakers, a line of work that the Cold War would institutionalize and turn into a permanent growth sector. Middle East experts, whether trained as economists or historians, could live comfortably off the money they made from working at think tanks or advising elected officials. "Area Studies," the large sector of academic programs which all of these fields eventually became associated with, was one of the most visible manifestations of how knowledge came to overlap with the nation, both in its politics and methodology.[17]

Press, 1983), Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), Suzanne Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), Tuska Benes, *In Babel's Shadow: Language, Philology, and the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), Margarita Díaz-Andreu, *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archeology: Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[17] Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990), Mark T. Berger, *Under Northern Eyes: Latin American Studies and U.S. Hegemony in the Americas, 1898-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), David Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), Helen Delpar, *Looking South: The Evolution of Latin Americanist Scholarship in the United States, 1850-1975* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008),

By focusing on the emergence and development of American Studies, this dissertation examines the case in which knowledge and the nation most explicitly overlapped. Compared to studies which focus on disciplines for which this connection was not constitutive but coincidental, this dissertation traces the history of the first academic field that made the nation its explicit reason for being. Unlike older disciplines, which had staked their identities to certain types of evidence or distinct methodologies, American Studies asked its adherents to put their disciplinary affiliations aside and subsume them under a new object of study. While historians, economists, and sociologists had been writing about the United States long before American Studies emerged, there was nothing inherent in their disciplines that committed them to the study of one particular country, just as there was nothing that determined that the nation should provide the natural frame for their work. By examining the emergence and evolution of American Studies, this dissertation focuses on the case in which knowledge and the nation most explicitly overlapped, and where the issue was most extensively debated. Because American Studies came into being in the United States in the years around World War II—when many citizens tried to make sense of the country's place in the world, when social policies began to expand access to higher education, and when the federal government became increasingly involved in academic affairs—it presents a particularly rich site for investigating how the nation became a central object of consensus and contestation for professors and students alike.[18]

David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Ricardo D. Salvatore, *Disciplinary Conquest: U.S. Scholars in South America, 1900-1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

[18] Although none of them focus on American Studies as such, the monographs which most closely trace the origins and early trajectory of the field include Kermit Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy: The Roots, Growth, and Maturity of a Profession* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), David R. Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), and Elizabeth Renker, *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Other studies which provide relevant context include Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*

III

As the *Mademoiselle* article correctly noted, American Studies entered the academy during the interwar years, when it brought together various disciplines in an attempt to remedy the marginal status of American culture in the university and provide students with a comprehensive understanding of their country's historical evolution and artistic achievements. A quick success, institutions all over the country, from liberal arts colleges in New England to land-grant universities in the Midwest, soon created their own programs in American Studies. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the number of these program grew rapidly, both within the United States and abroad. By the early 1960s, however, when the field had consolidated itself institutionally and intellectually, something occurred that the 1954 magazine piece could not have foreseen, as the Vietnam War forced academics to ponder the political implications of their research and teaching, the Civil Rights Movement revealed to them the demographic homogeneity of their profession, and the eventual rightward shift of American politics reminded them of their relative political powerlessness. Like other fields, American Studies changed profoundly from the 1970s onward, as its practitioners became more diverse, as they adapted new methodologies, and as the field at large grew increasingly self-reflective. But in contrast to other academic programs, scholars in American Studies embraced these shifts to an uncommon extent, going so far as to question the very premise of the field's academic existence. What had begun in the 1930s as an attempt to give American culture a place in the academic curriculum had by the late 1990s become a debate over whether the field should still call itself *American* Studies.[19]

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Ian Tyrrell, *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), and David S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[19] Janice A. Radway, "What's In a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November 1998," *American Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1999): 1-32.

As an academic endeavor, American Studies has always been unusually fascinated with itself. Due to its relative novelty, the origins and development of the field are well documented, and this in turn has invited a large amount of analysis and critique. Virtually no aspect of American Studies has been left unexamined, and debate over its politics, methods, and aims has been a constant since its inception.[20] Few meetings of the American Studies Association have occurred without panel discussions concerning the field's methodological problems, just as few years have gone by in which its history has not been probed in journal articles or book chapters. In fact, over time such ruminations became so characteristic of American Studies that they became occasions for humor. In his introductory seminar to American Studies, Marshall Fishwick, who as a young historian had convinced the future novelist Tom Wolfe to do graduate work in the field, would tell his students a joke about the field's obsession with itself. During his first visit to a psychiatrist, a new patient is asked by his doctor: "Well, what seems to be your problem?" To which the patient replies: "Hell, Doc, *I'm* the problem!" The same was true of American Studies, Fishwick would then tell his students. "The problem in the Amer. Studies world is," he noted on an index card, "*Amer. Studies*."[21]

However, this tendency for introspection has not helped the field define itself. If anything, it seems to have muddied the waters, and questions about its disciplinary nature abound. Is American Studies a discipline, a field, or a movement? Are American Studies programs interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or antidisciplinary? Is American Studies more closely aligned with the humanities or the social sciences? Does American Studies have its own methodology or does it borrow its techniques from neighboring fields? Is anyone who does

[20] Among other places, this point is discussed in Lucy Maddox, preface to *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), vii-x.
[21] Marshall Fishwick, "Intro – Amer St. 640," Fishwick Papers, Box 33.

research on the United States by default a part of American Studies? Is there a fundamental difference between what happens in American Studies and what happens in European Studies or Asian Studies? Has American Studies been more successful when organized as a program or a department? Does American Studies owe its existence mainly to the Cold War and the State Department's sponsorship of educational programs and exchanges? Did European interest in the United States, especially as it entered educational institutions in the wake of World War I, provide the impulse that led to the full emergence of American Studies a decade later? To what extent did American Studies inspire fields such as Black Studies or Women's Studies and provide them with an organizational blueprint? And, perhaps most importantly, is it American *Studies* or American *studies*?

This lack of shared assumptions has made it challenging for historians to provide reliable accounts of how the field has evolved over time. Histories of disciplines are almost always histories of ideas, and in the case of American Studies, it can be difficult to determine which ideas reflected the educational realities of the field in the past. In contrast to recent trends in intellectual history, which have spurred researchers to include new types of evidence and new historical actors, the history of the disciplines still tends to operate according to older standards. Privileging published documents and official pronouncements, it is prone to telling stories that are highly simplified and idealized, and which tend to smooth out the inconsistencies that oftentimes characterize the realities of academic research and teaching. In the case of American Studies, this reliance on public statements is especially problematic. In part because of its confused academic identity, and in part because of its hospitality towards activists and reformers, writing on the history of the field has often mixed descriptive and normative statements. What American Studies was and what it ought to have been frequently become intertwined when

scholars study its past. For academics who have dedicated their careers to the field, the line between aspirations and realities is easily crossed.[22]

This dissertation follows a different approach. Relying on a wide range of archival sources and introducing actors who have previously been overlooked, it tells the story of American Studies from the ground up. While disciplinary histories often focus exclusively on researchers and their ideas, this project pays attention to the whole breadth of actors who enable academic programs to function, including students who take classes, administrators who oversee regulations, foundation officers who allocate funding, and family members who provide help and support. If disciplinary histories traditionally rely on published documents, ranging from articles and books to state-of-the-field essays and methodology pieces, this dissertation looks to different types of evidence for information. Letters and diaries, brochures and postcards, student newspapers and course critiques, departmental memoranda and committee minutes all provide the foundation for the story that follows. Taken together, these materials provide an intimate account of the institutional, social, and personal aspects that shaped American Studies over the span of seventy years. As informal documents rather than public announcements, they often include revealing opinions and candid assessments, a fact which makes them especially valuable as sources of insight. As one Americanist put it after writing his friends a long letter rather than

[22] For examples of a disciplinary histories that rely exclusively on published documents and official statements, see Ellen Fitzpatrick, *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880-1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), Robert Adcock, *Liberalism and the Emergence of American Political Science: A Transatlantic Tale* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), or Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). Other studies of academic fields, by contrast, make use of a wide variety of evidence and explore both biographical and institutional aspects in depth. See, for example, David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), Christopher Hilliard, *English as a Vocation: The "Scrutiny" Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), or Richard Aldous, *Schlesinger: The Imperial Historian* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017). In this context, see also the methodological reflections in Suzanne Marchand, "Has the History of the Disciplines Had Its Day?," in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 131-52.

sending them an official report about a recent international trip: "The trouble with the report will be that, as a public document, all of the juices will be squeezed out of it."[23]

The picture of American Studies that emerges from this line of investigation helps clarify some of the confusion over what exactly the field has historically been. American Studies, according to its most famous definition, is "the study of American culture, past and present, as a whole."[24] Because no single discipline can do justice to a subject this large, the argument runs, the field has to rely on the methods and insights from departments as different as art history and economics. For that reason, promotional materials for American Studies programs, from the earliest brochures to the most recent websites, tend to proudly enumerate how many disciplines they manage to involve. It is no coincidence, however, that the person who defined American Studies as the study of American culture "as a whole" was a professor of English who wrote books that won prizes for historical research. Despite its self-image as a field that includes faculty from all corners of campus, American Studies has always been welcomed most warmly by historians and literary scholars, who met on the common ground of cultural history. In theory, American Studies is, according to one joke, "six (or more) subjects in search of a discipline."[25] In practice, literary studies and cultural history have always been its "nucleus of study," as the program at Brown University explained to its students.[26]

For the better part of its history, what people thought of when they heard the term "American Studies" was a style of scholarship that used literary materials, especially non-canonical ones, to investigate historical topics in a speculative and unconventional fashion. This

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[23] John William Ward to Friedel Dewitz, 20 January 1985, American Studies Scrapbook (Amherst). For a recent study that follows a similar methodological approach, see Emily J. Levine, *Dreamland of Humanists: Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, and the Hamburg School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
[24] Henry Nash Smith, "Can American Studies Develop a Method?," *American Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1957), 197.
[25] Marshall Fishwick, "Ecology," in *New Patterns for American Studies?* (Wilmington, DE: The Wemyss Foundation, 1966).
[26] "Brown University: Advanced Degrees in American Civilization," Garvan Papers, Box 38, Folder 34.

was true of publishers, students, and professors alike. When a British publishing house tried to enter the market for American Studies, the titles it sought to acquire were all along the "literature-history axis."[27] When students reviewed one of the most influential books in the field, they took particular note of the fact that it brought "non-textual evidence to bear on the literary text."[28] And when a professor of history had his students read William Faulkner in a class on the American South, a friend teased him for being "positively American Studyish."[29] In fact, the identification of American Studies with history and literature was so ubiquitous that programs who did not follow this model, like the one at the University of Pennsylvania, made this fact a part of their brand. Consciously trying to create a version of American Studies organized around the social sciences, the Pennsylvania program was widely known for deviating from the usual mold. It was "the foremost if not unique example" of a program that had actually managed to do something different, as an outside observer noted.[30]

That American Studies came to be synonymous with history and literature was not a coincidence. Although scholars in the field have made efforts to recover different strains of research and teaching, there are concrete reasons why the "history-literature slant" became so influential.[31] In the 1930s, when the first degree-granting programs in American Studies were established, the faculty associated with these programs had shared the feeling that it was time for universities to give American culture "a place in the scholarly sun," as one professor later remembered.[32] Whereas American history had been a respectable area of interest since the late

[27] Malcolm Bradbury to Daniel Aaron, 19 February 1973, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 11, Folder 97.
[28] Marc Green, "Mr. Marx's New Dialectic," *The Amherst Student* (12 November 1964).
[29] Robert Davison to Hugh Hawkins, 14 October 1959, Hawkins Papers, Box 1, Folder 39.
[30] Daniel Aaron to William Goetzmann, 19 February 1979, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 17, Folder 179.
[31] Malcolm Bradbury to Leslie Fiedler, 6 October 1967, Fiedler Papers (BU), Box 19, Folder 14. For a recent attempt to recover different intellectual traditions within the field, see Philip J. Deloria and Alexander I. Olson, *American Studies: A User's Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).
[32] Howard Mumford Jones to Thompson Webb, 1 November 1977, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 3.

eighteenth century, American literature had never managed to establish itself in the college curriculum. Throughout the nineteenth century, different universities had occasionally offered classes in the subject, but these classes never managed to become part of the permanent course offerings. Although this had begun to change in the years around World War I, when projects like the *Cambridge History of American Literature* showed that the subject was rich enough to fill over six-hundred pages of text, it did not prevent Americanists from remaining targets of collegial condescension for some time to come. The notion that American literature was "neither literature nor American," so common before the emergence of American Studies, could still be overheard by the time the first students prepared for their degrees in the field.[33]

When the first American Studies programs were established, it was a common belief that American literature was fundamentally different from other national literatures, and that for this reason it needed to be studied using different methods. According to this view, the country's long history as first a colonial outpost and then a frontier society had left it with a body of texts that could not be evaluated by the aesthetic standards that European scholars had developed for European letters. In comparison to England or France, each of which had a long history of belles-lettres, the United States did not have a noteworthy literary tradition to pride itself on. Instead of penning novels or poems, Americans had spent most of their time writing sermons, travel reports, or political pamphlets. And when they had produced fiction, it had usually been derivative and inferior, paling in comparison to the quality of writing they saw when looking eastward across the Atlantic. Studying American literature, it seemed to many critics, meant by necessity studying American history, since the types of texts that were available for explication and evaluation were of interest more for their historical insights than their aesthetic

[33] "The New American Literature Journal," December 1928, American Literature Papers, Box 9, Folder "Misc. 1928-1950."

achievements. "To phrase the question differently," one scholar speculated in 1928, "is it not true, that, so far as American experience is concerned, history and literature have been more than usually intimate companions?"[34]

This theory of American literature guided the creation of American Civilization programs in the 1930s and 1940s, and it remained an important intellectual influence for decades to come. When Lionel Trilling reviewed Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* in 1960, he praised the book for its creative handling of the inferior literary materials that he thought made up so much of American writing. Due to the "infrequency of genius" among American writers, Trilling argued, any critic of American letters had to engage in the study "not of a literature but of the literary manifestation of a national culture."[35] When David Riesman read this review, he finally understood what Americanists like Fiedler were trying to do in their work. "You have made very clear," Riesman wrote Trilling, "some of the reasons for misgiving I have had about 'American studies,' wondering why people are chauvinistic enough to spend time with unimportant authors instead of reading Tolstoy and Dickens."[36] That American Studies has always been primarily concerned with bringing together literary studies with history was neither an intellectual accident nor the result of institutional influences. Instead, it was the logical outcome of an especially prevalent theory of American culture that dominated academic thinking during the interwar years and beyond. The sociologist John Sirjamaki was not the only social scientist who lamented the ubiquity of "the literature approach to AS."[37] But like others who thought that American Studies was too dominated by literary historians, he made the mistake of taking the field at its word, believing that it actually was as inclusive as it liked to proclaim. In

[34] Franklin B. Snyder, "What is American 'Literature?,'" *Sewanee Review* 35, no. 2 (1927), 207.
[35] Lionel Trilling, "Love and Death in the American Novel," *The Mid-Century* 10 (1960), 5-6.
[36] David Riesman to Lionel Trilling, 10 March 1960, Trilling Papers, Box 8, Folder 3.
[37] John Sirjamaki to Ralph Henry Gabriel, 11 February 1955, Gabriel Papers, Box 12, Folder 238.

theory, it may well have been open to anyone interested in understanding America. In practice, however, it was an endeavor run mainly by "Literature boys," as one historian had to regretfully note.[38]

IV

This dissertation examines the development of American Studies from the 1920s to the early 2000s. Taking the history and literature approach to be the field's defining intellectual orientation, it traces the interlocking careers of the small group of academics who championed this approach and who gave American Studies a disciplinary identity. This group of people, which included Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, Perry Miller, John William Ward, Daniel Aaron, and Sacvan Bercovitch, thought of themselves as participating in a shared intellectual project, and they formed an academic network which made institutions such as Harvard University, Amherst College, and the University of Minnesota into influential centers of American Studies. As students, advisers, colleagues, and friends, they secured jobs for each other, developed ideas together, and exchanged political opinions as well as professional gossip. Although small, this group of teachers and thinkers had an outsize influence on the development of the field as a whole, and generations of students in American literature and American history were forced to come to terms with their work. Competitor programs, such as the one at Yale University, differed from the dominant approach in degree rather than kind, and attempts to create rival traditions in American Studies, such as the one developed at the University of Pennsylvania, only proved the hegemony that the "Harvard-Minnesota" tradition had over the field.[39]

[38] Albert House to Louis Rubin, 17 January 1956, ASA Records, Box 24, Folder 22.
[39] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 5 May 1954, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 16.

The opening chapter of this dissertation traces the career of Henry Nash Smith, who was the first person to receive a Ph.D. in American Studies and whose work provided the field with an intellectual agenda for the first two decades of its existence. Following Smith from his upbringing in Texas to his time as a graduate student at Harvard and his eventual career as a university teacher in Minnesota and California, this chapter explores how ambivalent the relationship between American Studies and the American nation was from the start. An avowed Europhile, Smith had little interest in American culture, and that he joined the first cohort of the first graduate program in American Civilization was the result of chance rather than planning. Yet Smith went on to become one of the most influential historians of the American West, and his work provides a reference point for scholars in American Studies still today. At a time when the field had few norms or conventions, he was able to leave his intellectual mark on the field. Skeptical, liberal, and distrustful of open avowals of patriotism, Smith helped make American Studies into an academic endeavor that from the beginning faced the problem of how to balance affirmation of and adversarialism towards its object of study.

The second chapter examines early interactions between American Studies and American students. At the graduate level in the interwar period, there had been little need to codify the field's intellectual premises and educational goals in curricular form. Yet once undergraduate programs in American Civilization began to expand after 1945, professors and administrators were faced with the need to clarify its position vis-à-vis traditional programs, to make it part of the vogue for general education, and to justify its political aspects. And in doing all this, they had to take into account the students under their supervision, who developed their own ideas about what American Studies was and should be. Focusing on the example of Amherst College, which made American Studies a mandatory element of its curriculum, this chapter explores the role of

undergraduate students as active co-creators of the field's disciplinary norms and practices throughout the 1940s and 1950s. With a mixture of respect and irreverence, they poked fun at the field's fetishization of "the meaning of America" while at the same time praising it for enabling them to make sense of their experiences growing up in Connecticut, California, or Colorado. Following the career of Leo Marx, this chapter details what students really learned in the American Studies classroom and how it affected their understanding of themselves as Americans.

Using Perry Miller's famous anecdote about his epiphany in the Congo as its point of departure, the third chapter describes how the rise of American Studies depended on events that occurred outside the United States and its territorial borders. Although dedicated to understanding one particular nation, American Studies was from the beginning a profoundly transnational project. Many of the academics who helped launch the field first became aware of their identity as Americans while serving as GIs in the South Pacific or Western Europe. After 1945, the field benefited enormously from the educational initiatives of the early Cold War, as faculty were sent to lecture abroad and as students from around the globe were given the opportunity to come to the United States to study its culture and institutions. This chapter examines the tensions and opportunities that arose in this context. It analyzes the eagerness of the field to incorporate foreign perspectives, the tendency among overseas scholars to imitate what their American colleagues were doing, and the willingness of academics everywhere to give lip service to governments and foundations to secure funding for international travel. In doing so, it explores how the methodological nationalism that American Studies organized itself around was itself the product of transnational circumstances.

Focusing on the career of John William Ward, a student of Smith's who later became president of Amherst College, the fourth chapter chronicles the ways in which American Studies organized itself in professional organizations. It pays particular attention to the development of the American Studies Association, the field's first and foremost disciplinary guild, which was created in 1951 to give coherence and structure to an academic endeavor that had grown with no clear sense of direction and few widely shared standards. From its inception in the years before World War II, the field had been defined by an almost paranoid worry about its academic legitimacy, and many of its practitioners feared that it would be perceived as little more than flag waving for intellectuals. During the 1950s and 1960s, it fell on the American Studies Association to police how the field was being taught and presented. While politicians sometimes charged it with being insufficiently affirmative of American values, faculty from other departments frequently dismissed it for being too respectful of political pieties, and it became part of the organization's mandate to navigate such attacks. Tasked with promoting American Studies as a respectable intellectual project, the work of the American Studies Association illustrates how the relationship between the nation and knowledge came to be defined at the intersection of curricular design, institutional pressures, and national politics.

The last chapter investigates the process of self-historicization that occupied Americanists during the final three decades of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1970s, scholars in American Studies became increasingly preoccupied with their field's histories and traditions. In articles, books, and panel discussions, faculty and graduate students debated how American Studies had come into being, what its function in the Cold War had been, and how it had or had not changed in the wake of the social upheavals of the late 1960s. Against the backdrop of a new recognition of U.S. global hegemony and a growing interest in transnational

approaches to teaching and research, these discussions became increasingly concerned with whether American Studies had outlived its purpose. While such discussions were not entirely new, they had never before been as rancorous and intense, and they had never led some academics to question the very nature of the field in which they had made their careers. As one of the first persons to enroll in an American Studies program, Daniel Aaron was especially well placed to take part in these debates, mixing autobiography and historiography in an attempt to make sense of what American Studies had become over the first seven decades of its existence.

Chapter 1

The First in the Field

I

In the summer 1926, Henry Nash Smith crossed the Mississippi for the first time in his life. He had graduated from Southern Methodist University the previous year, and after remaining there as a lecturer for another twelve months, he had managed to gain admission to the Graduate School at Harvard University, where he was now headed. As an undergraduate, Smith had been a promising student, easily impressing many of the older academics he met. "A very bright boy," one professor remembered him years later. "He tried out for the Texas Rhodes Scholarship, and should have won it."[1] At Harvard, Smith planned on continuing to study English literature, which had been the subject he had dedicated most of his time to in college. Once in Massachusetts, he hoped to study with the best men in the field, many of whom he and his friends back in Texas regarded as intellectual giants. He thought he would study as hard as he could, receive his degree, and then return to the Southwest to teach English. Although he had never left the Southwest, he was interested in all things European, voraciously reading Thomas Mann and Stendhal and trying to understand the latest work in philosophy and anthropology. Harvard, he was sure, would provide him with everything he needed to embark on an academic career and make his intellectual mark back at home.

Once in Cambridge, however, he discovered how naïve he had been. Instead of intellectual stimulation and the play of ideas, what awaited him were rote memorization,

[1] Dixon Wecter to Robert Penn Warren, 7 January 1935, Warren Papers, Box 77, Folder 1508.

professorial indifference, and endless hours of isolation in the stacks of the library. Instead of Thomas Hardy or D. H. Lawrence, the writers he spent the most of his time on were the Beowulf poet and Chaucer. For someone who had grown up in Dallas, Boston seemed cold, dark, and gloomy, with endless winters and too little sunlight. His stay in New England turned into one of the unhappiest years of his life, and he returned to Texas the following spring, leaving Harvard with a master's degree instead of the doctorate he had set out to pursue. Mainly because of this melancholy episode, Smith put off further plans for graduate school. Once he was back in Dallas, he returned to his teaching at SMU, where he remained for another ten years. That he did go back to graduate school in 1937 was the result of chance rather than planning. Political troubles in Dallas suggested to him that it would be wise to get a PhD sooner rather than later, and a chance encounter with a professor who had recently joined the Harvard faculty convinced him to try his luck one more time. So, Smith returned to New England again, to enroll in a program that he knew little about and whose subject matter he had so far shown not much interest in. In the late summer of 1937, he became one of the first students in the first degree-granting program in American Civilization.

Most accounts of the emergence of American Studies tend to describe it in broad and general terms, as the result either of long intellectual traditions or abstract cultural contexts. It has been characterized as the endpoint of a fascination with America going back to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Alexis de Tocqueville, as an academic variety of the cultural criticism produced by Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks, and as a type of "substitute Marxism" that enabled ideological critique without political transgression. It has been depicted as an outgrowth of the New Deal's cultural programs, as a byproduct of the "democratic revival" that flourished after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and as a "cultural Marshall Plan" meant to further American interests

during the early Cold War. It has been linked to the emergence of a new culture concept during the interwar years and has been seen as an early example of interdisciplinary teaching and research. Compared to such explanations, the story of Smith's unplanned return to Harvard can seem insignificant and anecdotal. However, what this story explains that other histories do not account for is the reason American Studies ended up taking the shape that it did. Because more than even the most influential cultural current, it was Smith who left his intellectual imprint on the field as a whole.[2]

Smith arrived back at Harvard in 1937 and he left in 1940 as the first person with a PhD in the field.[3] A busy teacher, frequent book reviewer, and overworked editor, he had already enjoyed a prolific career by the second time he moved to New England. At Harvard, he was able to work with a number of important Americanists. Perry Miller was one of his teachers, and Smith liked his ability "to argue cases about Thomas Mann as well as Thomas Aquinas."[4] But it was Howard Mumford Jones, who had left the University of Michigan in 1936 to spearhead

[2] Most accounts of the beginnings of American Studies mention several of these factors to explain its emergence. For a range of representative examples, see Leila Zenderland, "Constructing American Studies: Culture, Identity, and the Expansion of the Humanities," in *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II*, ed. David A. Hollinger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 273-313, Leo Marx, "On Recovering the 'Ur' Theory of American Studies," *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 118-134, Michael Denning, "'The Special American Conditions': Marxism and American Studies," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): 356-80, Elaine Tyler May, "The Radical Roots of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1996): 179-200, Philip Gleason, "World War II and the Development of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1984): 343-58, Marc Chenetier, "'New' 'American Studies': Exceptionalism Redux?," *European Journal of American Studies* 3, no. 3 (2008): 1-23, Michael Holzman, "The Ideological Origins of American Studies at Yale," *American Studies* 40, no. 2 (1999): 71-99, and Jerry A. Jacobs, "American Studies: Interdisciplinarity over Half a Century," in *In Defense of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity and Specialization in the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 153-87.

[3] Questions whether Harvard really had the first program in American Studies, and whether Smith really was the first recipient of a PhD in the field, are usually based on loose definitions of both American Studies and of academic programs. At least to contemporaries, there was no doubt that the Harvard program was "the first in the field," as Robert Spiller put it. See Robert Spiller to Kenneth Murdock, 22 February 1952, American Literature Section Papers, Box 5, Folder "Correspondence 1951-1952." For the consensus view of Smith as the first PhD in the field, see Richard Bridgman, "The American Studies of Henry Nash Smith," *American Scholar* 56, no. 2 (1987): 259. For an attempt to dislodge Smith from this position, see George W. Pierson, "Henry Nash Smith," *American Scholar* 57, no. 1 (1988): 158.

[4] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 13 May 1938, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.

Harvard's efforts in American Studies, who proved the more influential teacher for him. Jones recruited Smith for the program's first cohort and he later encouraged him to write his dissertation on the nineteenth-century American West. This dissertation, published over a decade later as *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), did for American Studies what other books had failed to accomplish. It provided the field with a theory and a style that others could reuse and repurpose. To the extent that American Studies ever had a distinct approach to its object of study, it was in the two decades following the book's publication, when "myths" and "symbols" were on everyone's mind. So influential and pervasive was this approach that it later became common to speak of a "myth-and-symbol school" that Smith had helped to establish. Important books had been written before it, but none had represented the new field quite as much as Smith's revised dissertation. As the executive secretary of the American Studies Association put it four years after the book's publication: *Virgin Land* was "real American Studies."[5]

As an academic project, American Studies was not the natural endpoint of a longer tradition. Neither was it the predictable result of a certain set of events. Smith, after all, had not been especially keen on pursuing a doctorate, and he ended up in the Harvard program almost by accident. When he arrived in Cambridge in the late 1930s, he knew little about American literature and even less about American history. An avowed Europhile, he found the United States philistine and repressive, a machine civilization that worshipped on the altar of money.

[5] Louis Rubin to Roy Basler, 5 October 1954, ASA Records, Box 30, Folder 1. Henry May thought that Smith's book "gave a pattern to the new field of American Studies," and Lawrence Buell argues that the myth-and-symbol approach provided the field with the only distinct methodology it ever had, and that Smith was "at least as responsible as any other single person" for establishing it. See Henry F. May, "The Rough Road to Virgin Land," in *American Literature, Culture, and Ideology: Essays in Memory of Henry Nash Smith*, ed. Beverly Voloshin (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 1, and Lawrence Buell, "Commentary," in *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 13. For a general overview, see Daryl Umberger, "Myth and Symbol," in *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, ed. George T. Kurian et al. (New York: Grolier, 2001), 3: 180-84.

The graduate program he joined struck him as haphazard and unorganized, with opaque expectations and a tendency to fail students just to prove its intellectual rigor. While writing his dissertation, he relied more on European than American thinkers, and he received his best advice not from fellow graduate students but from a friend in medical school. Instead of boosting American Studies, World War II kept him from revising his work, burdened him with additional teaching, and left him aghast at the suppression of labor rights he saw in the Southwest. And after the end of the war, when he finally had time to finish his book, it was turned down by one publisher after another. In retrospect, the emergence of American Studies between the Great Depression and the early Cold War can appear like a foregone conclusion. With turmoil at home, totalitarianism abroad, and the international order in flux, Americans had good reason to look inward and ponder how they had arrived at this point. But if the career of its first PhD holder shows anything, it is that the path towards national self-understanding was far from straightforward, and that American Studies from the beginning had a rocky relationship with the American nation.

II

Smith enrolled at Southern Methodist University in 1922, less than decade after the institution had opened its doors. Like many of the students it attracted during these years, he had grown up in Dallas, and the university's main appeal for him lay in its combination of convenience and affordability. When Jay Hubbell arrived at SMU in 1915, what he found were "a fine central building," "an attractive dormitory for women," and "three rather small and flimsy dormitories

for men."[6] Modest in size but with hopes for expansion, the university mirrored its surroundings both in scale and ambition. Just as it was still a "family-sized place" when Smith was there as a student, Dallas was merely "a small town trying to become a city."[7] Born and raised in the area, Smith never lost his sense of being a Texan, although few things in his upbringing corresponded to popular conceptions of life in the state. Urban and bookish, he rode a trolley car to his high school, and aside from the occasional trip to visit an uncle with a small farm in Denton, he had no exposure to horses or cattle. His family did well enough, although "without approaching any hint of upper-class or even upper-middle-class style," and he later remembered his upbringing mainly for its oppressive conventionality.[8] Looking back, it seemed to him that he had grown up in "a last outpost of nineteenth-century evangelical post-Puritan philistinism."[9]

But whatever misgivings he had about his upbringing did not prevent him from staying in Dallas. First as a student and then as a teacher, Smith remained at SMU for the next fifteen years, for what proved be the most formative time of his life. Wealthy enough to fund cultural programs while small enough to provide a sense of cohesion, the city had many attractions for those who knew where to look. A respectable orchestra, a serious art museum, and a vibrant theater were just one part of the Dallas cultural scene. The *Southwest Review* made up another, as did the lively book page of the *Dallas Morning News*, where the region's tastemakers skewered or praised the latest titles that had arrived in the stores. Over the years, Smith spent much of his time and energy at the center of this intellectual ferment. Never without a project at hand, he wrote book reviews, edited articles, gave lectures, and usually taught several classes each day.

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[6] Jay Hubbell, "John Hathaway McGinnis (1883-1960)," Hubbell Papers, Box 9, Folder "Mc-Mz." For the early history of SMU, see Darwin Payne, *One Hundred Years on the Hilltop: The Centennial History of Southern Methodist University* (Dallas: DeGolyer Library, 2016).
[7] Henry Nash Smith to Mary Bywaters, 3 October 1972, Bywaters Collection, Box 41; Henry Nash Smith to Frederick Bracher, 19 March 1984, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 20.
[8] Henry Nash Smith to Stuart Miller, 15 February 1984, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 8.
[9] Henry Nash Smith to Stuart Miller, 8 November 1983, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 8.

Whether through eccentricity or brilliance, many of the people he met at this time left a lasting impression on him. Although he had many accomplished colleagues over the course of his life, few influenced him as much as the motley group of professors and artists that made up his circle of friends during this time.[10]

The most important of these was John H. McGinnis, a professor in the SMU English department and a catalyst for many of the projects Smith was involved in. Spending most of his time in the classroom and editorial office, McGinnis published little himself, but he had a lasting influence on the people he worked with. Smith considered him his "intellectual father" and used to joke about having attended the "John H. McGinnis Institute of Advanced Studies."[11] Along with Hubbell, McGinnis helped bring the *Texas Review* from Austin to Dallas, where it was rebranded as the *Southwest Review* in 1924. Over the next twenty years, McGinnis played a crucial role in steering the publication, which he envisioned as an organ for fostering the letters and arts of the region. While its fortunes rose and fell and its conception changed over time, the journal never failed to provide a workshop for young academics like Smith. It was a modest operation—its office occupied a "semisubteranean cranny" with "an over-used flat-top desk," "a quite uncertain oak swivel chair," and "two or three overloaded ash-trays"—but for the young men who worked there it became a storied location.[12] Smith remembered the office as "a busy place for good talk and hard work," and he found even decades later that he could not write or think about books without being reminded of what he had learned as an editor and reviewer during that time.[13]

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[10] For general information on Smith's life in Dallas, see Bridgman, "American Studies of Henry Nash Smith," 259-62, May, "Rough Road to Virgin Land," 1-23, and Thomas F. Gossett, "Henry Nash Smith as a Teacher: A Memoir," in Voloshin, ed., *Essays in Memory of Henry Nash Smith*, 25-36.
[11] Henry Nash Smith to George Bond, 14 April 1960, Bond Papers, Box 1, Folder 95; Henry Nash Smith to Mrs. Robert W. Winn, 30 May 1954, McGinnis Papers, Box 1, Folder 17.
[12] John Chapman, "Early Days at the Southwest Review," 1989, Southwest Review Records, Box 35, Folder 20.
[13] Henry Nash Smith to George Bond, 14 April 1960, Bond Papers, Box 1, Folder 95.

While almost everything in Dallas prepared Smith for an academic career, almost nothing prepared him for a life in American Studies. For one thing, he was not particularly interested in American culture. Before he started his degree in the "History of American Civilization," it was mainly European civilization that drew his attention. His favorite poets were English and his favorite novelists either German or French. He liked Whitman but he thought that Keats and Shelley were better. He taught himself enough German to read Thomas Mann, he acquired enough French to savor Stendhal, and he learned sufficient Italian to appreciate Dante.[14] In the summer of 1930, he traveled to Paris and Munich, in an "epoch making" occasion that changed the course of his life.[15] Even during his time at the *Southwest Review*, his main interests concerned things that had little to do with Arizona or Texas. He did not mind the journal's antiquarian focus, but everyone knew that his real passion lay in philosophy, anthropology, and "contemporary fiction, from Thomas Mann to Thomas Wolfe."[16] During his first decade of undergraduate teaching, Smith was responsible for classes on Chaucer and advanced composition, while the university's lone course on American literature was offered by one of his colleagues.[17] In a general reading list prepared for his students, Smith did include a number of American thinkers, but the longest section was reserved for the countrymen of Henry Fielding and Samuel Pepys. It took him many years to become interested in American history and American writing, and when it happened, it was the result of friends urging him to read Melville and James.[18]

[14] See Henry Nash Smith to Al Harting, 11 June 1942, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 30; Henry Nash Smith to Stuart Miller, 8 November 1983, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 8.
[15] Henry Nash Smith to Lon Tinkle, 5 November 1975, Tinkle Papers, Box 31, Folder 15.
[16] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 19 April 1937, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10.
[17] "Bulletin of Southern Methodist University: Annual Catalogue with Registration for 1927-1928," Southern Methodist University Archives.
[18] See Henry Nash Smith to Lon Tinkle, 29 April 1977, Tinkle Papers, Box 31, Folder 15.

This lack of interest in American culture was partly the result of Smith's distaste for what he considered the philistinism of middle-class American life. One of his friends later mused on the cultural flair of the interwar years, when H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis taught a generation of young intellectuals to be "hotly against the Establishment," to recognize "the idiocy of the Genteel Tradition," and to cultivate "an aversion to and scorn of American commerce."[19] Smith shared these feelings, and he abhorred the oppressive conformism he found among the city's wealthier circles, where the "fear of being in the slightest degree different" haunted everyone's thoughts.[20] Making money and playing golf seemed the only respectable occupations for men, while for women life consisted of "study-clubs, rental libraries, literary luncheons."[21] And while his neighbors liked to imagine themselves as inheritors of the culture of cowboys and ranchers, Smith thought the actual roots of the modern Southwest lay in a different place. "The origins of the Texas that I know best can be found much more clearly in the Geneva of Calvin or the London of Milton."[22] He regretted the fact that his countrymen were "enslaved to the morality of being at the office every day," and he liked France because it lacked "some of the stupider Puritanisms of the United States."[23] America had "technical proficiency and money," he acknowledged, but it lacked the ability to merge technical mastery with human concerns. "The result is that intelligent technique is dead and emotion runs wild into sentimentalism."[24]

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[19] Frederick Bracher to Henry Nash Smith, 20 June 1985, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 20; Frederick Bracher to Henry Nash Smith, 24 February 1984, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 20; Frederick Bracher to Henry Nash Smith, 18 November 1984, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 20.
[20] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, undated, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 6.
[21] Henry Nash Smith, "Culture," *Southwest Review* 13, no. 2 (1927): 250.
[22] Henry Nash Smith, "New Fields for Critics: Standards versus Standardization," in *Higher Education and Society: A Symposium* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1936), 259.
[23] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 27 May [?], Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10; Henry Nash Smith to Lon Tinkle, 13 August [?], Tinkle Papers, Box 31, Folder 14.
[24] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 11 March [?], Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 5.

While Harvard eventually turned Smith onto American culture, it was also responsible for delaying this discovery by almost ten years. When he arrived in Cambridge to start his doctoral studies, it was not the first time he had made the journey to the Northeast. Smith graduated from SMU in 1925, and a year later, he was on his way to Massachusetts, following one of his friends who was taking an MA at Harvard. Throughout the year they were apart, his friend, Jimmy Allen, kept him informed about his life in New England, and much of what he reported was unpleasant and dreary. Because SMU was still largely unknown, the Harvard graduate school had not accepted his degree at full value, and he was obliged to take additional courses. He felt stressed much of the time and found it difficult to keep up with work. "I dream and worry in my sleep a lot," he confessed. He spent his waking hours either in the library or in classrooms, with twenty minutes off for his meals, which he rarely found worth the time he invested in going to them. "I haven't been to a show or anything for over a month and a half," he told his friends back in Dallas. "I play bridge every now and then for a few minutes—other than that I do nothing but study."[25] Even the weather proved difficult. He spent the Christmas holidays catching up on his work, but because the library closed early during that time, he had to stay in his room, which got uncomfortably cold during the nighttime. When Smith sent him a Christmas present that included some socks, Allen was grateful: "The sox are good—you can't wear anything but wool ones up here—so how opportune they are goes without comment!"[26]

Intellectually, Allen had ambivalent feelings about what he was learning. On the one hand, he enjoyed the experience of getting a close-up look at some of the academic stars of the time. He liked his classes with Irving Babbitt and John Livingston Lowes, and he was entertained by the mannerisms of George Lyman Kittredge, who would end his lectures by

[25] James Allen to Henry Nash Smith, 1 December [?], Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 5.
[26] James Allen to Henry Nash Smith, undated, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 5.

taking his hat and cane and speaking the last words as he walked out of the room—mainly, the theory went, to prevent students from pestering him with questions or comments.[27] On the other hand, Allen dreaded the philological requirements he had to fulfill, and he struggled with Old English. He "hated the darn stuff" because it was "more irregular than regular with no regularity to the irregularities," and he did little to hide his lackluster performance.[28] "My Anglo-Saxon is so-so, like all Anglo-Saxon is, I guess."[29] By comparison, he was excited about Kenneth Murdock's class on early American writing, which he hoped would prove "interesting as well as enlightening." He knew so little about American literature that he hoped to enjoy "the pleasures of a novice" in his encounters with American texts.[30] Yet once he embarked on his reading, his enthusiasm started to flag. "This early period is fierce, and how Dr Murdock has the nerve to tell us that it is delightful reading etc etc I don't know." Perhaps even deeper was his disenchantment with his country's supposed artistic achievements. "I nearly died of laughter at some of our own Philip Freneau's poetry that I read for last time—after reading Wordsworth he certainly seems hopeless."[31]

In 1926, Smith himself went to Harvard, undeterred by his friend's reports and driven by the desire to get a higher degree so he could embark on an academic career. Never having been east of the Mississippi before, it turned into a "lonely, grim year," much of which was spent in Widener Library trying to frantically prove himself in the eyes of his teachers.[32] Like Allen, Smith used this opportunity to study with the stars of the field, whose scholarship was mentioned "with bated breath" back in Texas.[33] But despite their preeminence, there was little they offered

[27] James Allen to Henry Nash Smith, undated, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 5.
[28] James Allen to Henry Nash Smith, undated, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 5.
[29] James Allen to Henry Nash Smith, undated, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 5.
[30] James Allen to Henry Nash Smith, undated, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 5.
[31] James Allen to Henry Nash Smith, 1 December [?], Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 5.
[32] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 6 November 1974, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 16.
[33] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 2 March 1979, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.

that spoke to his interests. He had to memorize large swaths of Shakespeare and was forced to read Chaucer over and over again. And while he was interested in German, his exposure to the language at Harvard was limited to studying obscure grammatical rules. "I am supposed to learn how to juggle separable and inseparable and separable-inseparable prefixes, normal, transposed, inverted, and modified transposed word order, contrary to fact and potential conditions," he complained. In addition, he was expected to acquire "a comparative knowledge of the principal monumenta critica on Shakespeare and the various efforts to determine the facts of his life."[34] Other students at the time derided Harvard for its "medieval outlook" and described it as "the New England haven of Chaucerians."[35] Smith may not have known this before he left Texas, but he was certain of it by the time he returned.

In large part because of this unhappy year, Smith did not return to graduate school for almost a decade. For SMU, his MA from Harvard was qualification enough, and once he arrived back in Dallas, he settled into an agreeable routine of academic labor and social occasions: lectures and grading during the day, dates and tennis at night. When his chairman assigned him Old English to prepare him for additional graduate work, Smith compared the experience to "cold baths in winter," and his response was straightforward: "I am not going."[36] After several years, when the initial shock had worn off, Smith did begin to consider doing doctoral work, but he quickly discovered that it would mean more of the things he had disliked at Harvard. Trying his luck by looking abroad, he wrote the University of Berlin to inquire whether they would accept a dissertation on "the influence of anthropology on modern literary criticism."[37] The reply

[34] Henry Smith to Lon Tinkle, 6 August [?], Tinkle Papers, Box 31, Folder 14.
[35] Clarence Gohdes to Jay Hubbell, 25 September 1928, Hubbell Papers, Box 4, Folder "Gohdes, Clarence Louis Frank, 1927-1961."
[36] Henry Nash Smith to Jay Hubbell, 13 May 1929, Box 5, Folder "Smith, Henry Nash, 1928-1978."
[37] Henry Nash Smith to Amerika-Institut Berlin, 29 December 1931, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 36.

did not answer his question but settled the issue: "The meaning of 'anthropology' and of 'modern literary criticism' is not quite clear to us."[38] Smith was not opposed to getting a doctorate, but he saw few opportunities to do so on his terms. "I'm not too good for it if I have to make a living," he explained. "But I hope I don't have to."[39]

When he did return to Harvard, it was with mixed feelings, and for reasons partly beyond his control. In 1932, he became embroiled in a scandal that almost ended his teaching career. That summer, the Book Club of Texas published a limited edition of "Miss Zilphia Gant," an early short story by William Faulkner about sexual repression, social isolation, and religious aberrance. Smith wrote a preface for the slim volume and traveled to Mississippi to interview Faulkner and get his permission to publish the story. When it appeared, Smith's chairman, John Beaty, was outraged. He found the story profane and offensive, and he managed to convince the university's president to terminate Smith over his role in the matter. Smith was in Europe at the time, and it was there that he learned about his dismissal. Determined to put up a fight, he returned to the States and was placed on leave until the issue could be resolved by the Board of Trustees. Smith was lucky. Other faculty members came to his defense, as did Stanley Marcus, the future inheritor of the Neiman-Marcus retail empire, who ran the book club and had both the resources and the connections to pressure the university into correcting its course. When the Trustees met the following January, Smith was reinstated to his position, despite his "public association with an obscene writer," as he would joke later on.[40]

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[38] P. Grossmann to Henry Nash Smith, 29 January 1932, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 36.
[39] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 24 June [?], Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 7.
[40] Henry Nash Smith to John William Ward, 19 March 1972, Smith Papers, Box 7, Folder 12. The Faulkner affair is chronicled in Stanley Marcus, *Minding the Store: A Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 327, and David R. Farmer, *Stanley Marcus: A Life with Books* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1993), 15-19. For a summary, see the introductory remarks in Alexander I. Olson, "'You Have Rescued Me from Academicism': Selections from the Correspondence of Henry Nash Smith and Mary Hunter Austin," *Southwest Review* 96, no. 1 (2011): 50-65.

He nonetheless felt himself on uncertain ground. Even though he had managed to keep his position, he was sure that he would need to leave SMU sooner or later. Beaty had openly stated that he could not teach in the same department as him, and when the Trustees reversed his dismissal, he was transferred from English to Comparative Literature. He fully expected that the administration would simply fail to renew his contract when it ran out. "I shall probably go to graduate school somewhere," he assumed without much enthusiasm.[41] Over the following years, he lived in a type of professional limbo. While the university kept him on staff, perhaps to avoid the impression of delayed retaliation, Smith felt himself unable to leave, since his departure would create the impression that he had been made to resign after all. Having long resisted the idea of returning to graduate school, it became increasingly difficult for him to ignore the prospect of becoming a student once more. "I have been forced to stay here a couple of years in order to demonstrate that I was not forced to leave. But it is getting almost time for me to go away."[42]

In the end, it took almost another three years before he found himself taking exams and writing papers again. Given his ambivalent memories of Harvard, as well as his failure to find a program willing to accommodate his unconventional interests, he took little initiative until events steered him back toward graduate school. In 1936, he got married, and his wife was eager to move to a different city. Trying to carve out a space for herself in Smith's busy life, she hoped that a different community would allow them to escape his demanding circle of friends and meet new people together. Then, in what proved to be a lucky encounter, Howard Mumford Jones came to Texas to give a talk at the Open Forum in Dallas. Jones was a contributing editor for the *Southwest Review* at the time, and Smith had discussed his work in the same publication. He

[41] Henry Nash Smith to J. Frank Dobie, 2 October [?], Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5.
[42] Henry Nash Smith to Claude Simpson, 21 November 1934, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 37.

went to meet Jones and ask him for the manuscript of his talk, and it was on that occasion that Jones informed him about a new degree Harvard was about to establish, which would allow him to acquire a doctorate without having to steep himself in medieval texts and arcane grammatical rules. And so, in 1937, during the last days of summer, Smith was on his way back to the Northeast, over a decade after he had first crossed the Mississippi to attend graduate school in New England.[43]

III

Jones had been at Harvard for less than a year when he encouraged Smith to return. The son of an insurance agent, he grew up amid the forests and farmlands south of the Great Lakes. Born in Saginaw, his family moved first to Milwaukee and then to La Crosse, where he attended high school and became Hamlin Garland's personal typist. After graduation, Jones entered La Crosse Normal School but later transferred to the University of Wisconsin. He began graduate work at the University of Chicago but never finished his doctorate. When he applied to the graduate school to be examined for his degree, he was informed that he still needed more courses, even though he had already taught the types of classes they insisted he take. When this failed to impress the administration, Jones withdrew from the graduate school and never returned. For the next twenty years, he taught in Texas, Montana, North Carolina, and Michigan. A prolific writer with little regard for specialization, he published on everything from *Hamlet* to Heine and from Lord Byron to Moses Coit Tyler. Unconventional, acerbic, and proudly Midwestern, it made sense that Jones "turned pale and then red" when one morning he found two letters from James Bryant Conant waiting for him in the office of the University of Michigan English department.

[43] Elinor Smith to Daniel Aaron, 17 June 1986, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329; Henry Nash Smith to Bessie Jones, 9 September 1980, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 3.

The first contained an invitation to join the Harvard faculty at a noteworthy salary while the second informed him that he would receive an honorary doctorate during the university's tercentenary celebrations that year. "If I had been invited to lecture on the planet Mars," he later recalled, "I could not have been more amazed."[44]

Jones clearly underestimated the attraction that a maverick like him held for a modernizer like Conant. By 1936, when he received his call to the East Coast, he had made a name for himself as a vocal critic of scholarly orthodoxy and a champion of academic reform. Beginning in the late 1920s, he joined the efforts of a small group of English professors to promote the study of American literature in the academy, and in 1935, he delivered a speech at the Modern Language Association's annual meeting that served as a rallying cry for Americanists all over the country. At a time of "intense economic and social strain," when the country needed "to cling to its traditions," Jones found the MLA unbearably anglophile and embarrassingly provincial, proudly ignorant of America's "national achievement" and eager to reduce its literature to little more than "a tail on the British lion." Of the fourteen hundred articles that had appeared in the organization's journal, less than thirty had dealt with American authors, and not a single president had been chosen for his contributions to the understanding of American letters. Perhaps worst of all was the impossible situation that teachers of American literature found themselves in. Because there were so few of them, the ones that did teach the subject had to cover everything "from 1607 to 1935." Whereas specialists in English literature could focus on a single century or a particular genre, Americanists were supposed to cover it all. "The task is four or five times as

[44] Howard Mumford Jones, *An Autobiography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 177. Aside from his autobiography, biographical information on Jones is included in Peter Brier, *Howard Mumford Jones and the Dynamics of Liberal Humanism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), and Daniel Aaron et al., "Howard Mumford Jones (1892-1980)," in *Harvard Scholars in English, 1890 to 1990*, ed. Walter Jackson Bate, Michael Shinagel, and James Engell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 64-67.

heavy as that of any other member of the department," he complained, and when this overload led to superficiality, the professor of British literature was likely to "murmur something about the lack of depth and richness in American literary scholarship."[45]

When Jones gave this speech, the Harvard English department was still the same operation that Allen and Smith had encountered ten years before. As far as graduate education was concerned, the 1930s looked much like the 1920s, which in turn had closely resembled the late nineteenth century. Philology was still a large part of the curriculum, and students were expected to spend much of their time memorizing vowel shifts and struggling through grammars. French, German, and Latin were required for the preliminary examinations, after which the student in question would have to take Gothic, Old French, and Old English. Kittredge, who had joined the faculty in the late 1880s, was still teaching by the mid-1930s. Although the hiring of younger men like Miller and Murdock had begun to signal a generational shift, the rules that governed the department were still the ones decreed by the "philological syndicate" that had overseen it for years. There was not much overlap between what graduate students were required to learn and what they were later expected to teach, and any use they might extract from their drudgery tended to be by accident and not by design. To outsiders, Harvard English appeared self-absorbed and over-refined, with scholars from a bygone era luxuriating in disregard for the challenges and demands of the present. Or at least this is what Conant appears to have seen.[46]

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[45] Howard Mumford Jones, "American Scholarship and American Literature," Murdock Papers (HUG 4589.7), Box 1, Folder "Miscellaneous, 1932-41."

[46] For the state of Harvard English during Conant's presidency, see Morton Keller and Phyllis Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America's University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 74-76. See also Walter Jackson Bate, "The Crisis in English Studies." *Harvard Magazine*, September-October 1982, 46-53, and Bush, "Memories of Harvard's English Department," 595-603. For a discussion of the "philological syndicate," see Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), 118-49.

Jones was called to Harvard not by his colleagues in English, where his appointment would be, but by Conant himself, who wanted the feisty Midwesterner to throw open the doors and invigorate the stagnant department with a breeze of fresh air. Conant considered the department "effete and precious," as Douglas Bush later recalled, and he hoped that an outsider like Jones might wake it from its intellectual slumber.[47] Jones had a reputation for being a difficult colleague, and it may have been this quality, together with his unspecialized background and his taste for big subjects, that caught Conant's attention. He was a man of letters in exactly the ways that his future colleagues were not, and Conant liked his willingness to pick fights. He was also impressed by his insistence on the need for the serious study of American culture. When Jones replied to Conant's two letters, he enclosed a copy of the speech he had given at the MLA meeting just a few weeks before. "I think it is excellent and I agree entirely with your point of view," Conant replied. He agreed with Jones that the proper study of American culture was long overdue, and he wondered whether a program organized around the society of the United States might provide a model for ameliorating the problem of academic overspecialization. He hoped that the intensive study of American history, especially when it included discussion of the modern sciences and the modern economy, would "provide the unifying point of view in education which everyone is so desperately seeking." Jones agreed without reservations: "It seems to me that the first university which will work out a program of this sort will do more to salvage the college of arts from anarchic disintegration than all the vague talk about culture which is now made to take the place of realistic thinking."[48]

The first graduate program in American Studies emerged from this dialogue between Conant and Jones. Neither had planned to create a new program, but as the two men discovered,

[47] Bush, "Memories of Harvard's English Department," 602.
[48] The exchange of letters is quoted in Brier, *Howard Mumford Jones*, 13-14.

such a degree would be located on exactly the spot where their goals overlapped. Timely, relevant, and placed outside the force field of departmental inertia, the program represented just the type of new venture that Conant liked to support, while for Jones it meant the opportunity to further his project of giving American culture a proper institutional setting. When Jones received his honorary degree that September, his efforts in this direction were deemed sufficient to justify his presence at the important occasion. His citation simply described him as "an American writer and scholar whose critical study of our own literature assists the country to appraise justly its own culture."[49] While Bostonians had been surprised "to find the name of young Mr. Jones" next to those of Rudolf Carnap and Carl Gustav Jung, Conant took his importance for granted.[50] And when the new degree in the "History of American Civilization" was formally established the following year, its relevance was considered so obvious as to need no defense. With its focus on understanding the United States in all its dimensions, from political and social to aesthetic and economic, it was assumed that "the mere statement of the nature of his new and important type of degree will suffice to justify it to all informed persons."[51]

Little was known about the degree when the first students arrived, even by the people who were responsible for its creation. In the spring of 1937, Hubbell had asked Murdock about information regarding the program, only to learn that he would have to wait until the degree regulations were printed.[52] Informally, it was referred to as the "American literature and life program," and even when the official brochure appeared, it had little to add to this phrase, stating merely that the degree focused on "the history of 'American culture,' 'American life,' or

[49] Jones quotes the citation for his honorary doctorate in *An Autobiography*, 183.
[50] Louis M. Lyons, "The World's Wise Men: Scholars Coming to Harvard's 300th Anniversary," *Boston Globe*, 13 July 1936.
[51] "Official Register of Harvard University," 18 February 1938, Harvard University Archives.
[52] Kenneth Murdock to Jay Hubbell, 15 April 1937, American Literature Papers, Box 9, Folder "Murdock, Kenneth Ballard, 1933-1964."

'American civilization.'"[53] As late as July, even Jones was unsure about what the program would look like, and he admitted as much to students who asked for advice on how to prepare for their work. "I know not what the formal scheme of the degree in American culture may be, but I should think that to pick out a period and study it would be excellent preparation." Beyond that, there was little definitive information he could pass on. There were "a thousand questions that need to be answered," and given his own interests, he suggested that students think about the history of the Midwest, including issues such as "the development of culture in and about Chicago."[54]

In the middle of September, Smith arrived back in Cambridge, after a journey by car that included stops in New Orleans, Charleston, and New York City. The graduate apartment he planned to move in was still being painted, so he and his wife spent their days driving about the winding country roads of New England, even though his fingers still had "the curve of the steering-wheel in them" from his long journey up North.[55] Like his fellow students in this inaugural cohort, Smith knew little about what to expect from the program. "The degree is so new that no one, not even the titular magistrates of it, know very clearly just what is expected of candidates," he wrote to McGinnis in Dallas.[56] The only thing he could confirm at this point was that he liked the professors in charge of the venture, and that things had changed since his last time in Cambridge. He could tell right away that the situation was entirely different from the "lugubrious and sadistic medievalism" he had encountered ten years before, and he was especially pleased with the program's focus on cultural history.[57] "You would really be amazed

[53] Howard Mumford Jones to Kenneth Murdock, 29 May 1936, Murdock Papers (HUG 4589.7), Box 1, Folder "Miscellaneous, 1932-41"; "Regulations for the Degree in the History of American Civilization," 28 April 1937, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 35, Folder 460.
[54] Howard Mumford Jones to Daniel Aaron, 9 July 1936, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 19, Folder 218.
[55] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 21 September 1937, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10.
[56] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 7 October 1937, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 18.
[57] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 22 June 1937, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10.

at the change in this place," he wrote to a friend. "They are explaining to me all about how folk arts, social outlooks, etc., of the region, are inseparable from thorough understanding of its literature: my word! Just like quoting the Southwest Review."[58] Even people who were not associated with it realized that the program represented something novel and fresh. "It looks to me as if Harvard were going to play the very devil with the Teutonic philology bunk that has so long enthralled American so-called scholarship," Frank Dobie wrote Smith from his office in Austin.[59]

After ten years at the lectern, it took Smith some time to adjust to life as a student again. "They really mean business here with their assignments," he noted once he recognized how much work he would be asked to get done.[60] Courses, freshman instruction, and the need to prepare for his qualifying exams all vied for his time, and while he had no difficulties dashing off research papers for graduate courses, having to memorize "facts and dates" for undergraduate classes took him more time than it used to.[61] What concerned him the most during his first months in the new program was the issue of how many courses he would be required to take. In college, he had studied "very little history and absolutely no American Literature," and this made him stand out from his fellow graduate students, many of whom came well prepared for this type of work.[62] It was also during these first months that he noticed a different side of the new venture. Because it had discarded many of the requirements traditionally asked of students in neighboring fields, there were suspicions concerning its rigor, and the faculty were eager to prove that such speculations had no basis in fact. "They are determined that no one shall say the

[58] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 23 October 1937, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10.
[59] Frank Dobie to Henry Nash Smith, 30 March 1938, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 3.
[60] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 23 October 1937, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10.
[61] Henry Nash Smith to Lon Tinkle, 19 December 1937, Tinkle Papers, Box 31, Folder 14.
[62] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 7 October 1937, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 18.

new degree is a pushover," he explained, "and they will assuredly be stricter the first few years than later."[63]

The impulse to prove the program's legitimacy was particularly strong given that some of its critics were other specialists in the field. Samuel Eliot Morison, for instance, had been skeptical of the "the American Culture degree" from the beginning. In principle, he approved of the plan, but he saw "grave difficulties" when it came to its implementation. He thought that the kind of graduate students it would attract were "likely to be just those that are so devoid of culture or knowledge of any history before 1860" that they would be better served studying a different subject. He bemoaned the fact that they had "people do Ph.D. theses on Colonial Literature who don't know a word of Latin," and he feared that they now would have "theses on the American culture of the Jamesian epoch by students who know nothing of English history or literature."[64] To such skepticism coming from people closely aligned with the project, the main proponents of the degree responded by ensuring the bar was set high. After its first year in operation, Jones "tossed and gored" several candidates. "The mortality was high," as Smith put it, and seven of thirteen students were plucked from the program.[65] Even three years later, the faculty were still intent on proving its intellectual rigor when they failed an otherwise good candidate for misreading John Locke. While this may have been "a peccadillo in an Americanist," as Smith thought it was, the committee viewed it with scholarly gravity, and the example reminded the other students to stay on their feet. "Well, it adds zest to life—the sense of danger; our moral equivalent for war," Smith reported in semi-serious fashion.[66]

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[63] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 9 December 1937, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10
[64] Samuel Eliot Morison to Kenneth Murdock, 9 September 1936, Matthiessen Papers, Box 3, Folder "Morison, Samuel E."
[65] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 9 June 1938, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 38.
[66] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 20 January 1940, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 12.

Students heading toward their general examinations knew little about what to expect, and many feared that some professors did not understand the design of the program. Two-thirds of the requirements were not covered by standard courses on offer, and candidates looking for guidance generally found little support. If two students asked a professor for reading suggestions in a particular field, they were likely to receive two different answers. In the end, candidates could do little more than try to coordinate what books they were reading for which of their fields. As Smith explained, "control of the plan is divided among so many professors working in such diverse fields that this seems to be almost the only way to get any unity of conception."[67] As one of the first students to approach his qualifying exams, Smith felt "complete uncertainty" regarding his committee's expectations, and he feared that there would be a tendency to expect him "to know as much about American history as candidates in that field know," plus a corresponding amount in the other fields he was taking. "The committee," he was afraid, "never having had the experience of giving oral examinations on a limited portion of these fields, will not be able to get its sights adjusted."[68] There were no older students to ask and no precedents to consult, and the professors themselves seemed to make things up as they went. "Jones and Murdock and Schlesinger are vague about standards and the like; they throw the decision on us and tell us to come up when we think we know enough."[69]

The degree regulations required that candidates show familiarity with six different fields. While they could work off two fields by taking courses in them, the other four were reserved for the two-hour oral exam. Students could choose from a dozen different subjects, all of which were historical in nature but only some of which focused on the United States.[70] Smith's committee

[67] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 5 November 1938, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 38.
[68] Henry Nash Smith to Lon Tinkle, 6 February 1938, Tinkle Papers, Box 31, Folder 14.
[69] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 5 November 1938, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 38.
[70] "Regulations for the Degree in the History of American Civilization," Aaron Papers (Harvard).

recognized his knowledge of English and American literature, and this left him with American philosophy, American political theory, American social and economic history, and general philosophy with an emphasis on aesthetics.[71] Smith took his exam on January 30, 1939, and he spent most of the preceding year preparing for the occasion. Every day, he went to the library at nine in the morning, "no matter what," and left again at six in the evening. During the summer months, he went over the reading list for Arthur Schlesinger's social history course, which he supplemented with a set of lecture notes he had borrowed. In the fall, he focused on economic history, which he considered "the real piece of resistance," as well as American philosophy.[72] When the end of the year came in sight, he realized that his preparation would turn into "a cram session from now until then," and he hoped that he would be able to acquire enough knowledge to satisfy his committee. "I shall be exempt in English and American literature," he explained to a friend, "with the result that all the probing will be in American history and philosophy: where I have but the use of my left hand or my toes."[73]

The day of the examination began with a surprise. Instead of Frederick Merk, whom Smith had expected to be the guild historian at the occasion, Schlesinger was present at the exam, and he began by asking Smith about Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* (1931). Although Smith had not looked at the book in several years, he appreciated the gesture, and they "got tangled up in barbed wire and cattlemen from the first." Later on, he was prompted to speculate on what Aristotle would have said "about Hegel's assertion that Beauty is the interpenetration of concrete fact and Idea," and he was asked to explain what was

[71] Kenneth Murdock, report on Henry Nash Smith's general examination, 30 January 1939, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 2.
[72] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 16 July 1938, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 36.
[73] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 4 October 1938, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.

"characteristically American about Jonathan Edwards's thought."[74] Although his examiners passed him without reservation, Smith was not sure how firm his knowledge of American history actually was. Given that he had begun the program with a complete lack of formal instruction in this domain, his attempt to "absorb American history entire" over the past year had been largely successful. Still, he admitted, "if I had been asked to vote on the exam after it was over, I can not truthfully say I should have been enthusiastic about the reach and depth of my knowledge of the American past."[75]

While passing his general examinations marked an important step forward for Smith, more consequential were the classes he took during his first year in the program. Of these, two were of particular importance for the course of his subsequent work. A seminar by Jones on James Fenimore Cooper introduced him to the large collection of old periodicals in the stacks of Widener Library, a resource he would return to frequently on future occasions.[76] And Merk's course on westward expansion, which stretched over the fall and spring of his first year back in Cambridge, captivated him from the beginning. The unofficial guidebook for freshmen noted Merk's "special emphasis on agriculture," and Charles Olson, who was at Harvard together with Smith, later mused that a book based on the lectures "could well stand quietly under the title *Land*."[77] Smith liked the class because it complemented his abstract ideas about the American West with precise dates and hard facts. Every new piece of information he learned gave him "a richer and fuller picture" of issues he had been thinking about for a decade or more. He marveled

[74] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 7 February 1939, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.
[75] Henry Nash Smith to Lon Tinkle, 7 February 1939, Tinkle Papers, Box 31, Folder 14.
[76] Henry Nash Smith to Quentin Anderson, 3 March 1986, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 7.
[77] "Confidential Guide to Freshman Courses and Fields of Concentration," 1938, Harvard University Archives; Charles Olson to Frederick Merk, 5 February 1952, Olson Papers, Box 194, Folder "Olson, Charles to Merk, Frederick."

at Merk's "amazing command of the facts of American history," and he thought the course was "made to order for anyone who has been interested in the Southwest Review."[78]

Merk's class was crucial in solidifying Smith's interest in the history of the West, and it established a pattern of collaboration that revealed the continuing importance of his friends back in Texas. Among these friends, the most important was John Chapman, whom Smith had met in an introductory biology course, and who had later become one of his colleagues at the *Southwest Review*. Although Chapman went on to attend medical school, he never lost the literary bent he had shown as a student in college, and throughout his career he kept working on things that were "nearer letters than medicine."[79] Not entirely happy as a physician, and quickly bored by his specialization in pulmonary disease, he frequently joked that he might yet become a professional writer. "It would not take a lot to make me forsake medicine thus early—say the extraordinary success of two novels (I should hesitate merely on the strength of one)."[80] In part to compensate for the dreary routine of dealing with the lung problems of elderly patients, he stayed in close contact with Smith, whose work in graduate school allowed him the vicarious pleasure of discussing intellectual questions. And Smith was happy to receive his advice, which he valued and welcomed. For a class in Renaissance history, he asked Chapman whether a paper on European attitudes towards Native Americans "could ultimately be worked into a magazine essay," and for his class with Merk, Smith wanted to write a paper on forts in the Southwest, in part because it would allow him to work together with Chapman. "I could be working with you with a clear conscience and you could help me, and in the end we could have a series of magazine articles as well as a term paper."[81]

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[78] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 9 December 1937, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10.
[79] John Chapman to Elinor Smith, 5 January 1986, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 17.
[80] John Chapman to Henry Nash Smith, 22 November 1936, Maxwell Papers, Box 2, Folder 31.
[81] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 23 October 1937, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10.

Smith also asked Chapman for advice on possible topics for the thesis he would be expected to write. Less than a month after his arrival in Cambridge, Jones had suggested to him that his dissertation should discuss "something related to Texas." Smith liked the idea, and he considered doing "a study of the 'Gone to Texas' theme" in magazines and periodicals from the early nineteenth century.[82] "If you have any suggestions," he told Chapman, "be sure to let me have them."[83] He later toyed with the idea of writing his dissertation about "the emergence of a conventionalized romance cycle based on the cattle range," a topic that Jones was especially interested in, and he used Chapman as a sounding board for the idea, just as he kept McGinnis informed about it. Although Smith liked the topic, he discovered that the cattle range had already been treated by other historians, which would leave him with merely its literary dimensions. "And this," he explained, "not only sounds like a thinner book than I want but also fails to take advantage of the distinctly non-literary interest implicit in the American Plan here."[84]

Smith did not seriously think about his dissertation until he had passed his qualifying exams, and by that time his course with Merk had steered him into another direction. The paper he ended up writing for Merk, "The Far West in Two American Literary Magazines, 1870-1879," discussed how writers had described the West to readers in the East who had never been to the region themselves. It concluded with an argument about how such descriptions might have influenced the course of American fiction. Noting that "the drama of Western scenery" tended to encourage action-based plots which focused on "physical rather than psychological conflicts," Smith speculated that Western writing had developed differently from the rest of American literature. "By preventing the absorption of the West as a literary theme into the growing

[82] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 7 October 1937, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 18.
[83] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 23 October 1937, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10.
[84] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 7 July 1938, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 36.

American realistic tradition," he argued, "special attitudes toward Western landscapes might tend to establish a separate, non-realistic minor tradition for literature dealing with the region." Merk was happy with it, deeming it "an excellent paper," and Jones was equally satisfied with this "excellent analytical study."[85]

After he passed his qualifying exams, Smith began to prepare his prospectus. But before he submitted an outline to Jones, he turned to Chapman for input. "When I get my wits together I'll send you a sketch plan of the dissertation, and ask you to carve it over as ruthlessly as possible," he announced to his friend. "Now is the time to avoid getting into blind alleys."[86] A few weeks later, he sent him a long letter describing what he thought his dissertation would be on. It started with a quote from Alexis de Tocqueville describing a strange dynamic the Frenchman had observed during his time in the States. "I readily admit that the Americans have no poets," Tocqueville had written, repeating a commonplace notion about the new nation's supposed lack of refinement and culture. But unlike other visitors to North America who had made similar comments, he had qualified his remarks: "I cannot allow that they have no poetic ideas." Americans may lack the usual adornments of culture, Tocqueville had argued, but this did not mean that they had no poetic vision of their existence. While few things were as "anti-poetic" as the lives of many Americans, who spent their days "drying swamps" and "peopling solitudes," these Americans still had poetic vision of themselves that seemed "to haunt every one of them in his least as well as his most important actions." With Tocqueville as his starting point, Smith tried to formulate the question he wanted his thesis to answer: "What was the nature of

[85] Henry Nash Smith, "The Far West in Two American Literary Magazines, 1870-1879," 7 May 1938, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 21.
[86] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 7 February 1939, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.

this unwritten poem which existed in the minds of Americans, in its specific (and perhaps later) reference to the Plains and the Rockies?"[87]

It was this idea of an unwritten yet collective national epic that caught Smith's attention and left him excited. He was especially interested in the methodological implications of following through on this project. How was it possible to read a text that had never been written? "The thing must have been a shared representation," he assumed, "and it must have cropped out in fragments—letters, conversations, chance passages in books." He would not try to reconstruct this text on the basis of literary masterpieces, since "there weren't any," but by exploring "the group mind," a phrase whose awkwardness he became aware of as soon as he put it on paper. "I should never use the term," he reassured Chapman. It was a big project, and he wondered how much research he could realistically do. He would have to go through at least a dozen nineteenth-century magazines, plus newspapers and books. He already had note cards "for about a hundred works of fiction before 1850," and an equal amount for other kinds of material. "I should like very much to know what you think of the whole idea," he wrote Chapman. "No one here can help me very much because no one knows very much about the problem." He had not talked to Jones about it so far, but he knew that he would have to get started sooner rather than later. "Perhaps I could wait to hear what occurs to you in this connection."[88]

Chapman approved of the plan and Smith later sent Jones an expanded version of the prospectus. The degree regulations stipulated that a candidate had to submit his thesis "not later than March 15 of the year in which he hopes to receive the degree."[89] Jones approved the project

[87] The discussion of this dissertation project is included in Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 16 April 1939, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11. The quotation is from Tocqueville's musings on the sources of poetry in democratic societies, from chapter seventeen of the second volume of *Democracy in America*. For a widely available modern edition, see Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), 554-60.
[88] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 16 April 1939, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.
[89] "Regulations for the Degree in the History of American Civilization," Aaron Papers (Harvard).

at the end of the 1939 spring term, and this left Smith with less than a year to produce a passable typescript. Now with not just a wife but also a son to support, he was eager to get his degree and find full-time employment. Having moved past "the original fumbling" of devising the project, he slowly began going over the hundreds of sources he wanted to cover.[90] "I have been plugging away in the library but have not had any divine revelations yet," he reported early on in the process. "There are a hell of a lot of books to read: I can testify to that."[91] It was not until June that he finally began to feel sure of his footing, when a brief and "almost dreamlike" visit to Texas gave him a burst of ideas. Once he had recovered from "sitting up two nights on the coach" on his return trip to Boston, he began to make tangible progress.[92] "I got many good ideas about what to do with my thesis, and since I came back I have been reading steadily."[93] Smith had concluded his prospectus by posing a number of questions: was the project important enough to justify doing? Did it have sufficient coherence? "Can the job conceivably be finished by next spring?"[94] For the first time he felt that he would be able to complete it on time.

But this did not mean it would be an enjoyable process. The closer he came to the deadline, the more he began to loathe the drudgery involved in his work. "At the moment I wonder how anyone ever got a thesis in shape without attaining bibliographical omniscience," he complained to Chapman, whom he kept updated on what he was writing.[95] He was frustrated by the need to rush through his research, and he discovered that "thesis jargon" was the result of not having time to follow promising leads and revise clumsy syntax. "You just try to frame timid generalizations that don't go beyond the evidence you happen to have in your notes, so you

[90] Henry Nash Smith to Jerry Bywaters, 16 April 1939, Bywaters Collection, Box 41.
[91] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, undated, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[92] Henry Nash Smith to Jerry Bywaters, 8 June 1939, Bywaters Collection, Box 41.
[93] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 16 July 1939, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.
[94] Henry Nash Smith, "Tentative Outline of a Dissertation to be called The Virgin Land: American Attitudes toward the Far West, 1803-1843," Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[95] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 8 November 1939, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.

won't have to stop and go to the library and find new evidence for a broader statement."[96] His wife helped him type up his handwritten pages, and Smith reported that their "little production belt" moved along without any problems. In the final weeks before he submitted the thesis, he came to think of it as his "400 page monster of dullness," and he could hardly wait for it to be done.[97] As he wrote Chapman during the final stage of the project: "Your letter reminds me of a world where people can sit down and talk about Thomas Mann without having to check the footnotes, and this seems to me a fair blueprint for the ideal society."[98]

The thesis he ended up writing did not reconstruct the fugitive epic he had set out to find. It was first and foremost a vastly expanded version of the paper he had written for Merk, discussing in detail how the West and its inhabitants had been portrayed in various texts during the first half of the nineteenth century. It described how the region had been seen as both an American desert and an American Eden, how the presence of Native Americans had spurred theories of primitivism and civilizational health, and how the mountain men of the Rockies had slowly become acceptable character types in American writing. "American Emotional and Imaginative Attitudes Toward the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, 1803-1850," as Smith titled his work, was replete with quotations and footnotes, but it did not present the type of overarching analysis he had promised in his earlier outline. Deeply researched, it argued by the simple accumulation of evidence, handing its readers large amounts of historical data that was mostly left to speak for itself. And yet it contained a kernel of insight around which Smith's later book would take shape. "The main thing I have demonstrated is that practically no one really looked at the West," Smith wrote to McGinnis, emphasizing how much the perceptions of

[96] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 19 January 1940, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 38.
[97] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 20 January 1940, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 12
[98] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 20 January 1940, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 12.

Americans who had written about the frontier had been shaped by "an intricate interplay of wishful dream and reported fact."[99] On March 15, 1940, Smith put two copies of his "enormous and ill-digested manuscript" in a suitcase and carried it through pouring rain and packed snow to Murdock's office, where a secretary accepted it on the professor's behalf.[100] Relieved that he had finished the dissertation on time, Smith had no way of knowing that it would take another ten years before his manuscript would make its way into print, and that by then he would be living in another place with long winters and no shortage of snow.

IV

By the time Smith submitted his thesis, he had already received an invitation from SMU, where his old colleagues had managed to secure a position for him, despite his earlier troubles. After three years on a meagre graduate stipend, he needed the money, and the opportunity to teach summer courses that year was hard for him to turn down. His diploma in hand and the Faulkner affair eight years behind him, he looked forward to seeing his friends and colleagues again, and his wife did not object to the plan. Throughout his three years in Cambridge, Dallas had never been far from his mind, and aside from the collections in Widener Library, he had seen little at Harvard that had spurred his desire to stay in the Northeast. "I feel a little maladjusted here among the Methodists but I know I'm not a New Englander," he would describe his feelings the following year.[101] With his thesis submitted, Smith spent a couple of weeks preparing for his oral defense, and once this was behind him, he set out on his journey back to the Southwest. Never

[99] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 16 March 1940, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 38; Henry Nash Smith, "American Emotional and Imaginative Attitudes Toward the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, 1803-1850," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1940, 15-16.
[100] Henry Nash Smith to Jerry Bywaters, 16 March 1940, Bywaters Collection, Box 41.
[101] Henry Nash Smith to Frank Dobie, 7 February 1941, Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5.

having seen the Rocky Mountains himself, and with his mother-in-law living in Boise, they made a detour to Idaho on their way back to Texas. By the time they got to Wyoming, in the middle of June, they read in the papers that Paris had fallen and France was about to surrender.[102]

In the past, Smith had approached politics with the irony common to young intellectuals of his generation, whose revolt against the "booboisie," as Mencken had called it, was often concerned more with questions of taste and aesthetics than with legislation or votes. As a creature of the academy, he had been shielded from the worst parts of the Depression, though he had been aware of its effects on the rest of the country. From outside of Abilene, Chapman had written him about the farmers he was treating, who were "completely broke for the most part" and offered him foodstuffs or personal items in exchange for medical care.[103] During his time in Boston, Smith had noted the animosity there towards Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was "violently booed" when he appeared on cinema newsreels. He had thought of this as "frankly a class sentiment," and it stood in sharp contrast with his academic surroundings, where most of the people he knew were "at least as far left as FDR."[104] There was much political agitation at Harvard in the late 1930s, over both domestic and international issues, but with a family to support and financial obligations to meet, Smith had not had the time for politics his unmarried friends seemed to possess. He had gone to meetings of the Teacher's Union, a hotbed of political debate at the time, but otherwise confined himself the role of the discerning observer. What had struck him most about Harvard was its relative indifference to the ebb and flow of events: "Harvard is so civilized that no outer influence whatever can have any effect on it."[105]

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[102] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 18 August 1940, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[103] John Chapman to Henry Nash Smith, 13 September 1934, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 6.
[104] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 16 July 1938, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11; Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 9 June 1938, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.
[105] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 13 March 1938, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.

But even from the seclusion of Widener Library, Smith had seen the straws in the wind. In March 1938, just when Merk was discussing the lead-up to the Civil War in his class, German troops had marched into Austria. While Chapman had tried to remain optimistic, refusing to believe that "Hitler and Mussolini are to remain forever unchecked and unchallenged," Smith had taken a stoic view of the matter, wondering if it was necessary to accept "some sort of cyclic theory" to explain the constant reappearance of conflicts and wars.[106] Now, on his way back to Dallas, he was determined to continue the type of work that Harvard had allowed him to do. "I'd prefer something American," he had written in regard to his teaching during the summer, and he later ruled out any position in "straight history" if it would mean doing "the History 1 sort of thing."[107] He was also eager to turn his dissertation into a book. "I naturally do not imagine that *The Virgin Land* will supplant Parrington," he acknowledged, "but I do feel a profound need to do something toward rewriting it before the material slips into the back of my mind."[108] When he received an offer from the University of Texas the following year, he was willing to accept it in part because the library in Austin was "magnificent in American history," and he considered the opportunity to make progress on his manuscript worth the stress of having to move yet again.[109] "Don't neglect that book on the West," Jones urged him from Cambridge, and Smith tried his best to heed his advice.[110]

By the time he received this message from Jones, however, it had become clear that this would not be easy to do. Four months earlier, the Japanese had attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, and whatever forebodings Smith had felt in 1938 had materialized the following

[106] John Chapman to Henry Nash Smith, 13 April 1938, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11; Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 13 March 1938, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.
[107] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 26 March 1940, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 36; Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 18 August 1940, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[108] Henry Nash Smith to John H. McGinnis, 16 March 1940, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 38.
[109] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 18 August 1940, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[110] Howard Mumford Jones to Henry Nash Smith, 14 March 1942, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 2.

day, when the United States officially entered the war. Although the German victory over France had profoundly disturbed him, Smith felt ambivalent about the possibility of the United States intervening in Europe. He doubted the wisdom of trying "to keep the British Empire together for all time to come," and he stood by his reluctant isolationism even though it marked him as a dissenter.[111] Refusing to sign a petition advocating unlimited aid to Great Britain, he was seen with the same suspicion as his "Mussolini-admirer colleague and an emotional theological pacifist and a man who married a violent Nazi German wife in 1935."[112] When the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, his reaction was measured. He considered it the logical endpoint of Japan's foreign policy, just as he thought the "alignment of Stalin Churchill FDR" was final proof that any attempt to interpret "international cleavages on the basis of class distinctions" was naïve and mistaken. In his view, the war was driven by "old-fashioned nationalism" more than anything else. Although he was "committed to the war as the lesser of evils," he took a dim view of where it would lead the world and his country. "Axis imperialism" or "British-Russian-American imperialism" were the only two outcomes he could envision, and he did not feel good about either. "Naturally I prefer the latter but I am not under the impression that it is either democratic or Utopian," he admitted to Chapman.[113]

Smith spent the war years in Austin, where his appointment placed him with one foot in the Department of History and the other in English. He taught courses on social history, American literature, and the history of ideas. It was "formidable but fun," and he was excited about the university's plans to create a graduate program similar to the one he had gone through at Harvard.[114] At first, daily life in Texas was not much affected by "by fall of Singapore and the

[111] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 30 September 1940, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[112] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 16 February 1941, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[113] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 21 December 1941, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 13.
[114] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 19 August 1942, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 13.

siege of Tobruk," and when the war eventually did make itself felt, it was mainly by way of restrictions on gas.[115] "We shall have to start walking or riding the bus," Smith feared, explaining to a friend the state's dependence on cars.[116] For a little over two years, he lived in relative uncertainty about his immediate future. He was sure that he would be drafted sooner or later, and there was a certain degree of satisfaction he received from this prospect, thinking that "it would be a kind of amputation to be left entirely out of the basic experience of the century."[117] Chapman had his doubts about this. His experience on the draft board told him that Smith would not enjoy life in the Army. "With all due regard to your undoubtedly excellent state of preservation," he candidly wrote him, "you're just not the type for a fox-hole."[118] The Army seemed to agree, and when Smith was called up for his pre-induction exam in early 1944, he was classified 4F and found unfit for service. He never learned the reason for his dismissal, though he suspected it was "a combination of bad teeth, bad eyes, and a sedentary temperament."[119]

While his wartime experience remained "extremely civilian," he soon discovered that life on the home front came with its own kind of battles.[120] Professionally, the war increased his teaching requirements and effectively prevented him from doing any significant work on his book. "I'm up to the ears in reading lists and outlines," he lamented during his first year in Austin, where he had to design and teach three completely new courses.[121] Then, in the fall of 1942, the Board of Regents added a full year of American history to the university's graduation requirements. As a result, Smith's classes were "swamped with students who are often sullen and

[115] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, undated, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 13.
[116] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 8 May 1943, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[117] Henry Nash Smith to Frank Dobie, 8 January 1944, Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5.
[118] John Chapman to Henry Nash Smith, 9 January 1944, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 14.
[119] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 27 April 1944, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[120] "American Civilization News," No. 5, April 1946, Harvard University Archives.
[121] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 19 August 1942, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 13.

thus not very pleasant to work with."[122] With over a hundred students now in his undergraduate courses, plus graduate students to supervise and examine, the fuel rationing began to look like a blessing. "The gasoline shortage keeps us at home all the time and we don't do much except work."[123] After the war, it seemed to him that he had spent the previous years "trying to meet the month's grocery bills," and he acknowledged that his thesis still looked much like it had in 1940. "I have made a few half-hearted passes at the standard maneuver of rewriting my thesis, with no visible results." He had written a number of reviews and contributed three chapters to a different book project, and this added up to "a hundred and fifty pages, more or less," out of which he was happy with about thirty.[124] "I can fully understand the emotions of a department chairman who wonders whether Smith is a 'productive scholar,'" he acknowledged.[125]

The war also hardened Smith's cynicism about the supremacy of commerce in American life, and the way that patriotism was utilized to serve its agenda. Back in Dallas after his trip through the Rockies, he noticed the local excitement about the expected influx of federal money. Texas weather was ideal for aviation, and the airplane factories under construction would bring thousands of jobs to the region. "The Chamber of Commerce is in raptures," he scoffed, while he considered it "just as nasty as it could be" that the war was being used to loosen restrictions on wages and hours so that new facilities could be built with maximum speed.[126] He felt pessimistic about the prospects of workers and feared that the Wagner Act would soon be repealed. The general atmosphere in Dallas struck him as almost comically paranoid and defensive. A popular restaurant in the city, the Italian Village, had removed the first part of its name, and there were

[122] Henry Nash Smith to Frederick Merk, 24 February 1944, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.
[123] Henry Nash Smith to Frank Dobie, 11 March 1944, Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5.
[124] Henry Nash Smith to Henry F. May, 16 February 1946, May Papers, Box 6, Folder 1.
[125] Henry Nash Smith to Henry F. May, 26 June 1946, Smith Papers, Box 4, Folder 17.
[126] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 30 September 1940, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329; Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 18 August 1940, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.

rumors about FBI agents listening "for any fifth-column talk."[127] As he explained to a Harvard friend who had never been to the Southwest: "Anything in New England is wildly radical beside Dallas, except Somerville. Even Brookline is radical beside Dallas"[128] He was particularly irked when a Constitution Day celebration turned into a display of jingoism because Martin Dies announced that he would attend the event. On hearing the news, the organizers threw out their original program and made the congressman, who at the time chaired the precursor of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the guest of honor. "Every high-school ROTC cadet was ordered out, all the national guard, and so on—a parade a mile long of men in uniform," Smith reported with open distaste. "And 'Americanism' filled the air."[129]

During his first months back in Texas, he observed all this from a distance. But within less than two years, he became involved in an academic skirmish that made national news. And unlike the Faulkner affair a decade before, this time there was no quick victory for the cause he supported. In 1941, when he began teaching at the University of Texas, tensions were beginning to grow between the university's liberal president, Homer P. Rainey, and the conservative Board of Regents, which put pressure on him to rein in faculty members who spoke out for the New Deal. The following year, the regents terminated a number of untenured economics professors who had protested an anti-union event, and that year also marked the first appearance of an issue that would eventually cost Rainey his job and make Smith leave Texas once and for all. A committee of English professors had included *The Big Money* (1936) by John Dos Passos on the syllabus of a new course, and when a student complained about the book as being unfit for academic discussion, the instructors were criticized for choosing the novel. Some administrators

[127] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 16 February 1941, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[128] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 30 September 1940, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[129] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 30 September 1940, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.

and faculty members objected to the work as being obscene, with some calling it "smut," but Smith thought that the issue was at bottom a political one. "This book has some four-letter words in it," he acknowledged, but what really seemed to upset some of his colleagues was its attempt to portray "the degeneration of American society in the days of the Coolidge boom." He feared the issue might signal a "reactionary purging of the curriculum," and he thought it was important to defend the pedagogical autonomy of faculty members, especially during times of national crisis. "It won't do to take everything like this lying down."[130]

The controversy over *The Big Money* was simply the most visible issue that roiled the University of Texas during the war. Rainey had already displeased the regents before, when he had protested the weakening of tenure and the termination of funding for research. He considered the attempt to ban Dos Passos's novel a witch hunt, and when he voiced his grievances during a faculty meeting in 1944, the regents fired him in an all-but-unanimous vote. What followed were strikes, protests, and censure of the university by a range of local and national organizations. Smith had been enormously impressed with Rainey, considering him "a man you can trust and a man who will fight for what he thinks is right," and within a short time, he became deeply involved in the quarrel.[131] Chairing committees, attending meetings, and writing pamphlets, his days were soon filled with an endless array of organizational tasks, none of which had much to do with his teaching or research. Still, he considered it worth the effort, even though attempts to calm the tensions by and large failed and the situation only seemed to get worse. "No criminal lawyer ever packed a jury to free a cow thief as this governor has packed the Board of Regents," Dobie groused in the wake of Rainey's dismissal. "Thugs run the educational system from top to

[130] Henry Nash Smith to Frank Dobie, 18 December 1942, Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5.
[131] Henry Nash Smith to Frank Dobie, 18 December 1942, Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5.

bottom now. We are as uncivilized as Mississippi."[132] As he saw it, the University of Texas had become a place "where a sensitive and intelligent man can't do much but butt his head against stone walls."[133]

With no end of the problems in sight, Smith decided to escape from the chaos in Austin when the opportunity presented itself. In 1945, he returned to Harvard to replace Perry Miller, who was on leave for a year. The following fall, he moved to California, where a fellowship at the Huntington Library allowed him to work in the institution's extensive collections of Western Americana. When it became clear that the situation in Texas was unlikely to change for the better, he began to consider resigning from his position. His role in the quarrel had become increasingly public, and he found it difficult to imagine what a return to the Southwest would entail. With almost no hope of being able to effect positive change, he decided to accept an offer from the University of Minnesota, whose local proponent of American Studies, Tremaine McDowell, had communicated to him that they would be interested in having him there. "I make the change without enthusiasm and after prolonged debate with myself," he told Dobie once he had decided to leave.[134] When he resigned, he sent an open letter explaining that he was "in complete disagreement" with the university's administration, and that he expected the continuing quarrels to leave him little time for his actual work as a teacher and writer. As he had painfully learned, he could not get on with his work "when every week brought some new crisis, some insult to the faculty to be confronted, some administrative action or pronouncement that must not be allowed to grow unchallenged into a precedent."[135]

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[132] Frank Dobie to Henry Steele Commager, 14 January 1946, Commager Papers, Box 17, Folder 78.
[133] Frank Dobie to Henry Nash Smith, 19 January 1947, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 10.
[134] Henry Nash Smith to Frank Dobie, 15 January 1947, Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5.
[135] Henry Nash Smith, letter to the editor of the *Daily Texan*, undated, Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5.

V

For a long time, Smith had harbored doubts about Minnesota. "It doesn't have enough spring in it," Dobie had warned him. "The winters are too long, and the people are too substantial."[136] When Joseph Warren Beach had extended the job offer to him, he had stressed that "American Studies are fostered" at the university, and he assumed that Smith would find the campus a congenial place for his work. "The general spirit of the place is liberal," he had assured him.[137] After living in California, Texas, and Massachusetts, Smith found the Midwest surprisingly foreign and strange, and it was only after asking friends for advice that he accepted the offer. The Smiths arrived in Minneapolis in September 1947 and settled into an apartment owned by the university, on the agricultural campus adjacent to an experimental farm used for research. "We have trees and grass and a pasture to see out of our windows," he was happy to report, and he did not mind the smell of manure that his son brought into the house when he returned from the dairy barn on Saturday mornings. "Of course the university is a mad-house but all universities are now," he informed Dobie after seeing that over two hundred students had signed up for his class.[138] When the first blizzard arrived by the third week of November, he tried to take it in stride, joking that he would probably have to acquire "a half-wild Alaskan sled-dog" sooner or later.[139]

Over the following twenty-eight months, Smith managed to do what he had failed to accomplish during the past seven years. At Minnesota, he finally found the conditions that would enable him to produce the book he had been meaning to write. He had begun serious work on the project during his time at the Huntington—"that Utopia of everybody's dreams, a University

[136] Frank Dobie to Henry Nash Smith, 10 December 1946, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 10.
[137] Joseph Warren Beach to Henry Nash Smith, 23 November 1946, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 6.
[138] Henry Nash Smith to Frank Dobie, 29 September 1947, Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5.
[139] Henry Nash Smith to Jerry Bywaters, 21 November 1947, Bywaters Collection, Box 41.

with no students"—but it was only in Minneapolis that he found the time and energy to see his manuscript into print.[140] But even before that, in unpublished form, his dissertation had become a reference point for other historians. After submitting his thesis, had Smith joked that it made him nervous to have a copy of it in the library stacks, wondering whether he should "try to sneak it out" the next time he was back in the Northeast.[141] Had he actually done so, he would not have received an admiring letter from Bernard DeVoto in the spring of 1945. In April that year, the essayist and historian had thanked him for the "too little acknowledged pioneering" his dissertation had done. "It has been in my Widener study for some months, and I am using it as the Bible of part of my job."[142] Gratified and humbled that DeVoto had made his way through "that laborious effort," he had told him about his plans to write "some kind of book on the West in Nineteenth-Century American Thought," and DeVoto's reply had lifted his spirits during his struggles in Austin. "I don't know any book that is more needed than the one you contemplate writing."[143]

By the time he arrived in the Twin Cities, Smith had finished about half of his work, and he planned on sending 70,000 words to Little, Brown "to find out whether it is by any possibility a trade book."[144] Nothing came of that attempt, and the following spring he mailed a typescript to Houghton Mifflin, together with an apology for its "somewhat untidy physical appearance." His grant from the university had required him to employ students as typists, and the ones available had not been "very finished workmen."[145] After keeping the text for several months, he received a long letter with advice for revisions, which together would have amounted to a "virtual

[140] Henry Nash Smith to Jerry Bywaters, 13 March 1947, Bywaters Collection, Box 41.
[141] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 16 February 1941, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[142] Bernard DeVoto to Henry Nash Smith, 13 April 1945, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 9.
[143] Henry Nash Smith to Bernard DeVoto, 26 April 1945, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 9.
[144] Henry Nash Smith to J. Frank Dobie, 25 March 1947, Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5.
[145] Henry Nash Smith to Paul Brooks, 4 April 1948, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 17.

rewriting" of what he had put down on paper so far. Next he approached Knopf, which suggested less drastic revisions but ultimately rejected the book after giving it some consideration. By November 1948, he could only report that his attempts at finding a publisher had "stalled again," and he stopped worrying about who would publish the work, as long as it got into print "with reasonable speed." At the suggestion of Miller and Jones, he began "a flirtation" with Harvard University Press, and in case this would also end up in failure, he would next approach the university presses at Minnesota and Oklahoma. "It seems a very bad time to get a book published," he thought.[146] By April 1949, Harvard had accepted the work, with publication scheduled for early the following year. Smith was pleased and relieved, and he was looking forward to having the text off his desk. "The last going-over a couple of months ago convinced me the MS stinks," he wrote to a friend. "I am heartily tired of it."[147]

The eventual title of the book emerged from a process of friendly negotiation between author and press. The prospectus from 1939 had referred to the project as "The Virgin Land: American Attitudes Toward the Far West, 1803-1843." Although his dissertation had ended up bearing a purely descriptive title, Smith was fond of the earlier phrase, and he planned on using it for his eventual book. In 1944, he had still referred to it as "The Virgin Land," while by 1948, it had become "Virgin Land: The Impact of the West on Nineteenth-Century American Thought."[148] Smith did not object when his editor changed the "awfully long" subtitle, preferring "The American West as Image and Idea" instead.[149] The similarity to Philip Rahv's *Image and Idea* (1949), which had just appeared, did not seem to concern the press. "As I remember the

[146] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 23 November 1948, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 3.
[147] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 19 April 1949, Aaron Papers, Folder 329.
[148] Henry Nash Smith to J. Frank Dobie, 11 March 1944, Dobie Papers, Box 167, Folder 5; Henry Nash Smith to Clarence Gohdes, 18 August 1948, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 23.
[149] Thomas J. Wilson to Henry Nash Smith, 23 September 1949, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 17.

reviews and judging from what I know of Rahv, the two books will appeal to quite different markets," his editor wrote him.[150] Smith was a little more doubtful, and during the proofreading process, he brought up the matter once more. One of his friends had also noticed the similarity to Rahv's book and suggested "The American West as Symbol and Myth" instead. Smith submitted this title for consideration, and the press ended up using it for the book.[151]

On the surface, *Virgin Land* was a straightforward examination of how the West had shaped American thought, especially as it had expressed itself in literature and popular culture. The book described how during the early republic, when little was known about the western half of the continent, the unknown terrain had inspired politicians and entrepreneurs to dream of finding a "Passage to India," a pathway to the lucrative trade with the Cathay and Macao. Later, when vague expectations were supplanted by discovery and exploration, it had spurred the literary imagination of dime novel writers, who turned it into a theater for adventure and action. By the nineteenth century's end, when the mountain man had made place for the farmer, the West had suggested itself as an agrarian Eden, shaped by the Homestead Act and imbued with hopes for the future health of the nation. The book ended with a discussion of Frederick Jackson Turner, the great theorist of the frontier, who was discussed not as an observer standing outside the West's emotional pull, but as merely one among many propagandists and dreamers whose imaginations had been captured by the land between the Pacific coastline and the Great Plains.

That the book became more than just another monograph derived from another dissertation had much to do with Smith's methodological interests. Disregarding the boundaries between literary and subliterary, high and low, elite and popular, he drew on evidence that had not been seen in conjunction before. Canonical poems appeared next to political speeches,

[150] Thomas J. Wilson to Henry Nash Smith, 30 September 1949, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 17.
[151] Henry Nash Smith to Eleanor R. Dobson, 19 November 1949, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 17.

Thomas Jefferson was given no more space than Kit Carson, and the scribblings of travelers and traders were taken as serious as those of Whitman and Cooper. In one of the book's most famous parts, Smith analyzed the dime novels of Erastus Beadle, of which he had read almost a hundred during his time at the Huntington. He argued that these mass-produced texts, whose formulaic nature stripped writers of any opportunity for creative expression or original thought, made them ideal evidence for analyzing "the dream life of a vast inarticulate public."[152] In a sense, "Deadwood Dick" and "Hurricane Nell" answered his question from a decade before, when he had wondered how to access the unwritten epic that Tocqueville had glimpsed during his time in the States. More than the book's subject matter itself, it was Smith's creative use of such evidence that impressed his readers the most.

What also caught their attention was the main theme that emerged from the book's three hundred pages. For at least fifteen years, Smith had been fascinated with the difference between fiction and fact, between what people thought about things and how these things looked upon closer inspection. While still living in Dallas, he had written about the contrast between the idealized "horse culture" of Texas and the actual Texas of crowded hotels and large city churches.[153] At Harvard, when he had toyed with the idea of writing a thesis on the romance of the cattle range, what had interested him about this topic was the opportunity to discover "the modes of distortion" that helped transform the realities of cowboy life into the stuff of stories and tales.[154] Later, in his dissertation prospectus for Jones, he had explained that he would be searching for "collective representations, departing more or less drastically from the facts, of the Far West."[155] And in 1945, he had prepared a paper on "Daniel Boone and Kit Carson as

[152] Smith, *Virgin Land*, 92.
[153] Smith, "Standards versus Standardization," 257.
[154] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 9 December 1937, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 10.
[155] Smith, "Tentative Outline of a Dissertation to be called The Virgin Land," Aaron Papers (Harvard).

legendary symbols," a case study in how real people were transformed into abstractions that fit the tastes of popular culture. As he explained this idea in outline format: "Contrast between fact and imaginative versions shows drift of folk imagination."[156]

This difference between "fact" one the one hand and "folk imagination" on the other is what the subtitle of his book attempted to hint at. By writing about the American West "as symbol and myth," Smith suggested that the region was more than just an expanse of geography. It was also a canvas onto which people projected feelings, ideas, and dreams, many of which stood in stark contrast with the realities of life in the region. And when ideas and facts clashed, the facts did not always win. The mistaken notion that "rain follows the plow" had proven popular even though it had failed settlers again and again, just as the idealized vision of the family homestead had continued shaping policy despite the corporatization of farming. More often than not, Smith suggested, myth won out over experience, no matter the data or facts. And although this could lead to disastrous results, it did not necessarily have to. Sometimes, Americans following their mistaken beliefs created what they set out to find. "If the Americans could not cause more rain to fall," he explained, "they could build irrigation systems, and devise the techniques of dry farming: and these were, functionally, equivalent to increasing the rainfall." The myth that rain follows the plow, he explained, "was contrary to empirical possibility on the plains but it was true to the course of history."[157] This paradoxical dynamic is what Smith had in mind when he explained a myth's "essential truth despite its frequent failure to correspond to empirical fact."[158]

[156] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 25 October 1945, Aaron Papers, Folder 329.
[157] Smith, Virgin Land, 180.
[158] Henry Nash Smith to Kenneth MacLean, 26 May 1947, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 13.

Since the publication of *Virgin Land*, much has been made of Smith's use of the concepts of "symbol" and "myth." In the book's preface, he famously defined them as "larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing, namely an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image." Just as famously, he wrote that he was not interested in "whether such products of the imagination accurately reflect empirical fact," since "they exist on a different plane."[159] These were mere afterthoughts, and unlike many of the people who read him, Smith did not spend much time working them out. He had never been happy with the term "myth," finding it "somewhat pompous" and suspecting that it "may not be entirely accurate," but he was not sure what else to call it. "Up to now I have not been able to think of a better word."[160] His reading in anthropology and philosophy had been eclectic and scattered, and his ideas about collective behavior had been pieced together in conversations with friends like McGinnis and Chapman. From Henri Bergson he took the idea of "fabulation," of a human propensity for creating utilitarian fictions, while Hans Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of "As If"* (1925) provided him with a quasi-pragmatic view of the relationship between ideas and facts.[161] The "greatest of all delusions," Smith mused, was "the idea that truth is a correspondence between something someone might have in his mind and something outside his mind."[162] But while his philosophy of symbols and myths may have used foreign ingredients, it was otherwise entirely homemade: a makeshift concoction of ideas that had little to do with the leading scholarship of the day. Instead

[159] Smith, *Virgin Land*, v.
[160] Henry Nash Smith to A. Whitney Griswold, 26 May 1947, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 29.
[161] For the idea of "fabulation," see Henri Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (London: Macmillan, 1935). The inspiration for Smith's quasi-pragmatic philosophical views came from Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If": A System of the Theoretical, Practical, and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. C. K. Ogden (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925). Smith and Chapman discussed both books in their correspondence in the 1930s and early 1940s. See Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 28 June 1933, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 4; Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 20 January 1941, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 13.
[162] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 20 January 1941, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 13.

of reading William James or John Dewey, Smith relied on obscure works by thinkers who wrote in German or French. Instead of studying Ruth Benedict or Margaret Mead, he drew inspiration from folklorists he had known back in Texas. It was not until the late 1970s, when he encountered the "high-powered linguistic-anthropological-structuralist" scholarship of that era, that he recognized just how amateurish his own theorizing had been.[163] But no matter how crude or incoherent its method, his book spoke to its readers. And like the myths it examined, it may not always have reflected empirical fact, but it was too interesting not to engage with.

VI

Smith put the finishing touches on *Virgin Land* in December 1949. Over the previous weeks, he had spent his evenings at the house of a colleague, sitting at the kitchen table and going over the proofs of his book.[164] Compiling the index had been his "Christmas-Holiday diversion" that year.[165] This would be the last time for almost two decades that he seriously engaged with this text. Within less than three years, he received an offer from the University of California, and he accepted the opportunity to move from the Twin Cities to Berkeley. His position there required him to spend part of his time editing the Mark Twain papers, which the university had acquired in the late 1940s. His work from then on focused mostly on issues connected to Twain, and he devoted much of his time to refining the concept of a vernacular culture he thought the novelist had represented in his most famous books. While he continued to participate in debates surrounding American Studies, most of his scholarship from then on was more conventional and less adventurous than his first book had been. As he acknowledged to a colleague in 1972:

[163] Henry Nash Smith to Jerry Bywaters, 4 March 1978, Bywaters Collection, Box 41
[164] Leo Marx to Elinor Smith, 1 July 1986, Smith Papers, Box 4, Folder 14.
[165] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 7 January 1950, Aaron Papers, Folder 329.

"Since 1950 I have been working on other matters; I have not really carried on lines of inquiry opened up by that book."[166]

But while Smith may have moved on from his book, readers stayed with it for decades. The year after its publication, it won the Bancroft Prize from Columbia University. In 1956, it was included in a project financed by the Carnegie Corporation that sent recent American publications to institutions in Commonwealth countries.[167] In 1961, the director of the Guggenheim Foundation listed it as part of his "ten-dollar shelf," a list of book recommendations that readers could acquire for ten dollars or less.[168] A year later, C. Vann Woodward included it in his "fifteen-dollar shelf," alongside works on the Civil War and colonial New England.[169] In 1964, the host of *Pathfinders*, a program for National Education Television, planned on having an episode of the show dedicated to it.[170] In 1973, Smith received a letter from a graduate student at Yale, who credited his book with restoring her confidence in "imaginative scholarship," and who thanked him for taking her beyond "New Haven's petty irritations."[171] And in 1977, a college junior in Purchase, New York, informed him that his book had changed her career aspirations: "I'm thinking about graduate school, and your book helped to convince me that American Studies is my field."[172]

For the field of American Studies, *Virgin Land* did two things. On the one hand, its success gave international prominence to the conception of American Studies championed by

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[166] Henry Nash Smith to Michael Millgate, 12 January 1972, American Literature Section Papers, Box 11, Folder "Correspondence Pre Papers 1972."
[167] Thomas J. Wilson to Henry Nash Smith, 7 September 1956, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 17.
[168] "A Ten-Dollar Shelf," *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 January 1961.
[169] "For Fifteen Dollars: A Shelf of American History," *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 April 1963.
[170] See "Benjamin DeMott to Narrate New Educational TV Series," *Amherst* Student, 15 May 1964; Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 28 September 1964, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 22. The project fell through because, as Smith described it, "the Barry Goldwater organization had preempted use of the videotape recording truck" that the producers thought they had under lease.
[171] Patricia Nelson to Henry Nash Smith, 28 February 1973, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 17.
[172] Sarah Maupin Wenk to Henry Nash Smith, 7 November 1977, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 17.

academics like Jones, who envisioned it as a meeting ground between literary studies and history. While the book was not even finished, Jones had written McDowell that Smith was "by nature absolutely *right* for that combination of history and literature we are, so many of us, looking for."[173] And after its publication, this is what reviewers noticed about it, mentioning Smith's attempts to encompass the vision "of both the historian and the literary man," and praising him for successfully fusing "the stuff of political and social history with that of literature."[174] When Smith explained what he had tried to do in the book, he described it as an attempt to find "a satisfactory position halfway between that of the historian and that of the literary critic."[175] That American Studies came to be seen as a mixture of cultural history and literary studies was in large part the result of Smith's work, which gave the new field direction and provided it with a compelling example of what successful research could look like. None of the books written by other Americanists at the time—not even McDowell's programmatic *American Studies* from 1948— managed to capture the possibilities of the new field as well as Smith's revised dissertation. And none left as lasting an imprint on it.

In addition to cementing this particular vision of American Studies, the book provided the field with a research program for the next twenty years. After over a decade of work on his project, Smith knew all about the shortcomings of "the study of cultural images and symbols."[176] But for many readers who picked up the volume, his probing of the nation's ideological dream-life proved impossible to resist. Many of the classic books in the field were written by young academics who worked with Smith at Minnesota, and who together became known as the "myth-

[173] Howard Mumford Jones to Tremaine McDowell, 4 January 1945, American Studies Records (Minnesota), Box 2, Folder 28.
[174] Walter Prescott Webb, "How Old West Serves as Symbol of What American Past Means," *Dallas Morning News*, 2 April 1950; Laurence Passell to Henry Nash Smith, 3 February 1950, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 11.
[175] Henry Nash Smith to Walter Prescott Webb, 4 April 1950, Smith Papers, Carton 2, Folder 5.
[176] Henry Nash Smith to Walter Prescott Webb, 4 April 1950, Smith Papers, Carton 2, Folder 5.

and-symbol school" of American Studies. And for at least two decades, these two terms enjoyed wide circulation wherever Americanists gave lectures or talks. One of the first meetings of the Middle Atlantic American Studies Association was dedicated to "Myth and Symbol in American life."[177] A decade after his book had appeared, Smith was still being invited to give presentations on the "relation of myth to empirical fact."[178] And when the Smithsonian organized a conference on political history in 1965, part of it was dedicated to "political 'images' and symbols" and their use in election campaigns.[179] By 1970, this approach had become so overused that even Jones had grown tired of it. Asked whether he would review a new book on the West, he replied that he would only do so if it was not another work of the "myth-symbol-O-God-the-Americans-lost-their-Edenic-innocence school."[180]

But Jones need not have worried. While *Virgin Land* had never been without critics, the number of academics who found the book problematic grew rapidly from 1970 onward.[181] And since other books had been so closely modeled on its style and approach, a whole generation of scholarship came under suspicion. Critics found the book impressionistic, undertheorized, and methodologically crude, and "myth-and-symbol" scholarship as a whole, with its focus on the experience of white male elites, became an example of generational blindness to the realities of American life. As Ann Fabian recalls, by the late 1970s the phrase had become little more than "a shorthand for a collection of errors."[182] To many of the Americanists who had followed the

[177] Louis D. Rubin to Edward N. Waters, 10 March 1955, ASA Records, Box 111, Folder 15.
[178] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 30 September 1960, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 19.
[179] Wilcomb W. Washburn to Daniel J. Boorstin, 17 December 1965, Boorstin Papers, Box 61, Folder 7.
[180] Howard Mumford Jones to Arlin Turner, 28 February 1970, American Literature Papers, Box 8, Folder "Jones, Howard Mumford, 1928-1970."
[181] For an early methodological critique, see Barry Marks, "The Concept of Myth in *Virgin Land*," *American Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1953): 71-76. For the most influential critique of both Smith's book and "myth-and-symbol" scholarship as a whole, see Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1972): 435-50.
[182] Ann Fabian, "Back to *Virgin Land*," *Reviews in American History* 24, no. 3 (1996): 542.

rise of this type of scholarship, such critiques did not come as a total surprise. Jones, for example, had always known that Smith's book was not particularly strong history, and he valued it mainly for its "imaginative insight."[183] Henry May, Smith's colleague at Berkeley, simply regarded its arguments as "brilliant suggestions with much truth about them, rather than as demonstrated theorems."[184] And Smith himself had always acknowledged that his book had methodological problems, conceding that he could "hope at most to be suggestive."[185] In fact, from 1972 onward, he would become one of his own harshest critics, revisiting his earlier work in a series of lectures and essays that ensured its relevance even after it had outlived its value as research. Like many scholarly classics, Smith's book had two lives: one as an example to be admired and copied, the other as a foil to be critiqued and avoided. But in this case, unlike in others, the author participated in both: first creating the work, then diagnosing its flaws. Both times, Smith left his imprint on American Studies, shaping it in ways he could have neither planned nor foreseen when he became the first person with a PhD in the field.

[183] Howard Mumford Jones to Wallace Stegner, 27 January 1974, Stegner Papers, Box 17, Folder 12.
[184] Henry May to Henry Nash Smith, 29 November 1962, Smith Papers, Box 4, Folder 19.
[185] Henry Nash Smith to George W. Pierson, 26 January 1950, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 15.

Chapter 2

American Studies and American Students

I

Several weeks of the fall semester had already passed when, in late September 1945, Leo Marx arrived back in Cambridge. It had been over three years since the last time he had crossed Harvard Yard and walked up the front steps of Widener Library, past the clusters of graduate students who would gather there to talk and smoke whenever they escaped from their desks in the stacks. Part of the last peacetime class to spend four years in college, Marx had graduated only months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, leaving the campus just as the war effort began to transform almost every aspect of university life. Like many of his close friends, he had done what he thought was expected of him: he had joined the Navy, married his girlfriend, and arranged for a honeymoon in San Francisco before beginning his assignment on a submarine chaser in the Pacific. Now, with the war having come to its sudden conclusion, he found himself at a crossroads. Should he remain in the Navy or become a civilian again? Everyone seemed to assume that the country was headed toward another recession, and with his wife expecting their first child in January, he dreaded the uncertainties of life outside the military's protective embrace. In college, Marx had belonged to a circle of students drawn to one of Harvard's less conventional professors of English, F. O. Matthiessen, an intense and charismatic man who was known across campus for his radical politics and his devout Christian faith. And it was Matthiessen whom he intended to see when he traveled to Boston from his naval base on Long Island. Sitting in the professor's office in Widener Library, he asked his

mentor for advice and direction. Should he stay in the Navy? Should he try to get into law school? Or should he do what had been on his mind all along: should he enroll in the graduate program in American Civilization he had heard so much about?[1]

As they were talking, Henry Nash Smith knocked on the door to the office. At Harvard for the year to substitute for Perry Miller, Matthiessen welcomed him in, and the three began talking about the decision Marx had to make. As the program's first graduate, Smith was a good person to ask for advice, and he could empathize with the situation the younger man found himself in. Matthiessen, a Rhodes scholar who had gone to graduate school over two decades before, had led a very different life from the one Marx was about to begin. A lifelong bachelor, Matthiessen had spent his adult years in a romantic relationship with another man, the painter Russell Cheney, the two of them dividing their time between an apartment on Beacon Hill and a summer home in Kittery, Maine. Matthiessen's passion lay in undergraduate teaching, especially in the one-on-one tutorial sessions he devoted much of his time to, and he had little to offer in the way of career advice or practical help. Smith, on the other hand, knew exactly what Marx was worried about. He had also become a father while in graduate school, and given the various positions he had held since leaving Harvard, he could speak from experience about the job prospects for students in American Civilization. Marx was concerned about money, housing, and childcare, and Smith was just the right person to reassure him about each of these issues. And by the time Marx was on his way back to Long Island, he was an important step closer to making a choice.[2]

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[1] Marx describes his first meeting with Smith in Leo Marx to Elinor Smith, 1 July 1986, Smith Papers, Box 4, Folder 14 as well as Leo Marx, "Henry Nash Smith," undated, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 3. For the custom of students gathering outside the library to smoke, see Henry F. May, "Contribution to HNS Memorial," undated, Smith Papers, Carton 1, Folder 3.

[2] For biographical information on Matthiessen, see Giles B. Gunn, *F. O. Matthiessen: The Critical Achievement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), Kenneth Lynn, "F. O. Matthiessen," *American Scholar* 46, no. 1 (1977): 86-93, Louis K. Hyde, ed., *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*

For the development of American Studies, few encounters were more consequential than the one between Smith and Marx that took place in Widener Library less than eight weeks after the end of the war. Although temperamentally different, the two men took to each other almost immediately, forming a friendship that lasted several decades and left a deep intellectual imprint on the field as a whole. Within days of enrolling in graduate school, Marx had signed up for one of Smith's classes, and he soon became one of his research assistants. When Marx received his degree, Smith helped him secure a job at Minnesota, where the two formed the core of the liberal faction of the university's English department. Although they taught together in Minneapolis for only a handful of years, they stayed in touch for the rest of their lives, exchanging thoughts and ideas in a steady stream of letters and phone calls. If Smith wrote the pieces that defined American Studies during the era of Eisenhower, Marx wrote those that shaped the field in the age of the counterculture, and neither would have been able to do so without the help of the other. Through publications, panel discussions, and conversations with colleagues, the two provided a living example of what an exciting and successful American Studies might look like. And in Marx's case, this became especially visible whenever he entered lecture halls or seminar rooms.

To an uncommon extent, Leo Marx was a creature of the college classroom. A quick thinker and talented speaker, he found it easy to impress his teachers and build rapport with his students. Over the course of his career, he became involved in some of the most influential attempts at bringing American Studies into the college classroom, and his experience both as a student and as a teacher sheds light on what happened when the ideal of studying American

(Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), William E. Cain, *F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), and Jay Grossman, "The Canon in the Closet: Matthiessen's Whitman, Whitman's Matthiessen," *American Literature* 70, no. 4 (1998): 799-832.

civilization met the reality of undergraduate students and curricular standards. At Harvard College in the late 1930s, he could observe the university's tentative forays into establishing American Studies at the undergraduate level. Later, as a professor at the University of Minnesota, he became part of one of the nation's largest and busiest programs in the new field. And from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, while teaching at Amherst College, he helped to reshape the school's famous "Problems in American Civilization" approach, which had influenced the teaching of American Studies in institutions all over the country. Over a period of three decades, Marx had a front-row seat to some of the most prominent attempts at bringing American Civilization to American students. From close up, he saw the hopes that his colleagues had for the field, the successes they celebrated, and the disappointments they suffered. And as an unusually popular teacher, he played a key role in these struggles, shaping not just what students thought of American Studies but also of themselves as Americans.

It is notoriously difficult to reconstruct how students experienced their time in the college classroom. What did they learn from the lectures they heard, the papers they wrote, and the examinations they took? When Samuel Eliot Morison prepared his history of Harvard College, just a few years before the university launched its American Civilization program, he noted that the undergraduate perspective was "the most difficult to recover," since it was "the least frequently recorded."[3] Three decades after Morison, Frederick Rudolph could still quip about "the neglect of students as a historical tradition," insinuating that more than just missing documentation was to blame for the lack of attention that scholars had paid to students as historical actors.[4] Since then, historians have done much to recover the experiences of college

[3] Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Development of Harvard University since the Inauguration of President Eliot, 1869-1929* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), xi.
[4] Frederick Rudolph, "Neglect of Students as a Historical Tradition," in *The College and the Student: An Assessment of Relationships and Responsibilities in Undergraduate Education by Administrators, Faculty Members, and Public*

students and to give them credit as social reformers, political players, and cultural tastemakers.[5] In the history of the disciplines, however, students are largely still on the sidelines, treated either as ornamentation or as relevant only once they left their classrooms to protest and strike.[6] Work on the history of American Studies rarely features students at all, despite the fact that the classroom was the main arena in which the field's ideological commitments and educational theories were put to the test. By overlooking the undergraduate classroom as a place in which disciplinary norms and practices were made and revised, historical accounts of the field have tended to simplify its impact on American education and American culture. Because college students did not have a professional investment in the success of the field, they were not afraid to

Officials, ed. Lawrence E. Dennis and Joseph F. Kauffman (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1966), 47-58.

[5] For the classic study of student life in American colleges, see Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). See also David F. Allmindinger, *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), Eileen Eagan, *Class, Culture and the Classroom: The Student Peace Movement in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), William Bruce Leslie, *Gentlemen and Scholars: College and Community in the "Age of the University," 1865-1917* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), Robert F. Pace, *Halls of Honor: College Men in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), Babette Faehmel, *College Women in the Nuclear Age: Cultural Literacy and Female Identity, 1940-1960* (Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), Andrea L. Turpin, *A New Moral Vision: Gender, Religion, and the Changing Purposes of American Higher Education, 1837-1917* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[6] To the extent that students are discussed in the history of the disciplines, it is in connection with academic programs that emerged out of the social upheavals of the 1960s. In this context, the scholarship is most developed in regard to the history of African American Studies. See, among others, Joy Ann Williamson, *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965-75* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), Noliwe M. Rooks, *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race and Higher Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), Wayne Glasker, *Black Students in the Ivory Tower: African American Student Activism at the University of Pennsylvania, 1967-1990* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), Stefan Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), and Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). In general, the lack of attention that the history of the disciplines has paid to students as significant actors can be seen in Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske, eds., *American Academic Culture in Transformation: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) as well as David A. Hollinger, ed., *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

point out its flaws and mock its pretensions, just as they had no reason to downplay how much it could affect their sense of themselves as Americans. Usually curious, often irreverent, and always concerned with their grades, students held a mirror up to the field, revealing to its adherents what it looked like from their point of view. And in doing so, they helped shape its appearance as much as did intellectual trends or institutional structures.

II

Like many of the students who entered Harvard's graduate program in American Civilization over the years, Leo Marx had been a student in the university's undergraduate concentration in History and Literature, and it was there that he first encountered the style of instruction that piqued his interest in American Studies. Created in 1906 as an alternative to the elective system, which had allowed Harvard students to obtain a degree by taking freely chosen combinations of courses, History and Literature created a structured education around the intellectual traditions of different cultures and historical periods. In addition to being Harvard's first attempt at creating an undergraduate major, it also introduced the university to the tutorial system, which combined independent reading with personal meetings between professors and students. By the late 1930s, when Marx began his college education, History and Literature had made a name for itself as one of the more exciting and demanding programs on campus. Limited to superior students and regarded as the university's "swank intellectual field," it had become a gathering place for those who were tired of studying merely political history or reading merely canonical texts.[7] Like the American Civilization program, History and Literature tried to make "a study of civilization" out of what had usually been an "inchoate mixture of material," and many students experienced this

[7] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 20 January 1940, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 12.

as a breath of fresh air. In their reviews of the classes they took, they applauded teachers who emphasized "the cultural background" in their courses while dismissing those whose teaching seemed to appeal merely to "the pedantic sort of future PhD men. As one reviewer described the atmosphere in the program at the time: "All courses which attempt to relate history and literature to the cultural and economic background of the time concerned are applauded."[8]

Within the program in History and Literature, the study of the United States was just one among many specializations that students could choose, and it was not until 1938, when Marx arrived as a freshman in Cambridge, that Harvard made its first attempt at establishing a dedicated curriculum in American Civilization at the undergraduate level. When this happened, however, the university's needs called for a particular kind of program. Over the previous two years, while the faculty had been preparing the graduate program, James Bryant Conant had tasked a committee with exploring ways of stimulating the study of American history among the student population more broadly. Conant was convinced that a knowledge of the American past was "of fundamental importance for any active-minded American citizen," and that to encourage the pursuit of such knowledge was part of the responsibilities an institution like Harvard had to the community to which it belonged. What he was less certain about was how to accomplish this goal without spending more money or requiring students to take additional courses. In the eyes of the committee, the solution to this dilemma lay in the creation of a strictly extracurricular program. With coursework as the main path to knowledge, studying their own country and its traditions was effectively limited to students concentrating in American history or American literature, shutting out those who had an interest in these subjects but no desire to make them their main focus of study. In this context, creating an informal program would give all students

[8] "Confidential Guide to Freshman Courses and Fields of Concentration," 1938, Harvard University Archives.

the opportunity to learn more about American civilization while at the same time enabling the university to broaden its mission. And it would accomplish both without enlarging the "existing machinery" of faculty and administration.[9]

Several months before the program officially started, the committee published the reading list that would be at the heart of the project. This small booklet quickly became the central reference point for the endeavor, providing the program with a direction as well as a tone. Meant as an introductory guide, the reading list stressed that its main purpose was not to be comprehensive but to show "the inter-relations of some of the aspects of the historical development of America." It explained that it was meant for students who did not concentrate in literature or in history, as well as for members of the general public "who feel the need for a wider knowledge of their national past." Organized into three sections, it contained introductory works, listed books on special topics, and made space for "thread" books that explored "strands of interest in the story of American development." The list included William Bradford and Emily Dickinson, Charles Beard and Carl Becker, Gilbert Seldes and Lewis Mumford, Ida Tarbell and Allan Nevins. Classic American fiction and recent scholarship were all part of what the committee considered worthwhile reading for amateur Americanists. "Almost any student," the booklet assured its readers, "can find something in this syllabus to deepen his insight and broaden his appreciation of the significance of life in his own country."[10]

At least as important as the reading list itself was the introductory essay that served as its preface. This piece, which echoed many of the ideas Howard Mumford Jones had championed over the years, explained the program's educational aims and hinted at its political bent. "The

[9] "A Report on the Possibilities for an Extra-Curricular Reading Course on the History of American Civilization," James Bryant Conant Records, Box 75, Folder "American Civilization Committee, 1936-1937."
[10] "Harvard Reading List in American History," June 1937, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 37, Folder 498.

Study of American Culture," as the essay was titled, started from the premise that Americans were a people uniquely ignorant of their past accomplishments and present importance. Although "hundreds of foreign observers" over the years had discovered in the United States "a culture and a civilization of present significance and profound importance for the future of the world," even the most cultivated Americans appeared uninformed or indifferent to the country's achievements. It seemed that educated Europeans were able "to converse familiarly about the statesmen, artists, and men of letters of their respective countries, and to discuss critically and intelligently new books that appear on their national history." But in the United States, people's knowledge of the American past tended to reach its height at graduation from high school, after which it only seemed to decline. Most Americans, the essay claimed, did not care about their statesmen and philosophers or their painters and writers. And those who did care were likely to compare them unfavorably to their counterparts from across the Atlantic.[11]

Because it considered the past crucial for understanding the present, the essay regarded this type of collective ignorance as not just unseemly but dangerous. "A longer stretch of time extends from the founding of Jamestown to the Declaration of Independence than extends from the Declaration of Independence to the present," the essay explained, "and during all these years formative influences were at work which went to make American civilization what it is today." Without understanding these influences, it argued, Americans were in danger of being misled by political salesmen peddling false solutions to difficult problems. Unless they understood "the genesis of the various abuses which afflict the country today," they would not be able to "choose intelligent means to rid themselves of these abuses." Even worse, lack of self-knowledge was likely to exacerbate the problems facing the nation, since it made Americans susceptible to

[11] "Harvard Reading List in American History."

"forms of propaganda which would have them conceive 'Americanism' in terms of class, party, sectional, racial, or religious affiliations." By contrast, closer familiarity with their own history would prevent them from making choices that could be described as radical or dogmatic. It would enable them to understand that "doctrinaire reformers do not always understand what they are reforming," and that well-meaning idealists often did not sufficiently appreciate "the stubbornness of human nature" and the weight of tradition. It would also help them recognize that "changes and reforms decried by conservatives as 'un-American' may be logical developments from ideas and practices as old as the Declaration of Independence, or older."[12]

In line with arguments Jones had made in other publications and speeches, the program presumed that American problems were in need of homegrown solutions, and that such solutions were by definition to be found in the political center. Raised in the Wisconsin of Robert LaFollette, Jones himself was no stranger to progressive political causes, and during his years teaching in Texas, Montana, and North Carolina, he had become involved in more than one struggle over the rights of migrant workers and mill girls. However, unlike his colleagues on the East Coast, who may have read *The New Masses* and been members of a John Reed Club, Jones never thought of himself as a radical. His goal was to provide students with "an impartial interpretation of American development," which he considered especially important during times of social and political strain, when the public was given "every variety of propagandistic and partial interpretations, varying from Marxist to the reactionary." He considered the American tradition "a tradition of intellectual liberalism," and he thought the greatest American thinkers had never succumbed to a "narrow patriotism" or given in to the "illiberal ideals of the pressure groups." If done correctly, he argued, the study of American culture would debunk the "many

[12] "Harvard Reading List in American History."

varieties of sham Americanism" that seemed to fill the airwaves and magazine pages, safely guiding students away from positions that he considered ideological or doctrinaire. It would serve as "a needed corrective to Marxian extremists, to shallow theories of American economic life, to chauvinism, and to other idols of the market place." Although the brochure's opening essay does not mention an author, Jones would have wholeheartedly agreed with its claim that "Franklin and Emerson still speak important things to the America of Faulkner and Henry Ford," and that what they had to say was antithetical to any type of "narrow-minded nationalism or chauvinism."[13]

Similar to how its doctoral program had started, Harvard's attempt at bringing American Civilization to its undergraduate body relied heavily on improvisation and experimentation. A gift from the wife of Charles Warren, a prominent Harvard alumnus, was sufficient to cover the program's operating costs for a period of up to five years, during which it underwent frequent adjustments and evaluations. The "experiment in the extracurricular study of American History," as Conant referred to it, was under the supervision of some of the university's best-known Americanists. Aside from Jones, the committee in charge of the program also included Murdock, Matthiessen, Morison, and Schlesinger. The counselors who were tasked with organizing activities and facilitating discussions were drawn mainly from the ranks of the university's graduate students. Henry Nash Smith became one of them, as did Daniel Aaron, Edmund Morgan, and Charles Olson. In public, Conant justified the program as an experiment in civic education, arguing that it was meant to disprove the idea that "the only road to knowledge lies in

[13] Jones described these educational goals, which closely resemble those laid out in the "Harvard Reading List in American History," in "Institute of American Culture," undated, Records of President James B. Conant, Box 56, Folder "English: Jones, 1935-36" as well as Howard Mumford Jones, "The Orphan Child of the Curriculum," *The English Journal* 25, no. 5 (1936): 376-88. For reflections on his personal politics, see Howard Mumford Jones to Daniel Aaron, 15 November 1961, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 29, Folder 378.

the formal instruction administered by a college or university."[14] But for the people who became personally involved in it, things were not always as clear. During a luncheon at his residence, the best Conant could do was explain "somewhat vaguely" how the program would accomplish its goals, leaving Smith and the other counselors with little practical guidance.[15] And people not involved in the effort could only guess at its function, usually imagining that it somehow tried to "explain the American tradition," as one newspaperman put it.[16]

From the beginning, the faculty organized the program in accordance with what they knew about the behavior of the typical undergraduate student, and oftentimes this meant tempering the idealism at the heart of the project with the lessons their own time in the classroom had taught them. In theory, the program would make a basic understanding of American culture "a common ground on which all Harvard graduates could meet intellectually," just as it would "encourage the forming of habits" which could be continued after graduation. In keeping with this ideal, it relied on the willingness of students to use their free time to read books and discuss them with friends. While the committee members supported this approach without reservations, they knew the motivational dynamics of student life well enough to acknowledge that successful voluntary work often needed concrete incentives. Long experience had taught them that "the spring of knowledge" needed to be "laced with the cognac of 'credit' in order to tempt the average undergraduate to drink." For that reason, they insisted that students who engaged in the program would be given the opportunity to gather prizes and win awards. Although the project was meant to be entirely extracurricular, the faculty knew that few students would be interested in participating if their exertions would not be acknowledged on their undergraduate records.[17]

[14] "History Course Open to the Public," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* (April 1937).
[15] Henry Nash Smith to John G. McGinnis, 4 October 1938, Maxwell Papers, Box 5, Folder 36.
[16] George Guernsey to Granville Hicks, 22 December 1938, Hicks Papers, Box 2, Folder "The American Teacher."
[17] "A Report on the Possibilities for an Extra-Curricular Reading Course on the History of American Civilization."

The "extracurricular program in American History," as the project was informally known, became an official part of the university's undergraduate offerings early in 1938, at the beginning of the academic year's second term. By that time, eight counsellors had been appointed, one of whom met with freshmen at the Harvard Union while the others organized groups in each of the seven residential houses the university reserved for its upperclassmen. Over the course of its first year in operation, the counsellors helped facilitate a variety of activities. They discussed books and ideas in weekly meetings, they invited Harvard faculty for informal discussions, and they arranged for guest speakers to give lectures and meet with their students. They also administered the exams for the William A. Bliss Prize and spent "considerable time and energy" revising and enlarging the reading list for the students[18]. In addition, they organized an exhibit with photographs from the Farm Settlement Administration and arranged for the documentary films to be screened, including *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and *The River.* Organizing all these activities, the counselors were supposed to always remember the guidelines that Jones had laid out early on: that the "spirit of the enterprise" was voluntary and there was no intention "to coerce students either to do the readings or to take courses in which they are not primarily interested."[19]

While the program's voluntary nature was meant to attract students, it initially presented a hurdle to its success. Partly, this was simply a matter of timing. When the program was finally introduced, many students had already committed their free time to other activities, and the prospect of additional obligations seemed to have sounded intimidating "to the student who already considered himself overburdened with work." While many freshmen were still flexible

[18] Daniel Aaron to Howard Mumford Jones, 17 March 1939, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 19, Folder 218.
[19] Howard Mumford Jones to Granville Hicks, 28 February 1938, Hicks Papers, Box 30, Folder "Jones, Howard Mumford."

with their time, the majority of upperclassmen had already filled their schedules with extracurricular house functions, and the counselors who worked with them found it difficult to introduce additional activities into their busy day-to-day lives. In addition, many of the older students were at first skeptical of the new plan, and it took the counselors time and effort to dispel suspicions that the program might after all be "a disguised form of compulsory study." However, despite these initial challenges, a sizable number of students became interested in the new program, and these students began to form the nucleus of the university's undergraduate activities in American Studies. All in all, about forty freshmen became involved with the effort at one time or another, plus occasional upperclassmen who participated in specific events that caught their attention.[20]

The most popular events organized in the context of the program were the Wednesday evening talks, and their success was at least in part the result of the informal atmosphere they managed to cloak themselves in. Faculty members invited to these occasions could speak on any topic they deemed important for a better understanding of American culture, and many chose subjects that students might have also encountered in their regular courses. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman received presentations, as did Frank Lloyd Wright and William James. Other topics included New England Puritanism, the history of the frontier, and the development of American political thought. But because the counselors believed that it was crucial to offset the notion that the program was merely "another rigid course of instruction," the talks were conducted in as informal a manner as possible. For that reason, the speakers always had dinner with the students before their presentations and stayed for a discussion afterward. This proved to be a successful formula for attracting participants, both for the Wednesday

[20] Daniel Aaron to Howard Mumford Jones, 17 March 1939.

evening talks and for other events. Wherever there was an opportunity for relaxed interaction with professors or graduate tutors, student interest seemed to be especially strong. Indeed, that freshmen dominated the program during its first year in operation was only partly the result of their relative lack of extracurricular obligations: just as important was the fact that the atmosphere in the Harvard Union, where they had their meetings, was less formal and stuffy than it tended to be in the different houses.[21]

While the program opened its doors to anyone interested in American culture, in practice it tended to attract undergraduate students of a particular type. Over the years, many professors had discovered that students who had gone to public high schools tended to know more about American history than students from "Anglophile eastern prep schools," where "a certain snobbiness towards American culture" still seemed to linger.[22] The demographic of students who flocked to the extracurricular program seemed to confirm this observation. While the freshmen drawn to the discussion groups and public talks were a "fairly representative cross-section of their class," including concentrators in history, geology, government, and economics, most of them came from public high schools, with "the so-called 'prep school' element" remaining in the minority. But simple familiarity with the subject matter was not necessarily what attracted students to the program. In fact, some students came almost in spite of themselves, since more than one undergraduate's curiosity about the American past had been "blighted by dull secondary school courses." Similar to students who knew very little about American history, or to students who may have been "taught to believe that American literature was non-existent," even those who were familiar with the subject found that the extracurricular program helped

[21] Daniel Aaron, "Report of the Activities of the Freshmen Extra-Curricular Program in American History (1938)," Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 37, Folder 499.
[22] Willard Thorp, "Americana Proving Ground," *Princeton Alumni Weekly* (3 May 1940).

them discover new topics and unfamiliar perspectives. Like the concentration in History and Literature, the extracurricular program in American Civilization attracted students interested in ideas more than in dates or events, and the wide range of issues it covered allowed many of them to rediscover American history in ways they found exciting and novel.[23]

Despite the challenges it had initially faced, the counselors involved in the program considered the program's first year as largely successful. An informal report submitted to Jones noted that it had been "both gratifying and significant" to see undergraduates "studying the civilization of their country on their own initiative," especially when these undergraduates had come from almost every concentration the university offered. It also emphasized that more work was needed if the program was to become a permanent part of the university's intellectual life. "As long as the whole House Plan remains unintegrated its future is uncertain," the report warned, pointing out the need to coordinate the events organized as part of the program with both regular classes as well as other activities taking place across campus. "By identifying the American history program with courses, debating, study groups," the counselors hoped they would be able to attract more attention and increase its relevance for the students who became involved in the program. Aware of the project's small size and its relatively marginal status, the report tried to be cautiously optimistic about its prospects for the future. "The groundwork of this history plan has been laid this year," it explained. "Next year should see it become an even more integral part of the extra-curricular life at Harvard."[24]

At least some of the undergraduate students familiar with the program came to similar kinds of conclusions, although they tended to be less optimistic about the future of the endeavor. Several weeks after Jones had received the informal report, the Harvard student newspaper

[23] Aaron, "Report of the Activities of the Freshmen Extra-Curricular Program in American History."
[24] Aaron to Jones, 17 March 1939.

printed its own evaluation of the program's achievements, describing some of the same issues without the understatement required by bureaucratic decorum. According to the article's author, the program's idealistic attempt at providing a holistic understanding of American life had "failed to make a perceptible dent on the shining armor of Harvard indifference to 'unifying principles.'" While the Wednesday evening lectures were well attended and regularly attracted over one hundred students, at the weekly discussion groups, "where physicists and philologists were to be inspired to search for the roots of American culture," attendance was usually small. Similarly, the large audiences that appeared for the public lectures consisted mostly of "Cambridge ladies in search of culture," and less than twenty persons in total ended up taking the examinations that were part of the program. As the newspaper reported, the program was held together by a "nucleus of six to ten faithful students," many of whom were affiliated with the History and Literature concentration. "If the plan is to succeed in future years," the author suggested, "it must not continue to be predicated on an impossibly romantic basis." In a world where course credit was king, it was insinuated, no amount of talk about the need for historical self-understanding would make large numbers of students do work that would not appear on their college transcripts. "Harvard students en masse will not voluntarily swallow an American History pill, no matter how heavily coated with sugar."[25]

The faculty associated with the program had never been naive about the challenges the project would face. From the beginning, they had wondered whether they would succeed in making "the study of American civilization at Harvard more than a passing fad." After its first year in operation, the program's then-chairman, Dumas Malone, hoped that the "difficult period of experimentation" was over, and that the counsellors would be in a position to capitalize on

[25] "For Civilized Americans," *Harvard Crimson* (11 May 1939).

what they had learned over the previous months. He and his colleagues recognized the challenge of "inducing busy undergraduates to do outside reading," and they knew that overcoming these "intrinsic difficulties" would require continuous efforts. Yet they remained optimistic about the project as such. The Wehrmacht had invaded Poland just the previous month, seeming to finally bring to a head the sense of mounting calamity that had accompanied many observers for years, as they watched the Depression continue, Hitler expand his power, and Franco declare victory in Madrid. Against this background, it seemed to the program organizers especially urgent to "explore the various aspects of American civilization." Now, they implied, it mattered more than ever before to understand what American civilization actually stood for.

In the event, however, other things turned out to matter more than American Studies. By the spring of 1942, when its initial five years of funding were about to run out, the program had largely ceased to exist. Attempts at making it more attractive for students had failed to increase participation, as had appeals to the importance of national self-understanding. "What was evident to shrewd observers from the beginning," Jones acknowledged in April that year, was that "students were not going to do an amount of work equal to a course unless they got course credit."[26] As a result of lagging participation, the flow of funding dwindled and the number of counsellors was eventually reduced to just two, both of whom were delegated to assist with freshman instruction in English. Yet despite its relatively short lifespan, the program did manage to leave a lasting mark on the students who found themselves attracted to it. One Harvard undergraduate had given up his original plans to study medicine when he became involved in the discussion groups that were part of the project. Originally planning to concentrate in biology, he "changed over completely" once "the fascination of Dan Aaron's freshman Am Civ group"

[26] Howard Mumford Jones to Robert E. Spiller, 13 April 1942, Garvan Papers, Box 38, Folder 33.

caught hold of him, he explained after the end of the war.[27] To the extent that the program was meant to arouse the curiosity of a wide range of students, it enjoyed many such modest but meaningful triumphs. And to the degree that it may have played a role in setting the course for Leo Marx's future career, it succeeded in creating a legacy that would outlast its own existence for decades.

III

Although Harvard's extracurricular project in American Studies did not survive World War II, the university's graduate program did, as did the concentration in History and Literature. And with the lean years of war and mobilization behind them, these programs prospered and grew in ways that had seemed impossible just a few years before. "These are boom-times for the field of American Civilization," the newsletter of the graduate program observed in the spring of 1946. "Familiar faces have reappeared in the Yard, and newcomers have applied for admission in bracing numbers."[28] As professors and students took off their uniforms and streamed back to the classrooms, American Studies began to attract increasing amounts of attention and money. Where they had not existed before, universities and colleges now created programs dedicated to the study of American culture. Courses on American literature, which only a few schools had offered sporadically before the war, now became a fixed part of the curriculum. Scholars who had made a name for themselves writing about American subjects were now rewarded with professorships tailored to their specialization. In fact, the opportunities in American Studies seemed so promising that shortly after the war American Studies experienced a glut in the job market. At Smith College, administrators quickly detected a "superfluity of people in American

[27] Gabriel Jackson to F. O. Matthiessen, 10 September [1945], Matthiessen Papers, Box 2, Folder "Jackson, Gabe."
[28] "American Civilization News," Number 5, April 1946, Harvard University Archives.

literature," while at Harvard some faculty wondered who else they might hire "if the woods here weren't so full of American Civilization people" already.[29]

For Marx, the war had turned out to be a relatively uneventful experience. Spared the worst horrors of combat in the Pacific, he later remembered his four years in the Navy mainly for being "tedious beyond belief."[30] While recuperating from an appendectomy in San Diego, Marx wrote Matthiessen about "the incredible boredom" and "the stupidness of the discipline and the military mentality" he had witnessed. Like many of the friends he had made in college, he had found it difficult to reconcile his conflicting feelings towards the war: a sense of duty on the one hand, distrust of the military and of nationalism on the other. "Our armed forces are completely anti-democratic," he complained, and the Navy in particular seemed to him "a snob-ridden organization with a caste tradition worthy of the best creations of the British upper class." The year before, while still a student, it had been easy for him to joke about the difficulties that intellectual types like him would have in the Army. But with his predictions having come true, he found it more challenging to be lighthearted now. "I guess we are all finding out what we knew well enough, and talked glibly off, last year—that our Harvard educations had very little to do with, and in fact would probably make more difficult the sort of role we would have to play in this war." But despite his misgivings about the hierarchies and the boredom, he at least found the political climate more to his liking than he had expected. "The 'my country right or wrong' spirit probably isn't as lusty as it was in 1917," he reported, and he found the attitude of the other men "not too unhealthy politically." The inventory of the library at the Navy hospital also seemed to

[29] Daniel Aaron to Henry Nash Smith, undated, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 3; Herschel Baker to Henry Nash Smith, 1 December 1946, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 8.
[30] Richard M. Douglas, Dudley H. Towne, and Leo Marx, "The Disclosure of Mystery," *Amherst Alumni News* 13, no. 2 (Fall 1960).

confirm this. It included, after all, the book he was reading while he recovered from surgery—a biography of Lenin written by the British Communist Ralph Winston Fox.[31]

Starved for intellectual stimulation during his time in the Navy, Marx took up graduate work with the enthusiasm and zest that characterized the attitude of many returning GIs. "Classes are crowded—jammed," he discovered. "Harvard has been transformed by a sudden stampede of vets.[32]" Although he had initially harbored doubts about the success of his "reconversion" to civilian life, any remaining reservations soon dissipated. A small scholarship, some savings, and the support from the Veterans Administration provided financial security, and the courses he took lived up to his expectations. "For the moment I'm in American Civilization and enjoying it tremendously," he wrote to a friend he had served with in the Pacific. "Those bleak and sterile months at sea left me with an appetite for intellectual exercise, for books and ideas and education, such as I never had had before."[33] He worked with Matthiessen and Miller, avoided the seminars of Schlesinger and Merk, and spent his first summer going through books he felt guilty about not having read, including "a lot of American literature."[34] He also mused on the possibility of writing a novel after completing his comprehensive examinations. A classmate of his had finished a war novel that was about to be published, but Marx thought he himself could do the topic more justice. "I haven't many illusions about any great skills as a writer," he acknowledged, "but I still would like to tell this story because I think it hits home."[35]

One of the first classes Marx took back at Harvard was Smith's lecture course on "The Literature of the American West," which Smith was teaching in lieu of Perry Miller's usual

[31] Leo Marx to F. O. Matthiessen, 4 March 1942, Matthiessen Papers (1967 Acquisitions), Box 3, Folder "M."
[32] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 10 February 1946, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.
[33] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 8 January [1946], May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.
[34] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 13 August [1946?], Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 15.
[35] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 20 October 1946, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5

course offerings. Temperamentally, the two men were cut from different cloth, and Marx was at first not quite sure what to make of the laconic Texan with the slightly genteel manners. Naturally mercurial and impatient, Marx initially found Smith "a little too pedagogic" for his taste, and with "a rather heavy aroma of bibliography and other academic paraphernalia" about him. "Conscientious to a flaw," Smith seemed to Marx the embodiment of "the painstaking, learned scholar of great integrity and little prejudice," which was something that Marx admired without intending to imitate.[36] That these first impressions soon dissipated was mostly the result of Smith's teaching. Later in life, Marx recalled the "low-keyed euphoria" that characterized Smith's courses during these months, when many of his students had not been in classrooms for years, most felt good about themselves and their country, and almost all were famished for ideas. In this atmosphere, Smith's teaching, which drew heavily on the ideas he was working out for his book, seemed especially fresh and exciting. "Whole sessions were devoted to documents, books, ideas that had rarely if ever been examined before," Marx remembered, "and even when he was looking at classic writers like Cooper or Melville, the perspective was so unconventional, the potential insights so fresh, that one had the feeling of participating in a slow-motion, continuously unfolding, act of discovery."[37] Smith shared this sense of excitement, finding many veterans "altogether extraordinary" and stressing how serious he took their impatience with triviality and frivolousness.[38] By the end of their first year together, as Smith was about to depart for California, the two men had become part of the same circle of friends, were constantly exchanging ideas, and had even gone on a beach vacation with their families.

[36] Marx to May, 20 October 1946.
[37] Marx, "Henry Nash Smith."
[38] Henry Nash Smith to F. O. Matthiessen, 19 June 1946, Matthiessen Papers, Box 4, Folder "Smith, Henry Nash."

Marx spent the next three years in a flurry of teaching and writing, with frequent discussion of politics taking up whatever free time he had. The fate of the American Communist Party, the complacency of the middle class, the difference between right-wing and left-wing totalitarianism, the responsibilities of intellectuals, the future of capitalism: issues like these all provided fodder for lengthy discussions, often over dinner and drinks at Matthiessen's Kittery home, which served as a convenient getaway for the professor and his close circle of friends.[39] In the spring of 1948, Marx proudly explained that his ward on Beacon Hill led the entire state in the matter of Henry Wallace nominating petitions, though he was quick to add that the experience of canvassing had opened his eyes about "the political level of the citizenry."[40] Hopeful that the future might hold "some sort of real progressive higher education," Marx planned on teaching classes at Boston labor schools, and for a while he toyed with the idea of writing a short book aimed at a popular audience that would try to predict the country's political future. One of the few things that Marx did not engage in with zest during these years was work on his thesis. Writing his manuscript—an examination of when American writers had first reacted to the advent of industrialization—often fell by the wayside, and over time he developed "a rather morbid, neurotic relation to the thing," which he needed Miller's help to get over. "It got very timid and thesis-ish and there is little hope now that it will be much," he confided to a friend towards the end of his graduate work. "It did turn from a labor of love to a deadly chore much too quickly, and the writing is, unfortunately, a gauge of that."[41]

While Marx was still writing his thesis, Smith was already thinking of ways to bring him to Minnesota. In 1947, the year Smith arrived in the Twin Cities, the University of Minnesota

[39] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 31 May 1948, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.
[40] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 8 January [1946], May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5
[41] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 27 December 1949, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.

was well on its way to developing one of the country's largest and best-known programs in American Studies. The driving force behind this effort was Tremaine McDowell, a jovial and mustached professor of English who had managed to make a name for himself as a tireless academic entrepreneur. The officers at the Carnegie Corporation considered him "a mild but energetic, kindly, unthreatening kind of fellow," someone who managed "to handle interdepartmental relations smooth and well."[42] Other academics simply thought of him as "a fine chap."[43] Minnesota had opened its doors to American Studies immediately after the war, launching its graduate program in 1945 and its undergraduate major the following year. The impulse behind Minnesota American Studies came from McDowell's unhappiness with the trend towards general education that had begun to gain momentum during the war. Despite their professed goal of preparing students for citizenship in a democracy, McDowell thought that general education courses tended to be too concerned with the past. In their focus on "great books" and the "Western tradition," they seemed to barely touch on anything had occurred in the past hundred years, thus leaving little room for discussions of specifically American issues. To be truly useful, McDowell argued, general education needed to address present issues, and such issues were by definition American issues. If Minnesota wanted a truly relevant general education curriculum, he advised a dean in 1944, it should not let itself be guided by the "champions of the St. John's curriculum" or the "disciples of President Hutchins." Instead, the university ought to listen to its Americanists, a group that was "livelier and more forward looking" than most of the faculty.[44] And once American Civilization had been granted a place in general education, McDowell argued, it would only make sense to give it a program of its own.

[42] "JWG's Visit to the University of Minnesota," 25 May 1954, Carnegie Corporation Records, Box 225, Folder 4.
[43] John Crowe Ransom to Robert Penn Warren, 4 September 1942, Warren Papers, Box 58, Folder 1153.
[44] Tremaine McDowell to T. R. McConnell, 7 January 1944, American Studies Records (Minnesota), Box 3, Folder "Humanities in the USA."

Partly because of its origins in attempts to reform undergraduate teaching, and partly because of McDowell's own personality, Minnesota American Studies had an especially articulate understanding of its curricular structure and its educational goals. Most fully laid out in his 1948 volume *American Studies*, McDowell had over the years created a coherent view of what American Studies should teach and how it should do so. Like his colleagues at Harvard and elsewhere, he assumed that "American ignorance of America" was an undeniable problem: "dangerous chiefly to the United States" and "disastrous also to the rest of the world." McDowell believed that the United States needed to accept its "responsibilities in world-society," and that it could only do so if it understood itself as well as it understood others. Drawing on a distinction John Dewey had made, he differentiated between "nationalism" as a political program and "nationality" as a depoliticized sense of belonging. "We in American Studies believe that political nationalism can be and commonly is disastrous," he explained, "but that cultural nationalism is healthy and creative." He argued that Americans could only become citizens of the world when they embraced their nation as well as their region. "Sane regional loyalties," "well-considered national loyalty," and "world fellowship" all went hand in hand, and self-knowledge was the most important prerequisite for "intelligent citizenship" in local communities as well as international organizations. Despite "unhappy discrepancies between aspiration and accomplishment," he saw the United States as the place where the ideal of "region, nation, and world" had been most clearly articulated, and he believed that American Studies could help elucidate the role it might play in the creation of a new international system. "Since a federation of the world can be formed neither out of zeros nor out of intransigent sovereign states,"

McDowell wrote, "an enlightened American nationality is one of the essentials to an effective league of mankind."[45]

Unlike other programs, which often failed to translate their high-minded intellectual goals into mundane classroom instruction, Minnesota managed to design an undergraduate course that reflected McDowell's ideas about self-knowledge and citizenship. The program as a whole, various brochures and pamphlets explained, followed the principle of "horizontal specialization," with students engaging in "interdepartmental study" rather than adhering to the curricula outlined by specific departments.[46] With no staff of its own, it relied almost exclusively on the resources of neighboring programs, oftentimes involving as many as forty-five instructors from over ten different fields. It also drew on other resources the university could provide, especially its radio station, its movie theater, and its adult education office. McDowell believed that American Studies was "a thoroughgoing exemplification of general education," and no course tried to live up to this promise more than Minnesota's undergraduate class on "American Life."[47] One of three general humanities courses offered by the College of Liberal Arts, it was technically under the purview of the Department of General Studies, although it was in fact run and taught by faculty associated with American Civilization. Methodologically, it followed the three principles McDowell had outlined for American Studies: it had to take into account both the past and the present, it had to involve more than one discipline, and it had to include at least some comparative aspects. Thematically, the course was completely committed to McDowell's ideas about "unity within diversity" and "diversity within unity," following this theme through three different clusters of topics: "nationalism, regionalism, internationalism; individualism,

[45] Tremaine McDowell, "The Meaning of American Studies," undated, Garvan Papers, Box 38, Folder 34; Tremaine McDowell, *American Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1948), 91-93.
[46] "University of Minnesota: Program in American Studies," 1946-47, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 35, Folder 461.
[47] McDowell, *American Studies*, 27-28.

democracy, minorities in a democracy; labor, the pursuit of happiness, the good life." Just as cosmopolitanism depended on patriotism, social cooperation depended on individual freedom, and the pursuit of happiness depended on all these together, the argument ran. More so than most programs, Minnesota managed to not just have a clearly defined philosophy of American Studies, but also a course that implemented this philosophy from the ground up. Or at least that is what it attempted to do.[48]

Despite the growing reputation of Minnesota as a hub for American Studies, Marx was at first hesitant to leave the East Coast behind and move to the Plains. Smith had put in a good word for him among his colleagues in English, and he thought that Marx would prosper in Minneapolis both personally and professionally. Although it would require "some dishwashing at first," mainly by teaching freshman composition, he would quickly be able to teach in the "American Life" course, and he would eventually be allowed to design more specialized classes himself.[49] Despite these prospects, however, Marx initially harbored some doubts about Minnesota. His Harvard friends had often joked about the "chilling dip into the hinterland" some of them would eventually have to make, and although hardly a snob about big city life, Marx felt the sting when he told friends that he might soon be a resident of Hennepin County.[50] "People in New York look at you with a pitying expression when you say Minnesota," he explained.[51] In the end, Marx took up the offer for several reasons. For one thing, he was not interested in a fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania which he thought was aimed mainly at "academic entrepreneurs." Then, it did not seem to him wise to stay in Cambridge much longer, despite the

[48] McDowell, *American Studies*, 72.
[49] Henry Nash Smith to F. O. Matthiessen, 21 October 1947, Matthiessen Papers, Box 4, Folder "Smith, Henry Nash."
[50] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 7 December 1946, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.
[51] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 27 December 1949, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.

many amenities he enjoyed there. For better or worse, Minnesota meant "change, experience, stimulus," he decided.[52] It also meant the chance to work together with Smith once again, and to contribute to what was already becoming known as the "Harvard American Civilization in Exile Group."[53]

Among the Americanists who at one time or another taught in the Twin Cities, it became a customary to joke about the region's harsh climate. "Siberia on the Mississippi" was just one phrase newcomers used to describe Minnesota.[54] In hindsight, what Marx recalled about his first winter there was the cold weather, his family of four staying in a one-bedroom apartment, and having to leave home before daylight each morning to catch a trolley to campus. At the time, however, the "Siberian exile" he would later remember was not as challenging as he had feared it would be.[55] With more sun and less rain than New England, he found Minnesota's below-zero days surprisingly easy to bear. Thatcher Hall, where his family lived together with other faculty members, was "noisy and cooperative" and resembled "a women's and children's dormitory" during the day.[56] On weekends, he used his new metal station wagon to leave the campus and go fishing with friends. "There are lakes everywhere," he noted with delight. He found the university lively, informal, and friendly, and he enjoyed the absence of the "personal and ideological badgering and bickering" that he had witnessed at Harvard.[57] "I am completely happy about the job, the University, and the people," he soon reported to friends. And once he was able to buy a house for his family, he found that there was not much he missed about life in the East. "I find that each return visit to N.Y. confirms my conviction that life in that place is virtually

[52] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 21 October 1948, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 15.
[53] Henry F. May to Daniel Aaron, 2 July [?], Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.
[54] Joseph Kwiat to William Van O'Connor, 22 November 1962, O'Connor Papers, Box 1, Folder "Correspondence 1962."
[55] Leo Marx to Elinor Smith, 1 July 1986, Smith Papers, Box 4, Folder 14.
[56] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 19 December 1949, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.
[57] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, undated, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.

impossible," he wrote after a trip. "Really—I came back to St. Paul a complacent smug middle-westerner!"[58]

Marx's experience teaching at Minnesota closely resembled that of one of his Harvard friends, Bernard Bowron, who had arrived in the Twin Cities before him. They were both impressed with the students they had, and they found the experience of teaching at a big state school in equal parts difficult and refreshing. "The graduate students are, on the average, as good as the best in Cambridge," Marx discovered. "They are much more aggressive, and don't allow any nonsense from the lecture platform."[59] Bowron, too, found that there "were quite a lot of really good students," and he noted their propensity to challenge his views. Some of them were "constantly interrupting his lectures to argue and engage in discussion," he noted with delight. Courses which were meant to be an hour long often took up twice as much of his time, since students would regularly stop him after class to ask questions or seek his advice. "They seem very pleased and anxious to have a chance to talk to their instructor rather than just be talked at," Bowron observed. "I don't blame them— this place is so enormous that the problem for any student who is really concerned with his work and his ideas is to—somehow—fight his way out of anonymity."[60]

Marx and Bowron were also in agreement when it came to their experience teaching "American Life." Despite the sophisticated structure McDowell had devised for the course, the two found it challenging to integrate the large number of topics and materials the class asked them to cover. "The American Life course, or humanities in the US, is rather a hodgepodge, or at least *I* am not sure yet just what in the hell it is that I am teaching," Bowron confessed soon after

[58] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 22 April 1953, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.
[59] Leo Marx to Harry Levin, 16 March 1950, Levin Papers, Folder 651.
[60] Bernard Bowron to F. O. Matthiessen, undated, Matthiessen Papers, Box 1, Folder "B."

arriving in Minnesota. It also did not help that the class, which was supposed to be a discussion course, was "jammed to the doors with a hundred students," leaving Bowron with few options but to do most of the discussing himself.[61] Marx was similarly baffled by the breadth of materials he was supposed to handle as part of the class. Trained in literary studies, his expertise was limited to texts and their historical backgrounds, and his knowledge of American painting, music, and architecture was cursory at best. Yet these were precisely the things he was now supposed to tell his students about. "This is somewhat appalling," he joked, "but even more appalling is my quickly developing ability not to be too shocked by the presumptuousness of teaching things I know very little about."[62] Teaching the course proved an education for all parties involved: the students as well as the educators.

In 1953, McDowell provided the university with an internal evaluation of the American Studies program, part of which was based on answers to questionnaires that had been sent out to alumni and students. These answers revealed that students did not seem to pay much attention to how their classes were structured. What they did take note of, however, were how these classes portrayed the United States. Among the faculty, there was a widespread sense that the American Studies program was not chauvinistic, and that it was successful at balancing appreciation and criticism in its assessment of American culture. As a dean told McDowell regarding his colleagues: "I believe they feel generally that our Program here draws a very nice balance between the actual study of American culture and American institutions and the broader international responsibilities of the American people." The students seemed to agree. "Chauvinism is not a problem at Minnesota," they reassured their professors, pointing to the

[61] Bernard Bowron to F. O. Matthiessen, undated, Matthiessen Papers, Box 1, Folder "B."
[62] Leo Marx to F. O. Matthiessen, 8 February 1950, Matthiessen Papers (1967 Acquisitions), Box 3, Folder "Leo Marx."

foreign civilization requirement they all had to complete. In fact, some students thought that the program was too focused on the country's failures to live up to its ideals. "In an attempt to dissipate erroneous assumptions concerning America," one of them noted, "some courses lean toward the skeptical side in analyzing our culture." Another student reported that some instructors were "not inclined to admit definite strengths or to make proposals for corrections of weaknesses." Less concerned than their professors about appearing detached from their object of study, students had no qualms about revealing their personal investment in American culture.[63]

Given the non-vocational nature of American Studies at Minnesota, their emotional investment in the subject was often the only reason students had for joining the program. Among faculty in the field, it was common knowledge that American Civilization programs tended to do best at private institutions, where a majority of the undergraduates were expected to go on to professional schools. American Studies was widely recognized as having little vocational utility, though it was considered a good preparation for advanced programs in the law or in business. While accountants needed to have merely technical skills, the reasoning ran, future executives needed to be able to talk about books and ideas. This was something that McDowell had been clear about from the beginning. "Since an overwhelming percentage of undergraduates at Minnesota hope to put their B.A. to immediate vocational use," he explained, "we take it for granted that few of them should enroll in American Studies." Although each year more and more students became interested in the program, McDowell insisted on pointing out that if a candidate for a bachelor's degree "must earn a living after graduation," a degree in American studies would only be practicable if it was supplemented by a teaching certificate or stenographic training.[64]

[63] Tremaine McDowell, "An Evaluation of the Minnesota Program in American Studies," 1 May 1953, ASA Records, Box 23, Folder 4.
[64] McDowell, "An Evaluation of the Minnesota Program in American Studies."

Despite such disclaimers, many students did find their education in American Studies of professional value. Usually, what these students came to later appreciate was the breadth of ideas and disciplines they had been exposed during their time at Minnesota. “Every course which I took in my diversified program has helped me at some point in editing,” an editor at a university press explained in response to the questionnaire. A director of an academic library found the same thing to be true, as did an administrative officer working on campus. “My broad training makes it possible for me to communicate and cooperate with men in several departments,” the former noted, while the latter emphasized the program’s usefulness in dealing with students “from all college departments.” A former State Department employee had found his training similarly relevant for his later professional duties, and in fact wished that he had pursued the program for longer. “During my three years in Germany, my work in American Studies was always valuable,” he explained. “However, anyone who hopes to show Europeans that we have a culture of our own should take the Ph.D. in American Studies rather than the M.A. as I did.” Teachers, too, found that their “interdisciplinary study” of American Civilization helped them with their social studies classes, even though the materials in their classes were “frequently European.”[65]

When former students found that their education had not been professionally useful for them, they tended to cite its politics as an issue. At least some students discovered that the outlook they had gained in the program had maladjusted them for life in certain parts of the American workforce. One alumnus, who had received a master’s degree in American Studies and had gone on to work as a building manager for a real estate firm, explained that he was frequently at odds with his colleagues, and that this was at least in part the result of his training at

[65] McDowell, “An Evaluation of the Minnesota Program in American Studies.”

Minnesota. “My associates are so conservative that my background gets me into trouble even in conversation,” he explained, insinuating that he found it difficult to tolerate such views after what he had learned in his program. “Controversial issues arise and violent arguments sometimes follow.” Despite regarding it as a “depressing statement,” McDowell tried to see it in a positive light. While he did not deny that there were occupations for which American Studies was not “appropriate professional training,” he still thought it possible that his education was helping this former student in other aspects of his life. “It is possible that this man’s experience at Minnesota supports and sustains him as an individual and as a citizen,” he partly hoped and partly assumed.[66]

Although few people recognized it at the time, Minnesota American Studies was already on the decline when McDowell compiled this internal review in 1953. A few years earlier, during its heyday, Minnesota had been so central to the new field that people joked about having to set a “Minnesota quota” for conventions and meetings.[67] In 1955, it was still possible for Lionel Trilling to advise an ambitious Jamaican-born student, Stuart Hall, to consider going to Minnesota to conduct his research on the American novel.[68] Just a few years later, however, few people would have given that piece of advice. Smith, who had left for California by then, noted that what little news he heard from Minnesota was “on the whole rather bad,” and by 1958, it had become conventional wisdom to note that the program was no longer what it once was.[69] As the Carnegie Corporation noted in a memorandum that year: “Minnesota for a few years had its great day as a graduate training center in American civilization, but this day is now passed.”[70] By the

[66] McDowell, “An Evaluation of the Minnesota Program in American Studies.”
[67] Theodore Hornberger to Merle Curti, 17 August 1951, Curti Papers, Box 20, Folder 1.
[68] Lionel Trilling to Stuart Hall, 26 January 1955, Trilling Papers, Box 16, Folder 1.
[69] Henry Nash Smith to Robert Penn Warren, 2 April 1957, Warren Papers, Box 65, Folder 1285.
[70] Record of Interview with Robert Spiller, 12 May 1958, Carnegie Corporation Records, Box 411, Folder 11.

middle of the 1960s, the faculty members who had not left the school looked ruefully at its demise. “The university has starved the arts college of funds and we simply can’t compete with other institutions,” one of the senior professors in the English department noted. “Twenty years ago this was a distinguished department. It is now less than nothing.”[71] And just as this was true of the English program, it was also true of American Civilization.

The decline of Minnesota American Studies was the result of both institutional decisions and personal choices. Due to chronic ill health, McDowell became less and less capable of running the program over the years, and no else at the university was able to match his enthusiasm and energy for administering the operation. When Smith left Minnesota for Berkeley 1953, the program was dealt an additional blow. Originally assuming that he would stay at Minnesota for the remainder of his career, Smith was surprised to receive an offer from the University of California, and he made the move with some hesitation, given his misgivings about the requirement that faculty sign loyalty oaths. Smith’s departure robbed the program off its most prominent teacher, and his colleagues soon discovered how difficult it would be to find someone to fill the gap that he left. In equal parts intellectual historian and literary critic, he turned out to be “unique and irreplaceable,” and the program never managed to find someone else to fill both these roles.[72] Over the course of the 1950s, few professors at Minnesota failed to notice “the general drift of the university toward an extreme technical-vocational pattern.”[73] Together with the attendant reallocation of resources away from the liberal arts, this led to a slow exodus of the university’s most-distinguished Americanists, who one by one found more promising jobs

[71] Samuel Monk to Robert Penn Warren, 13 April 1967, Warren Papers, Box 46, Folder 907.
[72] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 20 May 1953, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.
[73] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 9 March 1957, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 17.

elsewhere in the country. And, as the Carnegie Corporation noted by the end of the decade, "the younger people and the replacements have not been of the same quality as these men."[74]

Of the group of Americanists who had been at Minnesota during its golden years, Marx was among the last to leave the university. In 1959, he permanently relocated to Amherst College, where had spent the academic year 1957-58 as a visiting teacher. Although it had occurred six years before, Smith's departure from Minnesota had set in motion the chain of events that eventually made Marx leave the Twin Cities. "It does awful things to our department," he had noted at the time of Smith's leaving, and to "American Studies especially."[75] While Marx enjoyed the "sense of self-sufficiency" that his mentor's departure entailed, he saw few other benefits in the loss of his colleague and friend. He suddenly found himself "swamped with the sort of committee work" Smith used to do, part of which entailed taking over some of the fourteen dissertations Smith had been supervising at the time when he left. Marx felt a "sense of loss and intellectual stimulus," and he bemoaned the fact that the Dutch Treat, a popular restaurant and meeting place for the university's Americanists, had sunken into an "intellectual torpor."[76] Perhaps most significantly, Smith's departure had caused an imbalance in the English department's ideological alignment. During the 1950s, the department was divided between two factions, jokingly referred to as "redskins" and "palefaces." The latter group included someone like Allen Tate, whose conservative politics, genteel tastes, and preference for European writers put him at odds with the "Peaux Rouges," such as Smith and Marx, who scoffed at social pretensions, who championed American authors, and whose politics were to the left.[77] With Smith's leaving, Marx suddenly had to face battles that Smith had been

[74] Record of Interview with Robert Spiller, 12 May 1958, Carnegie Corporation Records, Box 411, Folder 11.
[75] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 20 May 1953, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.
[76] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 11 November 1953, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.
[77] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 28 November 1953, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.

happy to fight in the past, and under circumstances that increasingly favored the cultural conservatives in his department. In the end, however, Marx decided to leave because of developments that affected the university as a whole. "Minnesota I fear is headed to 42,000 students and downhill," he wrote a friend in March of 1958. "Who is going to run an operation this size?" Although he felt a sense of obligation toward the American Studies program, the university's increasing size and inertia, combined with a "frightful exhaustion of leadership" in his department, convinced him to move back to New England after ten years in the Midwest.[78]

IV

When Marx arrived at Amherst College, he joined what by then had become the most influential American Studies program in the country. To the Americanists who were associated with it, it must have only seemed fitting that Amherst would receive such distinction. Nestled in the heart of New England's Pioneer Valley, the atmosphere at the college resonated with echoes from the American past. In Northampton, just across the Connecticut River, Jonathan Edwards had delivered sermons to his parishioners during the First Great Awakening. A stone's throw from campus, Emily Dickinson had spent her days writing poetry in lonely seclusion, in a house that many professors still passed by on their way to campus each day. And until his death in 1963, Robert Frost was a regular guest at the college, spending evenings reading verses surrounded by groups of fraternity boys.[79] Socially, the Pioneer Valley was largely removed from the circles of power in New York City or Boston. It was, as Merle Curti told Henry Steele Commager in 1956, "really country."[80] Intellectually, however, it was far from a backwater. Americanists as far away

[78] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 16 January 1958, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 18.
[79] Leo Marx, notes for farewell talk, 3 February 1976, Marx Papers, Box 5, Folder "Amherst Faculty Club."
[80] Merle Curti to Henry Steele Commager, 7 January 1956, Commager Papers, Box 15, Folder 77.

as Wyoming and California tried to imitate the "Amherst way" of teaching American Studies, and many traveled to western Massachusetts to see the program itself.[81] "The work in American Studies at Amherst is more or less seminal," the executive secretary of the ASA noted before making the trip there himself.[82]

Similar to Harvard, American Studies had first appeared at Amherst in the late 1930s, when the college created a group major consisting of "courses treating American material." But whereas the extracurricular program at Harvard lost momentum after the outbreak of the war and eventually ceased to exist, at Amherst the opposite was the case. In 1941, Stanley King, Amherst's president at the time, appointed a faculty committee tasked with reforming the school's basic curriculum. Although this project was temporarily suspended after the United States entered the war, the committee took up the project again in 1944, working out significant changes concerning the curriculum, admissions, social life, and scholarships over the next two years. The result of this labor was the so-called "New Curriculum," a general education framework that would shape the experience of Amherst undergraduates for the following twenty-five years. While the New Curriculum was being designed, the faculty group in charge of American Studies was invited to prepare its own course of the two-year social science sequence for freshmen and sophomores. They took up the offer, and under the leadership of George Rogers Taylor, an economic historian with a passionate belief in the importance of civic education, the Americanists at Amherst managed to create an American Studies course that every student at Amherst would be required to take.[83]

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[81] Robert Walker to George Rogers Taylor, 14 June 1956, ASA Records, Box 29, Folder 6.
[82] Louis Rubin to George Rogers Taylor, ASA Records, 1 October 1954, Box 24, Folder 2.
[83] George F. Whicher, "The American Studies Program," Amherst Alumni News 2, no. 3 (December 1949), 101-102. For general information about the New Curriculum, see Gail Kennedy, ed., *Education at Amherst: The New Program* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955).

Like other general education curricula designed at the time, the New Curriculum distinguished between two levels of courses. During their freshman and sophomore years, students took a set of classes meant to supplement their high school training and lay the foundation for the rest of their studies. These courses were team-taught and drew on the resources of a variety of departments. Freshman science was handled by physicists, mathematicians, astronomers, and chemists, while freshman humanities involved faculty from English, economics, history, and classics. The driving force behind the New Curriculum was Gail Kennedy, a professor in the Amherst philosophy department and a committed follower of John Dewey. Like the pragmatist philosopher, Kennedy believed that education ought to familiarize students with the process of knowledge creation itself. It ought to be a hands-on apprenticeship, Kennedy thought, rather than a scholastic exercise in rote memorization. He intensely disliked survey courses, which he dismissed as including "less and less about more and more," and did not have much patience for Mortimer Adler's "Great Books," which in his view reflected an outdated view of the world. "Adler and company are sorry that they were not born in the Middle Ages when they could know everything there was to know," he scoffed.[84]

In line with Kennedy's views, the American Studies course was designed with two objectives in mind. First, the course would not be a traditional freshman survey but a class designed around a "modified method of teaching by the case system." Second, its main goal would not be to cover a particular subject but to "stimulate intellectual activity" among the students by asking them to analyze particular problems. Students would not end the course "feeling that they have completed American history," but they should have developed "a lively curiosity" to find out more about it on their own. When designing the course, the committee also

[84] Gail Kennedy, "Is There a Way Out of Educational Confusion?," *Amherst Alumni News* 5, no. 4 (March 1953); "Great Ideas Classification Is 'Plain Screwy' Says Kennedy," *The Amherst Student* (10 April 1951).

decided that it would treat twelve discrete "problems" per year, that these problems would change over time, and that students would learn about the problems through both lectures and seminars. About eight of the problems would be historical while the remaining four would deal with contemporary issues. A typical set would include problems such as "Puritanism in Early America," "Slavery as a Cause of the Civil War," "Pragmatism and American Culture," and "American Aid to Western Europe." American Studies 21-22, or "Problems in American Civilization," was first taught in 1949, during the sophomore year of the class of 1952.[85]

The sophomore course in American Studies demanded time and energy from both students and teachers. Each of the twelve problems needed elaborate planning and preparation. In 1951, the sophomores discussed the issue of compulsory health insurance as part of American Studies 21-22. In preparation, they read a variety of materials describing advantages and disadvantages of a national health care systems. Among other things, they were given sections of policy papers, testimonials by physicians, statements from the American Medical Association, and reports on the National Health Service in Britain. Then, during the lecture part of the class, they heard several speakers give their views on this issue, including an economist, a lobbyist, and two practicing doctors. On Friday, after the lectures were over, the sophomores were given their writing assignment: "In your judgment would the medical needs of America be more adequately cared for under compulsory health insurance than under existing voluntary programs?" The papers, with an expected length of two to three pages, were due the following Monday, and during the seminar meetings on Wednesday, the students discussed their ideas with one

[85] Whicher, "The American Studies Program," 101-102. For a more detailed description of the American Studies curriculum, see George Rogers Taylor, "Meeting the Social Studies Where They Are," *Journal of Higher Education* 23, no. 2 (1952): 68-74.

another.[86] With readings to xerox, speakers to book, and essays to grade, the course was time consuming both for students and for instructors. It also seemed to prove a larger point about the New Curriculum. "Some of you may recall that professors find it hard to listen to students," Reuben Brower joked in the Amherst alumni magazine in 1946, in an essay explaining the reforms taking place. "I might add that they find it almost impossible to listen to one another."[87] The New Curriculum would change this, he thought. With its emphasis on sharing courses and responsibilities, it would require interaction where none had existed before, transforming not just the life of the students at Amherst but also that of the faculty.

In making American Studies a required part of each student's education, Amherst gave the field a degree of visibility it lacked at most other schools. And this visibility was not limited to the Pioneer Valley. In 1947, while Taylor was finalizing the course design for the sophomore course, he realized how challenging it would be to assemble all the readings that students would need. In that moment, the idea for the so-called "Amherst pamphlets" was born. These course readers, which included the various documents that students would be asked to read over the course of the year, proved to be an enormous success. At first merely intended for local circulation, they began to be distributed nationally in 1949, when the publishing house D. C. Heath took note of their popularity. Paperbound and inexpensive, each booklet cost about $1.00 per copy, and within less than two years, scores of colleges and universities had adopted various *Problems in American Civilization* readers for use in their courses.[88] By 1959, dozens of titles were in circulation, and over 750,000 copies had been sold to hundreds of institutions.[89] Over the

[86] Neil H. Hertz and David E. Gyger, "American Studies: A Course on Trial," *Amherst Alumni News* 4, no. 2 (October 1951), 51-53.
[87] Reuben A. Brower, "The Sequence in the Humanities," *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (November 1946), 11.
[88] "New American Studies Series Is Widely Hailed as Success," *The Amherst Student* (1 December 1949).
[89] Bill Davis, "Sale of 'Am Studs' Pamphlets Totals 750,000 since 1949," *The Amherst Student* (14 March 1960).

following decade, the booklets sold around 200,000 copies per year, and other publishers soon began to create "problem pamphlets" of their own.[90] Listing all the institutions that had adopted the booklets, D. C. Heath's promotional brochures asked: "Is your college on the list?"[91] By the time Marx accepted his job offer from Amherst, many Americanists across the country would have been able to answer this question affirmatively. What had begun as a byproduct of the New Curriculum and its skepticism of surveys and textbooks had come to reshape the way faculty all over the country approached the teaching of American Studies. And in the process, Amherst had gained national prominence as a leading institution in the new field.

By the end of the 1950s, Amherst College and the "problem approach" had become virtually synonymous in the minds of Americanists all over the country. When a young historian, Hugh Hawkins, joined the college faculty in 1957, it was mainly because of his interest in this new way of teaching. A few years earlier, Hawkins had met Taylor for an informal interview at the Baltimore train station, from which he came away fully convinced that the case method was superior to the types of instruction he had been exposed to so far.[92] Although military service interfered with his plans to join the college at that point, he was still interested when the opportunity presented itself later on. Having to decide between job offers from Amherst and the University of North Carolina, Hawkins chose the former, mainly because of what he had heard about American Studies 21-22. "I have long been a vociferous advocate of the 'problem' approach in history-teaching and of inter-departmentalism in education," he told the chairman of the history department at North Carolina when explaining his decision to turn down their offer. "An institution that has pioneered in both these realms is inviting me to participate in such

[90] "Problems in American Civilization: Five-Year Sale," Rozwenc Papers, Box 7, Folder 14.
[91] D. C. Heath promotional brochure, Department of American Studies Records (Amherst), Folder "Department Publications."
[92] Hugh Hawkins to George Rogers Taylor, 25 May 1965, Hawkins Papers, Box 2, Folder 10.

programs, and I feel duty-bound to accept it."[93] Some of his colleagues had warned him about Amherst, explaining just how much time he would have to invest in his teaching. "Those courses are terrible," someone told him at the time. "You spend all your time being taught by your colleagues who've done their part of it, because it's not your area of specialty—and so you work, work and work getting ready."[94] But he remained undeterred and arrived in the Pioneer Valley excited and hopeful.

Hawkins was happy to discover that Amherst lived up to his expectations. Because of the need to coordinate his teaching with the other instructors, he quickly became friendly with most of his colleagues. In one of his first letters to his parents back home, he mentioned the "Morgan Hall coffee hour," one of the rituals most cherished by the members of the program. "Every morning at 10:00 the American studies department has coffee and pastry courtesy of our chairman," he wrote. "This has made us pretty well acquainted by now." He also mentioned his teaching in the sophomore course, which suited him well. He enjoyed the cooperative nature of the endeavor and relished the sense that he was both teaching and learning. "It gives me a sense of 'taking' the course as well as 'giving' it," he wrote to his parents, describing the many different talks he had seen his colleagues deliver. Since each instructor had to prepare only a handful of lectures over the course of the year, the quality of the presentations was unusually high, he explained, since the burden was shared in such a way that each teacher had the opportunity to give the occasion the time it deserved. With an average of close to three hundred students enrolled in the class, the presenters were always aware of the blow to their reputation that a poor performance would bring.[95]

[93] Hugh Hawkins to Fletcher Green, 28 January 1957, Hawkins Papers, Box 1, Folder 28.
[94] "Interview by Nicolas Zerbib with Hugh Hawkins," 6 November 1990, Department of American Studies Records (Amherst), Folder "Student Papers."
[95] Hugh Hawkins to James Hawkins, 28 September 1957, Hawkins Papers, Box 1, Folder 30.

Just as American Studies 21-22 created a sense of community among the faculty members assigned to the course, it provided the sophomores with a shared experience that accompanied them through their day-to-day lives. While reading their assigned texts during the week and struggling with their essays over the weekend, the students found that the topics they were confronted with tended to creep into conversations during lunch time and study breaks. They even became topics of discussion during dates they went on with girls from neighboring schools, so that students at Mount Holyoke or Smith College also ended up pondering the legacy of Puritanism or the intricacies of the New Deal. The mandatory sophomore course in American Studies provided "topics and material of such intrinsic worth that it is the basis of much of the class discussion," one student observed in 1955. "We have found that over pizza there is often transcendentalism and over beer the frontier thesis."[96] When Amherst ceased having such mandatory courses in the late 1960s, many alumni who had attended the college twenty years earlier were visibly disappointed. Given their memories of a highly structured curriculum that had glued whole cohorts of students together, for them, the president of the college acknowledged in 1973, "the curriculum today may seem without structure and without purpose."[97]

Marx arrived at Amherst not entirely sure that he would enjoy the experience of teaching at an all-male college with no graduate students. The year he before he left Minnesota, he had repeatedly weighed the upsides and downsides of college teaching as compared to university life. While he was sure that he would not miss "certain items of high Minnesota civilization," he was equally sure that "graduate students, female students, and the richer life of the university

[96] "A Student Evaluation of the Amherst Curriculum by the Theta Xi Fraternity, 1954-55," Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Student and Alumni Publications.
[97] John William Ward, "The State of the College," 2 June 1973, Ward Papers, Box 1, Folder 27.

community" were things whose lack he would feel.[98] Once back in New England, however, such ruminations were quickly forgotten. Amherst, he wrote to Smith, satisfied the "decadent pastoral impulse" in him, and he found the relative simplicity of life on campus refreshing. "We are out of the swirl of academic power, and one feels here a bit less of the obsession with status, prestige, success—power—that is so strong in the university." He also noticed the differences in classroom instruction between Amherst and Minnesota. "Students have names, faces, even personalities," he joked. "A shocking concept."[99] Perhaps most of all, however, he enjoyed the power Amherst was offering him. As the college's chair in American literature, he would be able to shape the curriculum to his wishes, and to create his own course "covering the full sweep of our literature." As far as the American Studies program was concerned, he planned on using his status to move the sophomore course as well as the pamphlet series in a new direction, "toward intellectual history and literature."[100]

Marx knew that he had big shoes to fill at the college. The writer Alfred Kazin, who had held the position before him, had been one of the most popular teachers at Amherst and its neighboring schools. The students had liked his "unorthodox teaching style" and his "intense and individualistic approach to literature." They found that he talked about books "in a way different from most teachers at Amherst," one of them explained when asked about the enthusiasm many undergraduates felt for his teaching. At Smith College, where Kazin had briefly taught before coming to Amherst, another student described the breath of fresh air that his teaching seems to have brought to the school. "I've never seen them more excited about any teacher," this student said of her classmates. "He talked about the feeling you get from a book, not just a cold emphasis

[98] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 16 October 1957, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 17.
[99] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 29 January 1959, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 19.
[100] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 27 December 1957, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 18.

on symbol and metaphor. He got everybody really excited." A New Yorker by birth and an artist by temperament, Kazin was neither used to country living nor to teaching classes of all female students. "God help us each and every one," he had joked after receiving his appointment at Smith. "I am unused to all this."[101] His students, however, did not seem to mind. His courses at Smith were so popular that there was not enough classroom space for all who wanted to hear him lecture. "You actually had to run to get there in time to get a chair," one of them stressed.[102]

What Marx did not know, however, was that the curriculum he would be in charge of had already been reshaped by the students he would be teaching. In its political bent, the Amherst program was similar to those at Harvard and Minnesota. According to one of its chief architects, George Whicher, it was built around the idea that Americans tended to profess one set of beliefs while living by another, and that it was the purpose of American Studies to make students aware of the discrepancy between "the official ideology" and "the actualities" of American life. "In its largest baring," Whicher explained, "the American Studies program is an attempt to bring young Americans to face realistically the implications of our way of life, its problems and its techniques, so that their thinking may not be based upon unfounded preconceptions but may be rooted firmly in American soil." At least as far as he was able to tell, the program succeeded in this. Among the sophomores taking American Studies 21-22, he noted, remarks "indicating that independent thinking is taking place" could be frequently overheard, as when one student remarked to another: "It strikes me that Jackson was right when he vetoed the bill to recharter the second Bank of the United States. But I'm not sure Dad would think so—he's a bank director."[103]

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[101] Alfred Kazin to Henry Nash Smith, 31 January 1955, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 6.
[102] "Amherst Teaching Debut Made by American Studies' Kazin," *The Amherst Student* (10 October 1955).
[103] Whicher, "The American Studies Program," 101-102.

Students started assessing the New Curriculum within weeks of its introduction, and many found its focus on inquiry and discussion a breath of fresh air. After only two months of classes, one student could already feel the effects this new way of learning exerted on him. "A penetrating, question-mark frame of mind accompanies me all the time," he wrote, echoing the rhetoric the curriculum's champions tended to use. "I refuse to accept an idea without probing to its roots." Even the question of political convictions appeared to this student in a new light. In the past, it had been difficult for him to understand why some people might subscribe to "a red-hot political attitude such as Communism." Now, however, he saw that this could be "more easily understood when one sees *how* it originated, *where* and *under what conditions* people found it desirable to adopt its ideals." The one aspect of the New Curriculum he found not to his liking was its heavy workload, which he tended to associate with schools of a different kind. "I have talked with many friends from other colleges," he confessed, "and the only ones who spent as much time in the classroom and in study after class were attending technical brain mills—Rensselaer or M.I.T."[104]

A review of the American Studies course written by two students seemed to confirm this overall view. They thought that the design of the course, with its twelve problems that needed to be understood, analyzed, and argued about, equipped them with skills that would prove to be useful later on in their lives. "The real significance of the American Studies 21-22 course lies not in problems One through Twelve," they explained. "What happens when the student faces Problem 13?" They thought that if a student had paid attention in the course, he would be well equipped to handle difficult problems later on. "If he can apply what he has learned in the course to any problem which faces him as a junior, a senior, or after he leaves Amherst College, then he

[104] Danny D. Gustafson, "A Freshman Looks at the New Curriculum," *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (November 1948), 1-4.

has learned the real point of Problems in American Civilization." Aware of what their teachers wanted them to take away from the course, they assured them that they had in fact learned its lessons. "If American Studies 21-22 is successful, and we believe that it is," they wrote without subtlety, "it is successful because it has instilled in the minds of those who have taken the course a few ideas on how to think. Not what to think; *how* to think. That's education for democracy."[105] When the brothers of Theta Xi Fraternity published their own evaluation of the sophomore course several years later, they also emphasized the democratic value they saw in the class. In demanding that students weigh different viewpoints and then make decisions based on imperfect information, they thought the course reflected the decision-making process that voters frequently faced. As they put it: "In this society (and in this course) the student has to decide. It is not so in other societies. The acceptance of Von Ribbentrop's 'The Fuhrer is always right' would indeed make decision making less necessary. But here and now decision making is necessary."[106]

While students may have been happy with the overall design of American Studies 21-22, there were also aspects of the course they were frustrated with. The grading system, which was widely perceived to be inconsistent, was one of these. With up to a dozen instructors from departments as different as English and political science, papers that students considered of comparable quality often received significantly different grades.[107] Another criticism concerned the frequent guest speakers that appeared in the course. Some of these, such as Senator Joseph McCarthy, who spoke on "Loyalty in a Democracy" in 1952, became highlights of the class.[108]

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[105] Hertz and Gyger, "American Studies: A Course on Trial," 51-53.
[106] "A Student Evaluation of the Amherst Curriculum by the Theta Xi Fraternity."
[107] D. E. Pfanner and P. K. Kalodner, "American Studies 22 Grades Are Investigated by Student," *The Amherst Student* (22 May 1950).
[108] "McCarthy May Talk on Soph. American Studies Problem," *The Amherst Student* (7 February 1952).

More often, however, guest speakers gave presentations that seemed to many students neither interesting nor relevant. “We are well aware of the fact that the primary function of a course lecture is not to entertain,” one student wrote. “But we are also aware that almost nothing will be absorbed by a group bored to tears of frustration.”[109] Students also criticized that rhetoric sometimes appeared to take prevalence over substance. “Literary experts,” it was widely accepted, were able to produce essays of “masterful logic” without even having looked at the readings. “A well-turned phrase can often take the place of sound reasoning in backing up an argument,” one student bemoaned.[110] A more serious issue concerned the widespread cheating that many students suspected was taking place. While one of them downplayed the issue by saying that “you haven’t seen anything until you see the English 21-22 papers,” others were upset by the fact that it was no uncommon for their peers to hand in the same papers to different teachers. The excuses that students provided for taking such short cuts, which ranged from “spring fever” to the “unusual difficulty” of particular problems, did not convince those sophomores who had earned their grades without subterfuge.[111]

The faculty in the American Studies program were aware of what their students thought of their teaching, and they reacted to praise and criticisms in different ways. Sometimes, professors went on the attack, as they did after receiving repeated complaints about the quality of the lectures in American Studies 21-22. “Students like to be told answers; this isn’t the point of the course,” Taylor pointed out, arguing that most students did not seem to be interested in weighing different viewpoints and reaching their own conclusions as to the merits of each. He suspected that students only liked lectures in which the speakers inadvertently presented them

[109] “A Student Evaluation of the Amherst Curriculum by the Theta Xi Fraternity, 1954-55.”
[110] Hertz and Gyger, “American Studies: A Course on Trial,” 51-53.
[111] “Am Stud Department Finds Two Cheating so Far; Sophs Guess 38,” *The Amherst Student* (25 May 1953).

with a clear-cut answer to the problem at hand. But as the American Studies faculty emphasized again and again, this was not the point of the course. "We don't peddle answers, we peddle techniques," Taylor stressed, while some of his colleagues reacted with exasperation: "Do we have to spoon-feed them everything?" At other times, however, the faculty acknowledged the concerns that students brought forward. Taylor had always been aware that the New Curriculum would cause difficulties in measuring student performance. Since courses such as American Studies 21-22 put so much emphasis on discussion and essays, the assessment of a particular student's achievement would always be highly subjective. "It is difficult to grade thinking with a marking system designed for survey and memory," he acknowledged, resigning himself to the fact that he was fighting an uphill battle in privileging analysis over memorization. Given that from primary school on students had come to think of learning as "the hours of cramming necessary to secure satisfactory grades on tests and final examinations," he was not surprised that his attempts at changing this sometimes ran into problems.[112] As one of his colleagues put it, "while a History 1 student will emotionally accept his mark, you can only hope you've succeeded in explaining an AmStud man's mistakes to him."[113]

As early as 1951, the American Studies faculty responded to student concerns by changing procedures and rules. That year, a committee consisting of professors and students had been tasked with reforming the testing procedures for the sophomore course. After their initial meeting, the committee decided to replace the previous hour-long test with three shorter tests of fifteen minutes each. They also agreed that in written papers "a more liberal interpretation of the questions" would be allowed, which was something that many students had wanted.[114] In 1953,

[112] George Rogers Taylor, "Report on a Questionnaire," 1955, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, General Files, American Studies, Departmental Records.
[113] "American Studies: 'Spoon Feeding' the Sophomores?," *The Amherst Student* (22 May 1955).
[114] "American Studies Staff Approves Plans by Class," *The Amherst Student* (12 March 1951).

amid allegations of widespread cheating, the faculty decided to increase the cross-checking of papers and to introduce harsher punishments for students who had run afoul of ethical guidelines. Anyone caught cheating would be dropped from the course and be required to take a different class over the following summer.[115] While the American Studies staff did this to protect the intellectual integrity of the course, they only sprang into action after undergraduates had taken the initiative and brought the issue to their attention. Had the student newspaper not polled over two dozen students about their experience with dishonest peers in the course, and had the results not shown that a sixth of the students seemed to have little concern for academic integrity, the faculty might not have made such changes that early on.

The concern of the American Studies faculty for what their students thought of their teaching also played a role in an alumni survey that Taylor organized in 1955. In early September that year, a questionnaire was mailed to all students who had graduated from Amherst since 1946 with a major in American Studies. This was done to gather statistical information on their career paths and to "evoke candid appraisals" of the program. Of the one hundred questionnaires mailed, sixty-five were filled out and returned, mainly by students who had graduated during the past four years. Of the respondents, only one indicated that he had regretted his choice of American Studies when graduating, and only three said that they had regretted their choice later, when they had realized that a different major would have prepared them better for their current careers. Many alumni were enthusiastic about American Studies 21-22 and its "problem approach," with one calling it the "most stimulating course" he had taken at Amherst. Some thought it unfortunate that only the sophomore course made use of this technique, regretting that "the approach used in the sophomore course is not carried into other courses." But

[115] "AmStud Will Cross-Check Papers; No Other Changes," *The Amherst Student* (28 September 1953).

there were also less happy alumni. While a handful of respondents had stated that the major had been too easy, not a single one had found it too challenging. Two former students explicitly noted that they thought the program had lacked intellectual rigor, just as another two admitted that they had chosen this program because of its reputation for being easy.[116]

The program's supposed lack of rigor became a major concern for the faculty over the years. American Studies 21-22 was geared towards students who would be willing to learn things they knew they might not be tested on. As the student newspaper noted, the course was geared "to the mature student," meaning a student willing to embark on his own in "attempting a rational struggle with the prescribed problems." In reality, this did not always happen. Students procrastinated, tried to find shortcuts, and often did the minimum amount of work necessary. "Last minute preparation is the rule, rather than the exception," two undergraduates noted. Partly because American Studies put so much trust in the willingness of students to work on their own, and because it largely eschewed quizzes and exams, it over time came to be seen as abstract and soft, and students specializing in American Studies were dismissed as amateurs. By the time Marx arrived at Amherst to take over Kazin's position, the field enjoyed a doubtful reputation on campus. Although many students enjoyed their classes in American Studies, few thought that they were as rigorous as the courses offered by other departments. "The popular image of the typical American Studies major is that of an academic dilettante," a review of the program written by two students noted in 1958. "Supposedly he never gets down to the business of learning a subject, but instead acquires a little superficial knowledge here, some more there, with nothing to tie it all together but that magnificent abstraction called 'America.'"[117]

[116] Taylor, "Report on a Questionnaire."
[117] Matthew M. Rubin and Arthur Powell, "American Studies 21-22 and Honors Course Utilize 'Learning by Doing,'" *The Amherst Student* (3 February 1958).

V

Once he began teaching, Marx quickly established himself as one of the most popular teachers at Amherst, and his three-part survey of American literature became for many students one of the most memorable classes they would take at the college. In informally published course evaluations, students regularly described him as a "brilliant lecturer" and called his course "the most exciting intellectual experience" at Amherst. "Professor Marx's determination and enthusiasm," one evaluation explained, "elicits an exuberant response from most students: many ranked the course among the best they had taken here." The first part of the survey, which covered American writing from William Bradford to Walt Whitman, was known as "one of the meatiest and most exciting courses in the curriculum," despite its relatively obscure subject matter. "Authors like William Bradford, Ben Franklin, Jonathan Edwards are not 'in,'" a reviewer acknowledged. "But given the direction of Marx's American Studies method, students are pleasantly surprised by their interest in the reading." While close reading was "a virtue well rewarded," Marx tended to emphasize other things. "The works are placed in a cultural context," the review explained, and were then related to themes such as "America's Puritan past, the immanent pastoral vision, and the dichotomy necessitated by a growing urban and technological society that sought a distinct way of life." The third course of the survey, which dealt with twentieth-century writing and covered authors ranging from Ernest Hemingway to Eugene O'Neill, was perhaps even more popular. Because it dealt with relatively recent texts, it was the type of course that many students enjoyed, regardless of their particular major. As one course

critique noted: “English 63 was one of those rare courses where practically everyone did virtually all the reading—and enjoyed it.”[118]

Such an enthusiastic response to a course was rare among the students at Amherst, and other American Studies classes received less generous evaluations. In a course on the history of the American South, for instance, many students criticized the cultural history approach the professor presented them with. “For most students,” one undergraduate wrote of the class, “the sojourn into Dixie suffered from many hazards of American Studies in general.” Students looking for concrete historical knowledge felt disappointed when they encountered the broad syntheses and abstract analytical concepts that the class was organized around. “In the grand attempt to understand a culture,” one student found, “historical events and other hard evidence were completely forgotten and unsupported generalizations became the prime concern.” Without clear criteria or tools for making generalizations, this student found it difficult to take the class seriously.[119] In another course taught by the same professor, the students voiced similar concerns. The seminar “seemed to wander without direction” and a “few overly vociferous individuals” tended to dominate the discussion. Because the course included segments on the contemporary social situation in the United States, it also tended “to become boringly autobiographical,” with students substituting their own experience for discussions of historical problems or issues.[120]

Throughout the 1960s, American Studies retained its reputation for oftentimes being abstract and soft, and many of the annual course critiques published during the decade dwelled

[118] See “Scrutiny: Amherst College Student Course Critique, 1967-68” and “Scrutiny: A Critique of Courses as Given First Semester, 1968-1969,” Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Student and Alumni Publications.
[119] “Scrutiny: Amherst College Student Course Critique, 1968-69,” Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Student and Alumni Publications.
[120] “Scrutiny: A Critique of Courses as Given First Semester, 1968-1969,” Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Student and Alumni Publications.

on this fact. They stressed that American Studies put emphasis on concepts rather than facts, and that it assumed that students had "an initial awareness of the facts of American history," which would then allow them to construct for themselves "a working conception of 'the consciousness of the time.'" When students approached their courses with curiosity, they accepted the fact that American Studies "largely defies rigid definition," and they embraced it "as an attempt to correlate social, political, and economic realities to the dominant cultural attitudes of a given period from the American past." When they approached it with skepticism, they made American Studies look like an intellectually inferior version of their history classes. As one student put it: "American Studies is history where what happened doesn't matter." And others agreed. While they acknowledged the fact that in American Studies historical facts "are not irrelevant but assumed" they were still irked that it benefited those with a theoretical turn of mind. According to one undergraduate, American Studies was "Valhalla for the student who can conjure up abstract models and apply them to particular problems."[121]

Marx was well aware of this situation, and during his time at Amherst, he supported efforts to make the program more rigorous and restrictive. "American Studies is very dangerous for the student who wants to work," he argued, "unless it is as demanding as possible."[122] For that reason, he was in favor of limiting the number of students who would be allowed to major in the field. In the fall of 1967, the program announced that it would only allow thirty students to become majors, and that it would expect all of them to write a senior thesis. "We now have sixty majors, 20 per cent of the junior class," Edwin Rozwenc explained. "It is not healthy to have this much concentration in a liberal arts college. We can't cope with them anymore." From now on,

[121] "Scrutiny: Amherst College Student Course Critique, 1967-68," Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Student and Alumni Publications
[122] Peter Swisher and Marshall Bloom, "Crowded Classrooms: A Problem to Small Colleges?," *The Amherst Student* (12 October 1964).

he announced, the program would be very selective in which students it would allow in. What the faculty were looking for, Rozwenc elucidated, was "range of interests, quality of mind and the way the student addresses himself to interdisciplinary questions." Marx supported this measure, and he was blunt in his assessment of the situation. "My feeling about American Studies is that it ought to be a fairly restrictive program because it tends to attract students for the wrong reasons," he told the college student newspaper. "Unless students are fairly serious about it, it may be less useful as education than some of the more traditional fields."[123]

In the late 1970s, when asked whether he thought American Studies was a discipline or not, the historian Gordon Wood had a difficult time answering this seemingly straightforward question. After grappling for a response, the best he could do was to observe that American Studies, whatever its disciplinary identity, seemed to beguile people with particular temperaments. "Certain kinds of students are attracted to American Civilization and certain kinds of minds are attracted to it," he had found.[124] The educational experience at Amherst over the previous thirty years seemed to both prove and disprove this point. On the one hand, American Studies 21-22 had shown that many students were eager to learn about American culture, and that a general education course built around the field could be extremely successful. On the other hand, the polarizing reactions to some seminars had indicated that it could put as many students off as it attracted. Of course, American Studies is not alone in fascinating some people while not remotely interesting others. But compared to similar programs and fields, it has always been a kind of intellectual litmus test. Frequently, students who felt attracted to it could not even explain what it was they liked about it. As one aspiring Americanist put it in a letter to one of the pioneers of the field: "If people like you, Annette Baxter and David Hall are in a field designated

[123] Tom Oliphant, "American Studies Limited to Thirty Next Year," *The Amherst Student* (9 November 1967).
[124] *American Civilization at Brown* (Spring 1979), Baxter Papers, Box 8, Folder 10.

'American Studies,' I know I'm in the right place!"[125] What they did know, however, was that American Studies could offer them something other fields lacked. As one undergraduate at Amherst put it in 1977: "American Studies courses are always the best, most exciting, and most relevant courses around."[126]

[125] Susan Conrad to Daniel Aaron, 17 March 1973, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 12, Folder 115.
[126] "Scrutiny: Spring 1977," Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Student and Alumni Publications.

Chapter 3

Americanists in the World

I

Like Ernest Hemingway, Perry Miller grew up on the West Side of Chicago in the years before World War I. With Hemingway's family residing in Oak Park and Miller's in Austin, the two lived only a short distance away from each other. But unlike Hemingway, who was six years his senior, Miller was too young to participate in what he considered his generation's defining event. After the United States declared war on Germany in the spring of 1917, Hemingway joined the Red Cross, left for Italy, and returned after being wounded in a mortar attack. When Miller dropped out of the University of Chicago in 1923, after his freshman year, it was partly to compensate for having missed this opportunity to prove himself in the world away from classrooms and books. Unhappy, restless, and envious of older acquaintances who had fought in the war, he spent a number of years working odd jobs and taking his chances. For a while, he lived in a mountain cabin in Colorado, where he associated with Wobblies and vagrants. He later moved to New York, where he wrote stories for pulp magazines and acted in the occasional play. Eventually, he found his way into the merchant marine, which sent him to South America, Europe, and Africa. And it was there, on the banks of the Congo, in the port of Matadi, that he received his intellectual calling. Standing at the edge of the jungle, watching drums of American case oil being unloaded, he suddenly realized that someone needed to explain "the innermost propulsion of the United States" to the world, that this person would have to be him, and that to

do so he needed to start at the very beginning, with the arrival of the Mayflower on the shores of New England.[1]

Miller's account of his African journey is one of the most famous stories told about the origins of American Studies. It has been described as the "opening chapter" of the field's history and as one of its original "paradigm dramas," and Miller has been characterized as "the most important single figure" in launching American Studies as an academic endeavor.[2] Despite its dramatic appeal, however, there are good reasons to doubt the claim that American Studies was "conceived on the banks of the Congo," as one scholar has argued.[3] While there is no question that Miller did travel to Africa after he dropped out of college, he only began telling this story thirty years later, long into a productive academic career. And when he finally publicized it in print, it formed part of a larger effort to portray himself as an especially unprofessorial type of professor. Miller was someone who "hated to be thought of as bookish" and who wanted "to be where the action was," one of his students later recalled.[4] He considered himself a "bluff tough man of the world" and liked to convey the impression that he was as good "in the library and classroom" as he was at "tarpon fishing or big-game hunting."[5] Eager to be seen as a man of

[1] For the original account of Miller's epiphany in the Congo, see Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956), vii-x. For information on Miller's early life, see Albert J. Gelpi, "Perry Miller, 1905-1963," *Harvard Review* 2, no. 2 (1964): 5, Robert Middlekauff, "Perry Miller," in *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 168, and Kenneth S. Lynn, "Perry Miller," *American Scholar* 52, no. 2 (1983): 224-25. Lynn in particular highlights the similarities between Hemingway and Miller, who eventually did meet each other in August 1944, in a recently liberated village in France.
[2] Randall Fuller, "Errand Into the Wilderness: Perry Miller as American Scholar," *American Literary History* 18, no. 1 (2006): 103, Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1979): 301-3, and Murray G. Murphey, "Perry Miller and American Studies," *American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2001): 5.
[3] Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.
[4] Randall Fuller, "Errand into the Wilderness: Perry Miller as American Scholar," *American Literary History* 18, no. 1 (2006): 103.
[5] John C. Crowell, "Reflections on Perry Miller: An Interview with Henry Nash Smith," 18 August 1975, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 6.

action as much as a thinker, Miller's story about his youthful exploits in the Congo was first and foremost about his own sense of self as a man and a scholar. The history of American Studies figured neither in his actual journey to Africa nor in the story he later began to tell about it.

But in spite of its shortcomings as a historical account of the origins of American Studies, Miller's yarn nevertheless captures an important truth about the development of the field. From the beginning, it was a profoundly transnational project, shaped by ideas and persons who frequently crossed physical and intellectual borders. Some of the most prominent scholars in American Studies only discovered American culture while residing abroad, just as some of the field's most influential books were written far away from the nation they dealt with. For many Americanists, the experience of fighting overseas in World War II proved intellectually life-changing, as they came to see their own culture reflected against alien customs and values for the first time in their lives. After the war, many of them returned to Asia and Europe as Fulbright professors, teaching the people they had once considered their enemies about American geography and American novels. For academics who did not go abroad, the experience of having foreign students in their classrooms in Massachusetts or Minnesota made them rethink their own assumptions about the United States and its place in the world. In addition, American academics often learned from foreign Americanists at the scholarly meetings and conferences they went to. With financial support from government agencies and private foundations, centers for American Studies sprung up in Europe and Japan soon after the war, drawing in curious students while struggling against rigid curricula and skeptical deans. As many scholars soon learned, American Studies may have begun in the United States, but its country of origin did not have a patent on it.

Because American Studies rose to prominence in the postwar era, and because its subject matter enabled it to play a role in the cultural contest between the United States and the Soviet

Union, it often appears as a side note in discussions of public diplomacy during the Cold War. Usually viewed as a useful instrument in the hands of State Department officials, it is frequently listed alongside other efforts to showcase American culture abroad, ranging from traveling art exhibitions to book distribution programs. As a typical manifestation of the midcentury "politics of apolitical culture," American Studies is said to have subscribed to a vision of the United States that erased conflict and elevated consensus. Compared to jazz musicians or writers, who are recognized for appropriating official resources and using them in subversive ways, academics are rarely seen as creative players on the international stage. And even when they are acknowledged as critical voices, their arguments are usually dismissed as ineffectual and naïve, supporting the fundamental conditions of American power even as they appear to denounce them. Just as their scholarship is said to have underwritten the idea of the United States as an exceptional nation, operating according to its own set of historical rules, their mere participation in official programs is seen as contradicting possible criticisms they tried to communicate. Scholars in American Studies, it appears, could not help but become ambassadors for the United States even in their attempts to criticize it.[6]

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[6] For typical examples of interpretations which see American Studies as a Cold War instrument, see Geraldine Murphy, "Romancing the Center: Cold War Politics and Classic American Literature," *Poetics Today* 9, no. 4 (1988): 737-47, William V. Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), Michael Holtzman, "The Ideological Origins of American Studies at Yale," *American Studies* 40, no. 2 (1999): 71-99, and Nicholas Guyatt, "'An Instrument of National Policy': Perry Miller and the Cold War," *Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 1 (2002): 107-49. For studies of public diplomacy during the Cold War, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), Volker R. Berghahn, *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe: Shepard Stone between Philanthropy, Academy, and Diplomacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), Giles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA, and Post-War American Hegemony* (London: Routledge, 2002), Alexander Stephan, ed., *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Lisa E. Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War Era* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), Greg Barnhisel and Catherine Turner, eds., *Pressing the Fight: Print Propaganda, and the Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), Martha Bayles, *Through a Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America's Image Abroad* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and*

What discussions of the international politics of American Studies tend to downplay is the diversity of experiences it enabled teachers and learners to have, and the degree of self-awareness that many participants brought to the programs they became part of. Often focusing on a single institution or organization, many arguments about the field's political uses rely on a monochrome image of how it functioned at home and abroad. American Studies interacted with the world not just through Fulbright exchanges but also through international conferences, visiting students, and the personal connections many Americanists forged throughout their careers. Summer schools in Austria, libraries in India, and diploma programs from Pennsylvania were all part of how the field reached beyond the borders of the nation it studied. Never especially successful at defining itself, American Studies was even less successful at developing a clear-cut role as an instrument of public diplomacy, often raising more questions about its uses than answering them. Although potentially the most useful field for convincing skeptical foreigners of the virtues of American culture, it was often the most self-conscious and timid. Always worried about how their work would be perceived, professors felt especially paranoid when teaching abroad, and students, usually aware of the geopolitical context in which they were learning, knew which opinions to share and which to keep to themselves. American Studies introduced the United States to students all over the world, from New Zealand to Norway, but it never had the last word on the topic.[7]

American Creative Writing during the Cold War (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015). For the most prominent example of a study stressing the ways in which artists put Cold War resources to subversive use, see Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[7] For a recent example of a study that focuses exclusively on one venue through which American Studies interacted with the world outside the United States, see George Blaustein, *Nightmare Envy and Other Stories: American Culture and European Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). While an excellent analysis of American Studies in postwar Europe, it does not capture the variety of channels through which the field reached foreign audiences.

II

Miller returned to the United States, and to the University of Chicago, in 1926. He received his undergraduate degree in 1928 and began his graduate studies the same year. After his revelation on the far side of the ocean, it seemed clear to him to focus his research on the seventeenth century. To most of his academic instructors, this appeared far from a promising field for a young man to enter. "All the hay of New England Puritanism had been threshed," he later recalled one of his mentors warning him. "I would wreck my career, even before it commenced, crawling through the dry stubble hoping to pick up stray gleanings."[8] But Miller remained undeterred, and under the supervision of Percy Holmes Boynton, he began with his thesis on the politics of religion in colonial Massachusetts. In part because it seemed so unlikely that an energetic young scholar would choose seventeenth-century Puritanism as his field of research, Miller made an impression on many of the people he met, including faculty and fellow students. Decades later, a professor at the University of Wyoming would remember an encounter with Miller in 1929, when they were both graduate students at Chicago and shared a library carrel. Although their acquaintance was brief and "not especially communicative," he remembered asking Miller about the subject of his research, "Watch out. You may get caught by these fellows," he joked after learning that Miller worked on the Puritans. The reply he received had stuck with him ever since. "They are the subject for a thesis," Miller told him. "They are otherwise for me so many insects under a microscope."[9]

Miller had spent much of his time in graduate school doing research in the libraries and archives at Harvard, and after receiving his doctorate in 1931, the university hired him as an assistant professor. Before Howard Mumford Jones was recruited to oversee Harvard's

[8] Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), xix.
[9] Wilson Clough to Kenneth Lynn, 20 March 1983, Lynn Papers, Box 2.

experiment in American Civilization, the study of American literature in the school's department of English was driven by two young professors who seemed mirror images of one another. Perry Miller was one of them, F. O. Matthiessen was the other. Although they were both interested in probing the traditions and conventions that together made up American culture, they could not have been more different in their temperaments or personalities. An exemplary college man, Matthiessen had gone to Yale, had been a member of Skull and Bones, and during his time as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford had come to see the British tutorial system as the gold standard for education. Miller, on the other hand, was the prototype of the modern research professor: pragmatic, unsentimental, and focused on advancing his field of knowledge rather than helping students attain refinement and cultivation. Whereas Matthiessen was short, intense, and reticent, Miller was tall, outgoing, and boisterous. The "Matthiessen-Miller" tradition, as some people came to think of it, arose out of the two men's shared interest in reading American texts as if they were keys to the "American mind," as Miller tended to call it. Apart from this dedication to the study of American culture, however, they had little in common, and their relationship would become increasingly strained over the years.[10]

One thing they did share was the experience of discovering America only after they had left its territorial borders. Just as Miller had recognized the significance of the United States only when working for the merchant marine in the Congo, Matthiessen had not been interested in American literature until he moved to England after his graduation from college. At Oxford, Matthiessen did not just discover the tutorial system, which he brought back with him and made part of the History and Literature concentration when Harvard hired him in 1929. He also did, as

[10] The most detailed discussion of the two men's relationship can be found in John C. Crowell, "Reflections on Perry Miller: An Interview with Henry Nash Smith," 18 August 1975, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 6. Smith describes the "Matthiessen-Miller tradition" as combing "the study of literature with a developed interest in history." See Henry Nash Smith to E. D. Hirsch, 22 January 1971, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 10.

two of his biographers have noted, "his first real work in American literature," discovering *Walden* on "a trip up the Rhine" and reading *Leaves of Grass* in "a teashop near the British Museum." Years later, in the summer of 1942, when his long-awaited *American Renaissance* was published, Oxford University Press would claim that it was Matthiessen's close familiarity with the American land that had enabled him to write this magisterial study. "For many years," a promotional brochure explained, "Mr. Matthiessen has travelled widely throughout the United States, by Ford and by foot, and this close feeling for his country has contributed much to his interpretation of our culture."[11] In reality, however, Matthiessen may have been more familiar with the British countryside than with American landscapes. During his time as a Rhodes scholar, he went on a series of long walking tours and likely "saw more of England, close up, than any other country," including his own.[12]

Miller and Matthiessen were both in Boston by the time Harvard started its program in American Civilization, but the world outside the United States was never far from their minds. In January of 1938, as Jones began to hire the counselors who would run the extracurricular program for undergraduate students, Edmund Morgan wrote Matthiessen from Europe, trying to gauge his chances of receiving a counsellorship when he returned to the United States the following year. Morgan had graduated from Harvard College the previous summer and planned on enrolling in the American Civilization graduate program in the upcoming fall. He was spending the year in England, listening to lectures at the London School of Economics, and like Matthiessen twenty years earlier, he also made trips to the continent, visiting Germany and France as soon as the opportunity presented itself. "Paris is everything I had hoped it would be

[11] Brochure, Matthiessen Papers, Box 12, Folder "Printed Material."
[12] The influence his time in Europe had on Matthiessen are discussed in George Abbott White to Marcus Cunliffe, 15 July 1980, Cunliffe Papers, Box 9, Folder 5, and Harry Levin, "Matty at Eliot House," 30 January 1982, Cunliffe Papers, Box 12, Folder 12.

and more," he wrote Matthiessen, envious of how gracefully and carelessly the French seemed to live. "I never knew that a city could be so beautiful or so civilized."[13] He had been enormously impressed with the spired cathedrals he had seen in many German cities, and which had reminded him of New England meeting houses, whose function for the community he thought they resembled. "The Europeans appear to know much more of the art of living than we," he noted, echoing a sentiment that he knew to be a cliché but had discovered to be true nonetheless. "One feels that they are on much better terms with nature, that they know what to expect from life and how to enjoy it."[14]

Matthiessen would have been able to understand these sentiments from his own time in Europe. What he might not have grasped, by contrast, was how much things had changed since he had been at Oxford over a decade before. As much as Morgan was basking in the experience of discovering the Old World for himself, he also felt that what he liked about Europe would not be able to last. "It is hard to escape the feeling that all its richness is only the mellow glow of an Indian summer which cannot last much longer," he confided to Matthiessen.[15] Wherever he looked, nationalism dominated the public discussion, and he found it nearly impossible to find "anyone whose thinking in the political realm transcends national boundaries." Instead of social reform, rearmament was on the political agenda not just in Rome or Berlin but also in Paris and London. "And in Russia we hear of one execution after another." He could not see how anything but catastrophe could result from this dynamic, and the Europeans, "with a shrug of the shoulder," seemed to admit just as much. "The absolute of all political aims seems to be the

[13] Edmund Morgan to F. O. Matthiessen, 21 March 1938, Matthiessen Papers (1967 Acquisitions), Box 3, Folder "Edmund Morgan."
[14] Edmund Morgan to F. O. Matthiessen, 24 January 1938, Matthiessen Papers (1967 Acquisitions), Box 3, Folder "Edmund Morgan."
[15] Edmund Morgan to F. O. Matthiessen, 24 January 1938, Matthiessen Papers (1967 Acquisitions), Box 3, Folder "Edmund Morgan."

pushing of national interests." Almost in spite of himself, he could not help but feel a new appreciation for what he thought the United States had accomplished. "However crude or however naïve we in America may be," he wrote Matthiessen, "we have a certain feeling of idealism that is better than this. Our aims may be confused and inchoate, but we at least perform obeisance to principles higher than nationalism." As it had done for others before him, his time outside his own country had given him a new appreciation for what he had left behind as he had crossed the Atlantic. "Being away from America for a year is making me much more conscious of what America, in the broadest sense, is."[16]

Even if he had not gone to Europe, Morgan would likely still have applied for admission to the American Civilization program, just as he would have tried to get one of the coveted counsellorships that were open to students doing doctoral work in the field. But given that he did find himself in Europe when writing Matthiessen about the position, he saw an opportunity to make this circumstance a part of his appeal for admission. "Returning from Europe" he explained, "nothing would please me more than to have the opportunity of contact with persons interested in any way in American culture." He assumed that most Americans were just like he had been before he embarked on his overseas trip: unable to understand who they were and what they had achieved as a nation. If he could contribute to changing this fact, he would be more than happy to "gladly learn and gladly teach," as he told Matthiessen. "For the more that Americans become conscious of the history and literature of their civilization, the more likely it is to be preserved, and the more likely it is also that their vague feelings will be crystalized into a definite ideal."[17] Like Miller before him, Morgan had been profoundly affected by the time he had spent

[16] Edmund Morgan to F. O. Matthiessen, 21 March 1938, Matthiessen Papers (1967 Acquisitions), Box 3, Folder "Edmund Morgan."
[17] Edmund Morgan to F. O. Matthiessen, 30 December 1937, Matthiessen Papers (1967 Acquisitions), Box 3, Folder "Edmund Morgan."

away from the familiar scenes of American life. And like Miller, he knew what a compelling story this made.

Whether or not his passionate letters from London played a part in the decision, Morgan did end up with a counsellorship when he returned to Boston in the fall of 1938. But even though he found himself back in the New World, he was constantly reminded of the fraying Europe he had seen on his travels. Among the professors and students he met in the graduate program, almost everyone had made the trip across the Atlantic at some point in the past. Matthiessen had done so in 1925, Henry Nash Smith in 1930, and Miller had been to Europe just the previous year. Supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship, he had spent most of the year in Italy, "away from the distraction of Cambridge," sorting his notes and writing most of what would become the first volume of *The New England Mind*.[18] But as the decade came to a close, and as German expansionism reached its first high point with the invasion of Poland, even the people who had never been to Paris or Rome suddenly found themselves in constant arguments about the fate of Europe and the question of intervention. The Harvard Teachers Union became a center of political discussion during this time, as faculty engaged in heated debates about whether they should support American involvement or not. As petitions, speeches, and arguments became part of the daily existence on campus, Miller and Matthiessen found themselves on opposite sides of the issue. Miller supported American intervention while Matthiessen, representing the viewpoint of the isolationist left at the time, opposed the idea. Their different experiences during the war would drive them further apart, but the original split, which led to months of bitterness between the two men, had occurred while the United States was technically still a nation at peace.[19]

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[18] Perry Miller to Gordon Ray, 4 November 1961, Miller Papers, Box "Correspondence A-K," Folder "E-K."
[19] The political discussions at Harvard during the late 1930s are chronicled, among other places, in Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman, eds., *F. O. Matthiessen, 1902-1950: A Collective Portrait* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950).

Miller and Matthiessen experienced two very different wars. Two days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Alfred Kazin noted in his diary the conflicting emotions he felt as the significance of the event began to sink in. Eating his lunch "in a beanery on Queens Boulevard," with planes flying overhead, he thought for a second that an air raid was happening when a nearby ambulance sounded its siren. The day before, he had been surprised by his own reaction upon hearing the news from Pearl Harbor. Brought up "to distrust all expressions of explicit patriotism and chauvinism," he felt strangely moved by the growing sense that he and the people around him on the streets of New York were all part of a community, "and certainly one that is more than a community of rhetorical associations."[20] His initial reaction upon hearing the news of Japanese attack, however, had been a different one: "My first thought," he confided to his journal, had been about the book he was writing. "It's going to be a struggle to finish it."[21] Neither Miller nor Matthiessen had reacted this way. Whereas Kazin was concerned with finishing the manuscript for *On Native Grounds*, the two Harvard professors felt instantly ready to put their own work aside. Of the two men, however, only Miller would end up wearing fatigues overseas. Because of his age and his health, Matthiessen did not pass muster when he tried to join the Marine Corps. For the duration of the war, he would have to remain, as one of his friends quipped, "an intellectual Leatherneck."[22]

Miller joined the Army, was assigned to the Office of Strategic Services, and eventually participated in combat during the liberation of France. As late as February of 1944, he still wondered about his chances of "ever succeeding in becoming more than a sort of office boy."[23]

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[20] Diary entry for 9 December 1941, Kazin Papers, Journals, Volume 4.
[21] Diary entry for 8 December 1941, Kazin Papers, Journals, Volume 4.
[22] Hugh Cunningham to F. O. Matthiessen, 13 November 1942, Matthiessen Papers, Box 2, Folder "Cunningham, Hugh."
[23] Perry Miller to Kenneth Murdock, 16 February 1944, Miller Papers (HUG 4572.7), Box "Miller- Murdock Correspondence."

He had spent most of his initial service and training doing clerical work, splitting his time between Washington, DC and London. During his early rotations abroad, he tried to make the most of what he felt was an unsatisfying position, and despite working in the intelligence branch of the armed forces, he kept an active social life going. "I have known of your presence for some weeks," T. S. Eliot wrote him in April of 1943, trying to find a time they could both meet for dinner.[24] The following year, however, Miller would no longer be in a position to make arrangements for social occasions. In London again and preparing for his deployment in France, he found himself close to the scene of a rocket attack, helping the first responders trying to clear bodies from the debris. "To live under the constant psychological threat of the thing" proved to be a novel experience for someone who had prided himself on his lust for adventure—as did the experience of picking up bodies "which had been so shattered that no bone in them was solid."[25]

Miller would see significantly more death before the end of the war. During his deployment in France, he witnessed a fighter plane crash into a farmhouse outside an orchard, and when he arrived at the scene of the impact, he found the charred corpse of the pilot with skin "black as a negro's" and with teeth "shining white in a quiet smile." Later on, after spending a night in a ditch trying to survive a German offensive, he looked around when daylight broke and saw himself encircled by the frozen corpses of horses and men. During the liberation of Paris, he managed to kill an enemy soldier himself, admitting that he was not sure what he felt about this event. "The fact of death is commonplace," he wrote Matthiessen back in Cambridge, trying to impress on him just how profound an experience he was undergoing.[26] The idea that anyone might confuse teaching with war service seemed to him simply absurd. "That just doesn't mean

[24] T. S. Eliot to Perry Miller, 30 April 1943, Miller Papers, Box "Correspondence A-K," Folder "E-K."
[25] Perry Miller to Kenneth Murdock, 29 July 1944, Miller Papers, Box "Miller-Murdock Correspondence."
[26] Perry Miller to F. O. Matthiessen, 13 January [1945?], Matthiessen Papers (1967 Acquisitions), Box 3, Folder "Perry Miller."

anything," he wrote Kenneth Murdock at Harvard. It was still worth writing books, he explained, but the idea that these books might help win the war in the Pacific or Europe seemed to him "strange and remote."[27] On the contrary, he felt that the experience of having fought in the war would be an invaluable asset should he ever make it back into a lecture hall or a seminar room. Having seen combat up close, he felt that he would be able to speak "with conviction to this generation," something he was not sure his colleagues who had remained in the States would be able to do.[28]

Academics like Matthiessen, who did not end up going overseas during the war, reacted in different ways to the social and educational realities they suddenly faced. There was a widespread sense that wartime education would marginalize the liberal arts, and that universities would increasingly start to resemble technical schools. "There is a fear," the *Pennsylvania Gazette* noted, "that after the war the emphasis on applied techniques and knowledge will prevent the return of the Humanities."[29] While this looming danger was something that Matthiessen in particular was worried about, many of his colleagues, both at Harvard and elsewhere, usually were preoccupied with more immediate issues. Some, like the young Richard Hofstadter, who had been "desperately eager to get out," were simply happy not to have to serve overseas.[30] Others, like Merle Curti, tried to control their frustration over how difficult wartime rationing had made it to get books into print, given that the paper shortage at times only allowed publishers to issue small "experimental editions."[31] Many professors had to accustom themselves to a loss of status on campus, as academic hierarchies were toppled by the demands of wartime

[27] Perry Miller to Kenneth Murdock, undated, Miller Papers, Box "Miller-Murdock Correspondence."
[28] Perry Miller to Kenneth Murdock, 29 July 1944, Miller Papers (HUG 4572.7), Box "Miller-Murdock Correspondence."
[29] "Are the Humanities Doomed?," *Pennsylvania Gazette* (June 1943), 295.
[30] Richard Hofstadter to Alfred Kazin, 5 May 1944, Kazin Papers, Folder "Hofstadter, Richard (1)."
[31] Merle Curti to Paul Buck, 3 November [?], Buck Papers, Box 1, Folder "Curti."

mobilization, and not every teacher enjoyed this upside-down world as Jones did at Harvard. Part of the volunteer police tasked with patrolling the campus, he considered it "a darn good thing for Harvard democracy," and he enjoyed seeing the sophomore who was a sergeant in his platoon bark orders "at squads composed of instructors, janitors, and graduate students."[32] To the extent that the academics who remained on the home front had something in common, it was the sensation of seeing their private struggles dwarfed by unfolding of history elsewhere. "One can no longer let personal difficulties assume the importance they might once have had," one Americanist noted, while another jotted down in his diary that he had ceased to seem "especially important" even to himself.[33]

While Miller was doubtful that any professor who had not seen combat would be able to connect with veterans after the war, the amount of correspondence Matthiessen exchanged with his former tutees suggested to him that this would not be the case. Because Matthiessen had remained in New England, he was relatively easy to reach, and many of the young men he had tutored stayed in touch with him during their deployments abroad. One of his advisees, John Finch, wrote him "from an appallingly remote coral atoll in the Pacific," complete with "sharp reefs and heavy surf and a lagoon full of strange fish." Reflecting on the horrors of carrier combat, he elaborated on the intensity of recollection that stress and fatigue could produce. "It's amazing how important your past becomes in this present," he explained. "I've spent completely absorbed hours, after the pre-dawn take-offs, or during alerts, or on long flights over the water, thinking of the people and the experiences and the places that have etched their way into my life." He was not only thinking of people, however, but also of books, and during his time in the

[32] Howard Mumford Jones to Henry Nash Smith, 14 March 1942, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 2.
[33] Newton Arvin to Willard Thorp, 25 July 1940, Thorp Papers, Box 1, Folder 8; Theodore Hornberger, diary entry for 6 August 1941, Hornberger Papers (Pennsylvania), Box 1, Folder 3.

Pacific there was no book he spent more time pondering than *Moby-Dick*. "I don't think the Pequod ever sailed these waters," he wrote Matthiessen, given that he had frequently seen whales in the quadrant in which he was stationed. And whaling ships, he informed him, were hardly what whales had to fear at this point in time. Because they resembled submarines, they often got "bombed and strafed" by pilots flying patrol over the ocean.[34]

World War II may have interrupted educations and delayed the writing of books, but it did not stop Americans from thinking, reading, and talking about their country's history, its artistic achievements, and its future place in the world. Faced with long hours of boredom as they waited in trenches or barracks, many soldiers started to read American literature for the first time in their lives, devouring the sturdy paperback books that the United States military supplied them with by the thousands.[35] And for those G.I.s who had already been avid readers, the hardships of service were rarely enough to prevent them from continuing to think about publications and authors. "The literary life in the Pacific has its difficulties," William Van O'Connor, who would later teach at Minnesota with Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx, quipped when some of his books got lost on their way to Manila, feeling unlucky but far from discouraged.[36] Compared to their peacetime habits, many former students read with an intensity they had never worked up before, devouring books they may have otherwise let gather dust on their shelves. A Belgian military base may have been an unlikely location in which to read about the middle phase of Henry James, but when Matthiessen sent one of his students his recent book on the topic, the recipient felt as if he had been "picked up from out of the sea" just before drowning.[37]

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[34] John Finch to F. O. Matthiessen, 17 April 1944, Matthiessen Papers, Box 2, Folder "F."
[35] For the significance of books and reding for American soldiers during the war, see Molly Guptill Manning, *When Books Went to War: The Stories that Helped Us Win World War II* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2014).
[36] William Van O'Connor to Robert Penn Warren, 29 July 1945, Warren Papers, Box 52, Folder 1032.
[37] J. C. Levenson to F. O. Matthiessen, 19 January 1945, Matthiessen Papers (1967 Acquisitions), Box 3, Folder "J. C. Levenson."

Whether they spent it at home or abroad, the war influenced students of American Studies in at least two different ways. On the one hand, it confronted them with large questions about the meaning of American history and the peculiarities of American life. Marx would spend his entire career writing about the role of technology in American culture. In his dissertation, in his book, and in shorter pieces, he would examine the ways in which technology had shaped how Americans thought of themselves and of others. Without his Navy service during the war, which brought him face-to-face with the imposing machinery of modern combat, he might have never reached the conclusion that technology was "the major transformative force" of modern life, just as he might never have enrolled in the American Civilization program after his demobilization.[38] Aside from provoking such intellectual questions, however, the war also contributed to the field's future in more mundane ways. By interrupting the normal routines of education and work, it gave Americans the opportunity to do things they might otherwise not have been able to do. And for some students, this meant continuing their education outside of classrooms. In the summer of 1944, one of Matthiessen's students hitchhiked from Massachusetts to Washington State, quizzing the people he met during his trip what they knew about Herman Melville. Asking "a varied group" of over forty people, "from Negro truck drivers to school teachers," he was disappointed to find that only five had read *Moby-Dick*, and that only two appear to have liked it.[39] After the war, that same student worked as a cattle attendant on a relief ship headed for Danzig, writing to Matthiessen that he had done so largely satisfy the urge to go to sea that he had felt "ever since reading *Moby Dick* in English 7."[40] Even without World War II, American Studies might have become a permanent presence on campuses in the United States and abroad.

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[38] Maureen Montgomery, "The State of American Studies: An Interview with Leo Marx," *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1992): 51.
[39] Paul Francis to F. O. Matthiessen, 2 October 1944, Matthiessen Papers, Box 2, Folder "Francis, Paul."
[40] Paul Francis to F. O. Matthiessen, 16 September 1946, Matthiessen Papers, Box 2, Folder "Francis, Paul."

But without the experiences the war enabled people to have, whether they stayed on the home front or went overseas, it might not have meant as much as it did.

III

After 1945, when American Studies made its first inroads in Europe, it was in formerly hostile countries that it celebrated its greatest successes. In Austria and Germany, in the areas occupied by American forces, it managed to effectively market itself as an instrument that could help a defeated people transition from dictatorship to democracy, and it quickly gained the support of authorities both in the United States and in Europe. Although it frequently met with skepticism in the years after the war, as suspicions of indoctrination ran high, it nevertheless managed to arouse the curiosity of many people hungry for information about American books, American films, and American music. American academics would frequently joke about the field's democratizing ambitions, mentioning the low expectations they had for teaching former Nazis how to pick judges, elect politicians, or respect the rights of minority groups. As Henry Steele Commager would write to Merle Curti when hearing of his friend's upcoming travels to Europe: "fingers crossed on teaching the Germans democracy."[41] Curti himself admitted that he was not entirely convinced either. If it were up to him, he told Commager, he would much rather teach in England than Germany, although he knew very well that the latter was "in much greater need of some sort of fair understanding of the United States."[42]

It made sense for Curti to assume that American culture would be appreciated more by the British than by the Germans. After all, the two countries had fought side by side in the war, whereas Germany had been the enemy they had tried to defeat. In fact, however, the opposite

[41] Henry Steele Commager to Merle Curti, undated, Curti Papers, Box 9, Folder 25.
[42] Merle Curti to Henry Steele Commager, 26 June 1949, Commager Papers, Box 15, Folder 77.

was the case. During the war, it had seemed to some Americans that there was little need for American Studies in Britain. "We need to have English thought and trends interpreted to us more than England needs an interpretation of America," Frank Dobie had discovered during a stay in Cambridge in 1943.[43] The British, he thought, already knew how important the United States was, whereas Americans often seemed to have little appreciation for the significance of the Commonwealth. After the war, however, with the menace of Nazism no longer threatening British existence, he discovered how naïve he had been. Instead of friendly interest, which had received during the war, he now encountered polite condescension. "The reason they don't have a fuller collection of Americana at Cambridge is because they have not wanted it," he noted in 1945, after Cambridge University had failed to use funds from the Rockefeller Foundation meant for the purchase of American books.[44] This was not, however, because of a lack of interest among British students. Teaching Royal Air Force cadets, Denis Brogan found that students in Britain often preferred American history over European history, with which they had been "stuffed at school."[45] The real problem, many professors came to recognize after the war, lay with established academics who still considered the United States as little more than a cultural upstart. As a Yale professor discovered during a trip to England after the war: "evidently we are still colonials."[46]

It should not have come as a surprise to American academics that their British colleagues would be dismissive of the value of American culture. To many observers, it seemed that a sense of cultural superiority was all that Britain had left after the war. Traveling to England in the late 1940s, many Americans felt as if they had gone back in time. With its shortages of clothing and

[43] Frank Dobie to Henry Steele Commager, 14 January 1946, Commager Papers, Box 17, Folder 78.
[44] Frank Dobie to Henry Steele Commager, 14 January 1946, Commager Papers, Box 17, Folder 78.
[45] D.W. Brogan to Henry Steele Commager, 8 February 1945, Commager Papers, Box 9, Folder 31.
[46] Stanley Williams to Marcus Cunliffe, 29 September 1950, Cunliffe Papers, Box 9, Folder 1.

food, its sparse accommodations, and its lack of even the most basic luxuries, it reminded them of nothing more than their own country in the Depression. One year after the war, when Allan Nevins arrived in Britain, he discovered scarcity wherever he looked. “In all restaurants and clubs a serving of bread counts as a full course,” he wrote Commager back in the States, noting that the bread was “dark, heavy, soggy.”[47] Because there was no fat to cook with, even warm meals were tasteless and bland. It was easy to procure potatoes and beans, he found, but cigarettes or beer were difficult to locate. Napkins, he discovered, were as rare as clothes were expensive. In the late 1940s, Britain was not the only country that looked bleak in the eyes of American travelers, and it was not just in London that fresh produce was rare. Advising a friend before his departure for Oslo, Kenneth Murdock urged him to bring soap, tobacco, and juice concentrate. “You will probably, like most Americans, get very hungry for fruit in Norway, and particularly for fruit juice,” he told him. “There is some sort of orange or lemon available in crystal form, and it might be worthwhile taking something of the sort with you.”[48] Compared to other countries, the British seemed to take this situation especially hard. Given their diminished status in the international order, the last thing many of them wanted to hear were well-fed Americans holding forth about the virtues of American civilization.

On the continent itself, the economic situation was equally desperate after the war. Illness and undernutrition were constant companions as people tried to rebuild cities and reunite with family members. Compared to the British, however, who had been living with the presence of Americans in their country for several years, Germans and Austrians were still able to savor the sheer novelty of the moment. Jazz music and Hollywood films, Hershey bars and chewing gum

[47] Allan Nevins to Henry Steele Commager, 5 August 1946, Commager Papers, Box 45, Folder 51.
[48] Kenneth Murdock to Robert Spiller, 8 December 1949, Murdock Papers (HUG 4589.5), Box 2, Folder “Spiller, Robert E.”

may have seemed to some Europeans vulgar or uncultured, but for just as many they represented liberation from not just political but also cultural norms. When American Studies gained a foothold on the continent, it found an environment that was in equal parts skeptical and curious. In most European countries, students did not learn about the United States in high school or university. Their knowledge of America came from different sources, and to the extent that they had been exposed to American culture, it had been through the press, through films, and through books they had read in translation. So, when one student at a summer school told his classmates that he had only seen America from afar—through the periscope of a submarine—they had no reason to doubt him.[49]

When the Salzburg Seminar met for the first time in the summer of 1947, this was the cultural soil in which it tried to take hold. An intellectual outgrowth of the European relief efforts of the time, the seminar was the idea of a handful of graduate students at Harvard. The driving force behind the endeavor was Clemens Heller, an Austrian émigré who had come to the United States in 1938, fleeing the Nazis after the annexation of Austria. Sponsored by the Harvard Student Council and financed through private donations, it was based on a simple idea: in an effort to increase international understanding, it would bring together American professors and European students in the picturesque environment of Schloss Leopoldskron, an eighteenth-century rococo palace located in the Austrian Alps. In this environment, students who until recently had seen each other as enemies could come together "on the neutral ground of American culture" as they read novels and listened to lectures. Living together for several weeks, they would learn just as much about one another as they would about American history, society, and

[49] For the impact American soldiers had on Britain, see Juliet Gardiner, *Over Here: The GIs in Wartime Britain* (London: Collins and Brown, 1992). The German encounter with American culture after 1945 is well described in Werner Sollors, *The Temptation of Despair: Tales of the 1940s* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

culture. It would be a substitute trip to a country that most of them had never been to and that many might not have a chance to visit in the foreseeable future. Returning to their home countries after the summer, the budding lawyers, teachers, and journalists would be living examples of cosmopolitanism and broad-mindedness, carrying the education they had been afforded in Salzburg back to their countries and their communities.[50]

This was the theory behind the Salzburg Seminar. That it would look different in practice was something that no one had doubted. But at least in some respects, the assumptions it was based on turned out to reflect the realities of the time. The students who came to Salzburg did in fact know very little about the United States, and whatever knowledge they possessed had come for the most part from the popular press. Some professors who taught at the seminar found this to be a challenging situation. The political scientist Benjamin Wright noted that despite their otherwise noteworthy educational achievements, most of his students tended to be "painfully ignorant" when it came to understanding the United States. "To many a European," he noted, "America is the land of Hollywood and the slick paper magazines."[51] Other academics, by contrast, thought that this was exactly what made the teaching at Schloss Leopoldskron so interesting and unusual. "It's an exciting assignment," Smith wrote to a friend, noting how sophisticated his students were in their own right while emphasizing how little they knew about American history.[52] "The Europeans were for the most part very superior people," he discovered, "but many, perhaps most of them are very ill informed about anything related to America before 1920."[53] While he sometimes wondered if his lectures on the Far West were too specialized, he

[50] The origins of the Salzburg Seminar are detailed in "Salzburg Seminar in American Studies: A Report," 1948, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 25, Folder 313. The same ground is covered in Blaustein, *Nightmare Envy*, 122-72.
[51] "Salzburg Seminar Teaches for Peace," *Smith College Associated News* (4 October 1949).
[52] Henry Nash Smith to Henry F. May, 14 December 1948, May Papers, Carton 6, Folder "Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization."
[53] Henry Nash Smith to Henry F. May, 27 September 1948, May Papers, Box 6, Folder 1.

felt enormously satisfied whenever he noticed students getting excited over the issues and ideas he told them about.

The Salzburg Seminar also reflected the economic realities of the time. Despite the "story-book setting" of the castle amid mountains and lakes, and despite the lush gardens and rococo classrooms, the all-pervading scarcity of postwar Europe colored the endeavor from beginning to end.[54] Professors had to be careful in designing their courses, given that many of the books they might want to use were not available overseas. In order to avoid putting even more strain on the Austrian economy, the Seminar imported all of its food from North America. The "adequate but simple fare" that could be organized this way was then supplemented by fruit and vegetables grown in the gardens of the estate.[55] The Seminar organizers had to remind participants not to make use of the lively black market for schillings in order to get a better exchange rate than that offered by the Austrian National Bank. "The Seminar does not mean to dictate in any way the conduct of its staff," a memorandum explained, only to add that "it is unavoidably true, however, that if our students learn that members of the Seminar are dealing with the black market in Salzburg, the morale of the Seminar is seriously threatened."[56] Despite living in a literal castle, the participants were not shielded from the shortages they found outside their gates. As one Italian student bemoaned, reflecting on the food he had eaten during his Austrian stay: "A little more milk and fresh fruit, and a little less cucumber and onions would have pleased me very much."[57]

[54] Henry Nash Smith to Clarence Gohdes, 18 August 1948, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 23.
[55] "Salzburg Seminar in American Studies: A Report," 1948, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 25, Folder 313.
[56] John Finch and Richard Webster, "Memorandum to American Members of the Salzburg Seminar," May Papers, Carton 6, Folder "Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization."
[57] Vittorio Gabriel, statement on the Salzburg Seminar, 1 October 1947, Matthiessen Papers, Box 7, Folder "Statements on Seminar."

Pedagogically, an important aspect of the Seminar was its ability to bring different people into close contact with one another. Students were not just meant to learn from attending lectures and classes but also from seeing foreign academics up close. Returning from Salzburg, Smith had noted how small the enterprise was when seen in the context of "the whole problem of European-American relations." He was not sure, however, whether there was another way of establishing meaningful ties between the countries involved. "The trick is to find some way of establishing personal contacts, and the Salzburg idea is by far the most promising means of doing this that I have heard of," he explained.[58] Whether at lunch, over coffee, or while brushing their teeth in the morning, the students and teachers spent so much time together that they almost automatically learned from each other. While the American faculty were curious about the personal backgrounds and political beliefs of their students, the students in turn used their chances to quiz them about everything from Charlie Chaplin to the mechanisms of baseball.[59] When Margaret Mead, who taught a class on anthropology in Salzburg one summer, asked her students to investigate the Seminar community "as though it was a South Sea Island," she merely made explicit what had always been part of its implicit reason for being. "It was startling to learn from a Dutch girl one morning at breakfast," Matthiessen amusedly noted in a report, "that her assignment was to observe the table-manners of Americans."[60]

While the students enjoyed "the informality of the student-faculty relationship," they were not always as comfortable interacting with one another.[61] After all, many of them had just a few years earlier found themselves on opposite sides of the trenches, often figuratively but

[58] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 11 October 1948, Aaron Papers, Folder 329.
[59] Alice Taylor, "Seminar at Salzburg to Dispel Skepticism about U.S.," *Smith College Associated News* (4 November 1949).
[60] F. O. Matthiessen, "The Salzburg Seminar," undated, Matthiessen Papers, Box 7, Folder "Statements on Seminar."
[61] Taylor, "Seminar at Salzburg."

sometimes literally. The organizers, of course, had always been aware of the challenges that might arise from this situation, taking particular note of how the presence of Germans in Salzburg might "disrupt the general atmosphere" of the Seminar. In 1947, before the Seminar had established itself on a permanent basis, this was a particularly acute problem, and the mere gathering of people from all over Europe created "immediate tensions" and "intense stimulation." Even in later years, tensions between students from different countries could quickly flare up, as was the case with a Dutch participant in 1949, who felt it impossible at first to speak with any of the Germans who were in Salzburg that year. But he eventually started talking to them, as the organizers of the Seminar noted: "first about the subjects they were studying together, and then as he might with any other students."[62] In this instance at least, the "neutral ground of American culture" did provide a meeting space for people who would otherwise have felt little reason to engage with each other. Looking closely at the United States, former adversaries did not have to look too closely at one another.

During the 1950s, teachers of American Studies often discovered that the foreign students in their classrooms idealized the United States to a greater extent than their American students tended to do. Teaching a special seminar for exchange students at the University of Minnesota in 1953, Marx discovered just how hard his students tried to see the United States in the best possible light. "They are in fact really much more American than we are, and much more anxious to believe the best about us," he noted. "They resist taking the dark imaginations of Melville and Hawthorne seriously, and want to believe that the energy and comfort and prosperity and excitement on the surface of American life is the 'real thing.'"[63] Julius Bixler, the president of Colby College, discovered something similar when he returned to Salzburg in the

[62] "Salzburg Seminar in American Studies: Newsletter I," 8 August 1949, Lynn Papers (18089), Box 1.
[63] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 4 November 1953, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 15.

late 1950s, almost ten years after he first participated in the Seminar. Wherever he looked he seemed to detect an "eagerness to find what is good in America." Many of his students were very interested in American progressive education, for example, feeling that their own systems had been too "one-sidedly bookish." Similarly, while many had misgivings about American foreign policy, Bixler found that his students went to unusual lengths to understand it on its own terms. "In some instances, they are even less inclined to stress our failures than we are ourselves," he noted, as when a Swiss participant told him that Americans should not be too upset about Sputnik. "All of us know that America has the scientific and economic resources to win the race for space," this student assured him.[64]

In the early years of the Seminar, this had been different. The students who traveled to Salzburg in the late 1940s represented a wide variety of political viewpoints, and they brought their various prejudices with them when they met for their classes. On the one end of the spectrum, Smith reported in 1948, he taught Communists from Czechoslovakia, who thought of the United States as an imperial power readying itself for an attack on the Soviets. On the other hand, he had students like the "Free Enterprise boy from Sweden," who were suspicious of the politics of liberal academics like him.[65] Bixler had detected a similar situation when he was at Salzburg the first time. Among the participants, he noticed "peevish querulousness" and sometimes "actual hostility." During the war and in its immediate aftermath, Europeans had had "plenty of opportunity to learn about the less attractive side of America," he thought, and not enough chance to study the country's "cultural achievements and ambitions." For that reason, it did not surprise him when he heard his students recite from the canon of anti-American clichés prevalent in Europe at the time. "We don't like your imperialism, your gangsters, your oppressed

[64] J. Seelye Bixler, "The Salzburg Seminars," *Amherst Alumni News* 13, no. 2 (1960), 9-12.
[65] Henry Nash Smith to Henry F. May, 27 September 1948, May Papers, Box 6, Folder 1.

minorities, your movies, your Coca Cola, or your chewing gum," he summarized the typical litany of criticisms.[66]

Whatever their misgivings about American culture, something the students did appreciate about the Seminar was the absence of censorship and of an overt political line. All parties involved in the endeavor were aware of the larger political issues at stake: the European participants knew that their classes were about more than simply American novels, just as their American professors were hardly naïve about the political implications of their Austrian journey. As Smith explained to an audience of potential donors in March of 1949, at a talk at his alma mater in Dallas: the Seminar was a "gigantic sales effort to build up goodwill for the United States and help keep Europe out of the clutches of Russia." Smith may not have put it in exactly these words, but this was what the *SMU Campus Weekly* took away from his lecture.[67] But this political dynamic did not stop the students from enjoying the relative intellectual autonomy the Seminar provided them with. Students from Central Europe in particular found it difficult to believe that the project did not rely on government support, just as they were impressed with the fact that the faculty "did not represent an official position," and that professors openly admitted that "the US had many problems which were not yet solved."[68] To what extent these experiences actually changed how students thought about American culture was something no one quite knew. Paradoxically, at least for some participants the intellectual impartiality of their professors merely seemed to underline the overall parochialism they ascribed to Americans generally. "This summer school," two Hungarian students told a journalist in the fall of 1947, "was arranged by such Americans who do not share the views of the average American, who is thoroughly

[66] Bixler, "Salzburg Seminars," 9-12.
[67] Lou Fittz, "Smith Says 'Seminar Helps Keep Europe From Russia,'" *The SMU Campus Weekly* (30 March 1949).
[68] Alice Taylor, "Seminar at Salzburg to Dispel Skepticism about U.S.," *Smith College Associated News* (4 November 1949).

convinced that the USA is perfect and that everything outside of its borders is bad and useless." As Europeans, they explained, they rarely met this "other America," which surprised them with its humility and introspection. "For this very reason," they concluded, "we must harken when the representatives of this other America come over to Europe."[69]

Although it did require the approval of the United States Forces in Austria, the Salzburg Seminar had otherwise little contact with government agencies. Once the Army's Education Division had established that no activities "which might negate the occupation mission" occurred in the castle by the lake, it quickly lost interest in what happened in Salzburg.[70] In this respect, the Seminar differed from similar American Studies projects which took place at the time. In 1948, Yale University established its own program for foreign learners. Based in New Haven, it was designed as a summer workshop for exchange students who were just about to start their education at an American school. Over the course of several weeks, the program would help them become acclimatized to life in the United States. It was a crash course in American history, civics, and culture, including field trips alongside classes and lectures. Although it was technically run by an independent group, it was happy to use Yale's facilities as well as its name to market itself both to students and donors. "This sort of summer program is unique," the project's organizer argued, drawing a direct comparison with its counterpart in the Austrian Alps. "The closest thing to it is the Harvard Seminar at Salzburg—which we feel lacks the really American background and atmosphere to make the studied material significant."[71] No comparable "short-term interpretation of the values, facts, and spirit of American civilization"

[69] "The Other America Makes an Appearance in Europe," 20 September 1947, Matthiessen Papers, Box 7, Folder "Statements on Seminar."
[70] Samuel H. Williams to James B. Conant, 3 September 1947, Matthiessen Papers, Box 7, Folder "Salzburg Correspondence."
[71] Homer D. Babbidge to Samuel S. Walker, undated, American Studies at Yale University for Foreign Students Records, Box 4, Folder 94.

existed elsewhere, the program director claimed in his fundraising letters to individual and corporate sponsors.[72]

Both the Salzburg Seminar and the "American Studies at Yale for Foreign Students" program shared the same set of goals. Aside from helping foreign students familiarize themselves with American culture and American educational methods, the Yale program, like its counterpart in Europe, was also meant to increase "international understanding and friendship."[73] Although the *New Haven Journal Courier* referred to the program unironically as an "American indoctrination course," the Yale project saw itself as opposed to dogma or ideology as its rival venture in Salzburg. Eager to disprove suspicions of propaganda, the organizers went out of their way to show the students what they considered the shortcomings of American life. After a visit to New York City's Yale Club, where the foreigners were greeted with "Martinis and Manhattans," the group went on a tour of East Harlem.[74] "That trip was probably the most startling and revealing experience of the whole six weeks," the official report described the event, emphasizing that "it certainly did not increase the respect of any of the students for the United States." But since the purpose of the course was not "to 'sell' the country" but to give "a realistic picture of what is good and what is not so good," it explained, this was perfectly in line with the educational goals of the program. "Certainly, we cannot be accused of hiding anything from them," it emphasized as if expecting skepticism.[75]

Unlike the Salzburg Seminar, which was financed completely through private channels, the Yale program relied on funds from both the Department of State and the Department of the

[72] Harold Whiteman to Mrs. Efrem Zimbalist, 3 May 1949, American Studies at Yale University for Foreign Students Records, Box 1, Folder 3.
[73] "Yale Interprets the News," 10 September 1950, American Studies at Yale University for Foreign Students Records, Box 4, Folder 94.
[74] "Turbulent Safari Braves NY Perils on Weekend Trip," *Yale Daily News* (4 September 1952).
[75] R. L. Mitchell, "Report on New York Trip," 25-27 August 1950, American Studies at Yale University for Foreign Students Records, Box 1, Folder 79.

Army to cover its operational costs. Struggling to obtain the approximately $12,000 per session year after year, and tired of having to ask newspapers like the *Herald Tribune* for free subscriptions to save money, the organizers had welcomed the support provided by the federal government.[76] What they had not expected, however, were the demands that the agencies involved with the program were beginning to make. These included, among other things, that the documentary films *The River* (1938) and *The City* (1939) not be screened for the visitors.[77] In addition, the Institute of International Education, which served as the liaison organization for the program, asked that each student fill out a lengthy questionnaire. This survey, which was meant to gauge of the effectiveness of the summer session, included a variety of questions that the organizers found objectionable. Students were asked about the status of minorities in American society, the aims of American foreign policy, and the personality traits of Americans. They were also prompted to reflect on the influence of the United States on their own country. "Do you think," one question asked, "that many people from your country who have been in America under the Exchange Program before have come under too much American influence?"[78] Fearing that such requirements would "limit expressions to those which are favorable to our Government," the organizers behind the Yale program tried to convince their counterparts in the government to waive these requirements. When it became clear that this would not happen, they reluctantly decided to end the cooperation.

Of all the postwar attempts to use American Studies for the purpose of increasing "international understanding," the Salzburg Seminar proved to be the most successful. By the

[76] David D. Denker to Herald Tribune Circulation Manager, 9 July 1951, American Studies at Yale University for Foreign Students Records, Box 1, Folder 32.
[77] Memorandum 21 August 1951, American Studies at Yale University for Foreign Students Records, Box 1, Folder 41.
[78] "Evaluation of the Student Orientation: A Study Conducted by the Institute of International Education for the U.S. Department of State," American Studies at Yale University for Foreign Students Records, Box 1, Folder 40.

late 1950s, when competitor projects like the Yale program had ceased to exist, the Salzburg Seminar could boast of having attracted 3,000 participants over the course of the past thirteen years. Few participants would have expected this longevity when the program met for the first time in the summer of 1947. Highly improvised and largely dependent on volunteers, it struck many as both educationally and organizationally dubious. Despite its antique charm and picturesque setting, Schloss Leopoldskron itself did not make for luxurious living. As one of its early participants later recalled: "The wooden floors on the top floor sagged, wiring and plumbing were inadequate and even potentially dangerous, and the water running from taps was undrinkable."[79] Many teachers also had doubts about the effectiveness of the instruction itself. While Richard Hofstadter thought the Seminar justified itself simply by enabling different Europeans to have "a good time with each other," he was not sure that it successfully reached its "educational aims."[80] Henry F. May, who taught in Austria in 1949, shared this concern. While he thought it was "very valuable indeed for breaking international barriers," he was unsure about the "academic seriousness" of the project.[81] That it still ended up becoming one of the most successful ventures associated with the new field of American Studies seemed to prove at least one thing: that, as May later wrote of the Fulbright program, it served primarily as an "education for American professors."[82] The ones who most certainly benefited from the teaching, it seems, were the teachers themselves.

[79] Daniel Aaron, "The Salzburg Seminar: A Retrospective View," *International Educational and Cultural Exchange* (Winter 1966): 20-21.
[80] Richard Hofstadter to Alfred Kazin, 24 July 1950, Kazin Papers, Folder "Hofstadter, Richard (1)."
[81] Henry May, "Evaluation of 1949 Seminar," May Papers, Carton 6, Folder "Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization."
[82] Henry F. May to Richard W. Downar, 4 February 1962, May Papers, Carton 6, Folder "Paris."

IV

The Salzburg Seminar was just one among many American Studies ventures created abroad in the years after the war. In the early 1950s, the Rockefeller Foundation and Stanford University helped establish a similar institution in a very different place. The Kyoto Seminar in American Studies closely resembled its European precursor, and it attracted many of the same academics. After teaching in Austria in the late 1940s, Smith went to Japan in the early 1950s, following in the footsteps of Perry Miller, who had been there before him and gave him advice on how to create a "receptive frame of mind" for the experience he was embarking upon.[83] In the spring of 1947, even before he went to teach in Germany, Merle Curti had already made a trip to India, where he had lectured over a dozen universities and had met both Jinnah and Nehru in person. Traveling the country "in rickshaws, carriages, on camels, elephants and in ox carts, in cars, trains, and on planes," he had impressed his hosts with his presentations on federalism, religious toleration, and "the American minorities problem" enough to have them consider the establishment of "American chairs" in a number of universities.[84] And just as Smith had been in Austria before teaching in Japan, Curti would eventually find himself in Australia, reassuring his audience at a conference in Melbourne that "varying cultural backgrounds can result in fertile insights and interpretations of American materials and problems."[85]

Within the United States itself, other attempts at bringing foreign students in contact with American culture had more success than the short-lived program at Yale. In the late 1950s, a number of faculty members at Smith College developed an American Studies diploma program that would allow a handful of students to come to Northampton every year. Officially launched

[83] Perry Miller to Henry Nash Smith, 19 February 1953, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 6.
[84] Merle Curti to Paul H. Buck, 3 April 1947, Buck Papers (HUG FP 9.3), Box 1, Folder "Curti."
[85] Merle Curti, "ANZASA," undated, Curti Papers, Box 1, Folder 23.

in 1964, it was based on the premise that America was the best place to study America, and its champions hoped that life in a small academic community would help "counteract the impressions of the United States normally gained by Europeans and others from their TV, from Hollywood, and from modern fiction."[86] Over the following decades, several hundred "Diploma-tists" would spend a year each in the Pioneer Valley and make discoveries both mundane and profound.[87] Just as a Vietnamese student was astonished that her American classmates preferred skimmed over whole milk, a student from Poland began to look at the United States in a new way after doing her reading assignments. As she later recalled: "We read and discussed fascinating books such as *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville or Michael Kammen's *People of Paradox* that were a real eye-opener for me."[88] In Northampton, it appears, some students discovered not just America but also American Studies.

For Americanists from the United States, there was a clear distinction between these two things. Fully aware of the differences between their field's cherished clichés and "the realities of America," as one historian has put it, they tended to react with either amusement or annoyance at colleagues from overseas who tended to confuse these two things.[89] After participating in a forum on "The USA and Europe" that had taken place in a Tyrolean village, Daniel Boorstin told Commager about the oddly abstract ways in which Europeans tended to think of America. "If I didn't know otherwise," he joked, "I would be persuaded here to believe that the USA is not inhabited by people at all, but rather by philosophies and metaphysical quintessences."[90] Another

[86] Peter d'A. Jones, "American Studies for Foreign Students: Smith's New Diploma," Smith Alumnae Quarterly (Spring 1965), 138-40.
[87] Daniel Aaron, "The Beginning of American Studies at Smith College," in *Smith's Foreign Legion: The First 50 Years of the Diploma in American Studies, Smith College, 1963-2012*, ed. Julia MacKenzie (Northampton, MA: Squirrel Rampant Press, 2012), 15.
[88] MacKenzie, ed., *Smith's Foreign Legion*, 43, 91.
[89] Robert Sklar, "American Studies and the Realities of America," *American Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1970): 597-605.
[90] Daniel J. Boorstin to Henry Steele Commager, 27 August 1965, Commager Papers, Box 8, Folder 25.

Americanist made a similar discovery during a trip to Europe, speaking with slight annoyance of the "European savants and sociologues" who visit the United States and then leave again "with their preconceptions not only undamaged but refurbished as well." Every Americanist, it seemed to him, had at some point met someone like this. "Six weeks in America plus substantial quotations from C. Wright Mills, David Riesman, Leslie Fiedler, Max Lerner, and Vance Packard, and they've got material for several fat volumes on the anxious, unquiet, homogenized, consumer-obsessed, and uncultivated Americans."[91]

For aspiring Americanists from abroad, by contrast, the line between the academic field and its object of study could easily blur. Participating in the summer program at Yale in 1949, a Danish student from Arhus used his early arrival in the United States to hitchhike from New York to Montana, where he would spend the following year attending school in Missoula. In a report he wrote about his experience crossing the country, he revealed his familiarity with how America was supposed to appear to someone like him. He marveled at "electric ovens, refrigerators, toast-machines, washing machines," noted that American society is "continually in motion, rushing for a job, hurrying to the office," found that the United States had "less sharp distinctions between social classes" than Europe, and was impressed by "the enormous wealth and variety of everything." It all made him feel, he explained, that he had come "from a poor old man to a strong young nation." His one observation that did not conform to the types of cliches peddled by "savants or sociologues" concerned his impressions of the Midwest and Pennsylvania. "I will always remember Ohio and Michigan for their beautiful girls," he reported, "just as I will never forget the quality of bananas and peaches I had in Pennsylvania."[92] For at

[91] Daniel Aaron, "Poland: A Self-Interview," 1964, Aaron Papers (Smith), Box 657, Folder "Poland: A Self-Interview."
[92] Harry Thomson, "First Impressions of America: Danish Student at Yale Provides Some Food for Thought," *New Haven Register* (11 September 1949).

least this student of American Studies, it seems, the clichés of his field could outweigh the realities of its subject. Especially in a transnational context, American Studies always taught its learners first and foremost about American Studies.

Chapter 4

Organization Men

I

On May 11, 1972, a large crowd of people gathered at the entrance to Westover Air Force Base near Chicopee, Massachusetts. The goal of this group, which counted several hundred participants, was to protest the increased bombing of North Vietnamese targets that the Nixon administration had ordered just a few days before. Among the people who took part in the occasion, many were affiliated with Amherst College, located just twenty miles to the north, where faculty and students had met the previous night to discuss the possibility of organizing an open display of civil dissent. The protest was largely peaceful and friendly. The protesters sat on the road leading up the base and chatted with policemen and local officials. Speeches were greeted with cheers and applause, and occasionally someone started to sing. After a while, as the police began to arrest people for unlawful assembly, many of the participants focused their attention on one particular figure. Dressed a dark suit, with a beige trench coat over his shoulders, the middle-aged man whom people were watching sat cross-legged on the road, next to young men and women wearing blue jeans and sweaters. His checkered tie falling down his chest, he sat on the ground until an officer came over, helped him up, and led him to one of the buses that transported detainees to the Chicopee courthouse. Among the protesters, almost everyone knew the dark-haired man with the tie. Some people knew that he was from Boston, that he had received a Ph.D. in American Civilization, and that he had been at Amherst College for less than ten years. Others were aware that he had been a student of Henry Nash Smith's, that

he had written an important book on Andrew Jackson, and that he had moved to Amherst in part because of the opportunity to work together with Leo Marx. What everyone knew, however, was that less than ten months earlier, he had been inaugurated as the fourteenth President of Amherst College.[1]

When John William Ward got arrested that day, he knew that he would likely make national headlines. Despite its openness to curricular experimentation, Amherst was still a conservative institution by the time he assumed the school's highest office, and many of his colleagues wanted to preserve its reputation as august, elite, and slightly detached from the day-to-day events that shaped the rest of the country. It did not come as a surprise to him, therefore, when the news of his arrest caused an explosion of unhappiness among some faculty and many alumni. "It's difficult to overstate the intensity and extent of alumni anger, disappointment, and frustration," the college's alumni officer would later report.[2] Coming so early in Ward's presidency, the Westover arrest had a profound impact on the fundraising ability of the school, and many faculty members believed that Ward had stepped out of line when joining the protest. However, not all of the letters that reached the college were critical of his actions. While most of the mail that poured into the alumni office came from unhappy correspondents, the letters addressed to Ward himself were mainly supportive. Especially recent alumni, who had graduated over the previous decade, lauded his act of civil defiance. By contrast, older alumni, and especially those who had chosen careers in the law or in business, tended to find his conduct

[1] The scene is described in Sandy Rosenberg, "Standing Together at Westover," *Amherst Student* (11 May 1972). It is also documented in a personal memorandum Ward added to the final page of the speech he had given the night before. See John William Ward, speech concerning the Westover protest, 10 May 1972, Ward Papers, Box 1, Folder 13.
[2] "Letters: The Ward Interview," *Amherst* 32, no. 2 (December 1979).

questionable.[3] When Smith learned of Ward's arrest, he telegrammed his former advisee a note of support: "Good for you."[4]

The decision to join hundreds of students in their protest at the airfield had come to Ward neither easily nor naturally. The night before, during the meeting in which the following day's actions were planned, he had spoken to the assembled students and faculty, explaining what he intended to do and how he had come to make his decision. Gathered in the college's chapel, he had told his audience that they would hear him speak "in two voices" that night. Part of him would speak as the President of Amherst, another part would speak as "Bill Ward," private citizen and individual. From the beginning, he had no illusions that many people would find this distinction far-fetched. His main argument that night, that he would join the protest not as the president of a college but as "self and citizen," struck many of his colleagues as specious, and he would have to defend this distinction often over the following years. Nonetheless, he insisted on it. "We have lived with this bloody war for eighteen years," he read from his rostrum overlooking the pews. He could not stay silent just because he was the head of a school, he explained to his audience, hoping they would understand but ultimately accepting that many would not. "As I said when I took this office, I do not intend to disenfranchise myelf or lose my rights as citizen because I am President."[5]

Ward's decision to separate his private self from his public role marked a profound moment of disappointment for someone who was by nature an institutionalist. Jovial and outgoing, Ward had more faith in the importance of institutions and associations than many other

[3] The alumni response to Ward's arrest is analyzed in Kim Townsend, "Civil Disobedience: A Question of Institutional Involvement," *Massachusetts Review* 53, no. 4 (2012): 701-716.
[4] Henry Nash Smith to Henry May, 20 May 1972, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 1.
[5] The speech was reprinted in several newspapers in the days following Ward's arrest. See John William Ward, "To Whom Should I Write a Letter?," *New York Times* (13 May 1972).

Americanists at the time. After receiving his doctorate from Minnesota, he had spent a decade building the Princeton University program in American Studies. Later, after completing his stint at Amherst, he first worked pro-bono for the State of Massachusetts, heading a corruption inquiry concerned with building contracts, and then became President of the American Council of Learned Societies. Throughout this time, he was active in the American Studies Association, attended conferences and meetings, and pondered collaborative projects with friends. In May of 1972, however, his faith in anything but personal action had reached its low point. Just two years earlier, he had extolled the importance of higher education as "a neutral and uncommitted space for the pursuit of truth," stressing its function as an authorized counterweight to what the rest of society might consider common sense or traditional wisdom.[6] By the time of the Westover arrest, however, he had lost faith in such pieties. Argument and debate, the lifeblood of education, seemed to him to have run their course. "I do not think words will now change the minds of men in power," he explained, ending his speech with his decision to join the protest the following day and let his actions speak for themselves.[7]

In the history of American Studies, it is rare for academics to try and dissociate their personal politics from their institutional roles. More often than not, scholars saw departments, universities, and associations as venues for channeling their concerns and giving them increased visibility. This was as true in the 1930s, when they created the first programs in the field, as it was in the 1960s, when institutions moved from the sidelines of intellectual exchange to its center, as a more diverse body of academics tried to have their concerns represented in departments, universities, and professional associations. Like their colleagues in other

[6] John William Ward, "Alumni Talks 1970," Ward Papers, Box 1, Folder 3.
[7] For an analysis of the thinking that may have led Ward to join the protest and get arrested, see James Patrick Brown, "The Disobedience of John William Ward: Myth, Symbol, and Political Praxis in the Vietnam Era," *American Studies* 47, no. 2 (2006): 5-22.

disciplines, scholars in American Studies confronted the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s by interrogating their own role as political actors and by questioning the social functions of the institutions they worked in. Unlike their colleagues, however, it was usually not the first time they had pondered these questions. Partly because of its relative novelty as an academic endeavor, and partly because of its self-image as heterodox and experimental, American Studies reacted in its own way to the challenges posed by the Vietnam War and the minority rights revolution. Highly decentralized and oftentimes improvised, the field did not have the governing structures and professional standards that older disciplines had established over long years of practice. Moreover, because of its paranoid relationship with its object of study, it had never been as naïve about its political nature as some of the fields adjacent to it. Ward knew that his separation of public role from private self would not be persuasive, and twenty years of involvement in institutions and organizations likely suggested to him that it was not desirable either. In his attempt to separate personal from institutional politics, Ward was not just out of touch with the times, he was also out of touch with what the history of his field should have suggested to him. His younger colleagues and students, as it turned out, had learned its lessons better than he had.[8]

[8] The question of institutional arrangements and political convictions that fields like American Studies faced in the 1960s and 1970s are most clearly laid out in the work of Richard Ohmann, particularly *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) and *Politics of Letters* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987). As far as the institutional arrangements of American Studies are concerned, the best synopsis of the challenges it faced during these years is Paul Lauter, ed., *Reconstructing American Literature: Courses, Syllabi, Issues* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1983). In this context, equally relevant is Ray B. Browne, *Against Academia: The History of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association and the Popular Culture Movement, 1967-1988* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989). The most influential contemporaneous discussion of the political responsibilities of university teachers is Theodore Roszak, ed., *The Dissenting Academy* (New York: Pantheon, 1968). Most of the recent scholarship that is concerned with these questions concentrates on fields that emerged in the wake of the 1960s. See, among others, Jane Gallop, *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1992), Jean Fox O'Barr, *Feminism in Action: Building Institution and Community through Women's Studies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), Ellen Messer-Davidow, *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), Noliwe M. Rooks, *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (Boston: Beacon Press,

II

Of all the scholars involved in American Studies during its first years as a new field, Ward was one of the less likely ones to end up becoming the president of a college. He had grown up in Dorchester and Brighton, in a family of Irish descent, and had attended the Boston Latin School before enrolling at Harvard. "I was," he would later admit, "a dumb jock in high school, not a very good student."[9] His grades were poor, his interests mainly athletic, and he failed a year of school because he lacked a taste for academic pursuits. Later in life, and especially after his time as an academic administrator, he could not help but look back on his career with amazement. He thought that it was only because so few Americans went to college at all before World War II, and because the Latin School had done a remarkable job preparing its students for the College Board examinations, that he had managed to get into Harvard at all. That he ended up with any intellectual interests was mainly an accident of geography. For a while, when his family lived on Beacon Street, he would stop by the Boston Public Library on his walk back home from school, where he would spend his afternoons reading in the courtyard of the building. It was there, he later remembered, that he got "hooked on books."[10]

World War II had a profound effect on the intellectual biographies of many Americanists, and this was no different for Ward. Before he joined the Marine Corps in 1942, he had been a biochemistry major, "one of those grubby pre-meds" he knew his students at Amherst liked to poke fun at. "Four and a half years in the Marine Corps changed all that." Like Marx, he returned

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2006), Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). Because of its emergence in the first half of the century, and because of its particular subject matter, American Studies presents a particularly relevant example of what the social upheavals of the 1960s did and did not change in terms of disciplinary norms and institutional frameworks.

[9] John William Ward, "The Life of Learning," Ward Papers, Box 3, Folder 39. For biographical information on Ward, see Kim Townsend, *John William Ward: An American Idealist* (Amherst, MA: Amherst College, 2014).

[10] John William Ward, "How Do We Understand Political Corruption?," Ward Papers, Box 1, Folder 80.

from the war famished for ideas and education. Had it not been for his time in the Marines, he later surmised, he might have become "a successful and decent doctor in some Boston suburb."[11] In part, it was simply the boredom and routine of military life that made him reconsider what he wanted to do with his life. One of his most lasting memories of the war had to do with the daily chore of shining his boots. "For four and a half years, I shined leather," he later recalled. "The world was in flames; western civilization was at stake; friends were dying on beaches in the Pacific: but you sure shined that leather."[12] But there was also a more profound reason that made him choose an academic career. Looking back, he realized that nothing in his own education had prepared him for the world that he was about to enter when he left Harvard to join the Marines. "In our freshman year in 1941, we had to go to maps to discover where Pearl Harbor was," he remembered. "No course in College prepared us for Hitler or war, or the interdependent world we were about to inherit."[13] Sensing that a medical education would not be able to still the curiosity he had worked up during the war, he changed tracks and spent his remaining years in college reading Karl Manheim and Bronislaw Malinowski. "Those were the books that had us swinging," he later explained to a different generation of students.[14]

After graduating from Harvard, Ward moved west to Minnesota, following the trail of the many Americanists who had had made the same journey before him. Having spent all his life east of the Hudson, Ward eventually "learned to live with, but never to love" the winters in the Twin Cities. Despite financial hardship, fits of self-doubt, and "that inevitable last blizzard sometime in the middle of March," he would later remember his four years in Minnesota as some

[11] John William Ward, untitled piece for *The Olio*, 16 April 1979, Ward Papers, Box 3, Folder 35.
[12] John William Ward, "On Shining Shoes," Ward Papers, Box 2, Folder 30.
[13] John William Ward, "To the Class of 1978," Ward Papers, Box 1, Folder 59.
[14] "J. W. Ward American Studies Seminar," Ward Papers, Box 1, Folder 2.

of the happiest of his life.[15] By pure chance, Ward managed to be at Minnesota during the exact years when the American Civilization program was at its high point, and when Smith's influence over its intellectual orientation was at its strongest. Similar to how Smith had begun his own thesis research, Ward started with a vague interest in the question of how literature was related to its historical context. Originally thinking he would work on how Hawthorne and Melville fit into "the general values of their time," his project soon took a different turn. One year into his graduate work, *Virgin Land* was published, and in one of the book's early reviews Ralph Henry Gabriel mentioned that a study of Andrew Jackson's popular appeal might provide an important addition to Smith's book on the West. Assuming that Gabriel had one of his own students work on the topic, he wrote him to ask for more information, only to find out that the comment on Jackson had just been an off-hand remark.[16]

In the same way in which *Virgin Land* was a study in popular culture, trying to analyze the ideas held by people who did not write down their thoughts for later historians to examine, Ward's dissertation was an attempt to uncover "the attitudes and values of the mass of ordinary, inarticulate men." It was not a study of Andrew Jackson, he emphasized when discussing the monograph that emerged from his work, but an examination of popular ideology. At its core, it tried to answer the same question that Smith had set out to study when he had written his dissertation in the late 1930s: "how does the historian get at the ideas and emotions in the minds of the great majority who leave behind no record of what they think and feel?" During the research stage of his thesis, it had not always been clear to him just what he was doing, and just how similar his work would be to that of his mentor. He spent months in what his wife came to

[15] John William Ward, "The Life of Learning: An Address at the Commencement Exercises of the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota," 23 May 1985, Ward Papers, Box 3, Folder 46.
[16] John William Ward, "Looking Backward: Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age," in *The Historian's Workshop: Original Essays by Sixteen Historians*, ed. L. P. Curtis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 208, 211.

refer to as "the 'shuffle, cut, and deal' stage of scholarship," sorting and resorting his notes, and it was not until he was sitting in his library carrel one day, reading the autobiography of Martin Van Buren, "the most inauspicious book possible," that the pieces fell into place. "I pushed that book aside and got some paper and for an hour I made an outline of the book," the later recalled.[17] It was only in hindsight that Ward realized just how much he had adopted Smith's method while working with him. *Virgin Land*, he admitted, was "the single most important influence" on his work, even though he may not have been aware of this fact at the time.[18]

For the field of American Studies, the book that emerged from Ward's thesis was a confirmation that symbols and myths abounded in American culture, and that the techniques Smith had employed in his book, however inconsistent, could yield interesting results even when they were applied to areas he had not touched upon. Long before Marx published his own book using the general framework established by Smith, Ward's study made clear that the themes and questions Smith had developed over more than a decade appeared to touch a cultural nerve. "It is a big moment for me," Smith admitted, "because this is the first dissertation I have directed that has gone on into publication more or less in its original form." Waiting for the first reviews to appear, it seemed to him that the work had "such solid substance" that readers might be tempted to focus on questions of style, which he knew was its weak spot. "The first half of the book at least is not so gracefully written," he had to admit.[19] One of his colleagues at Minnesota, Samuel Monk, also noted this discrepancy between substance and style. "I have read it all and am full of admiration," he wrote Smith, confirming his assessment of the book's appeal and its value. "Of course it is badly written. I squirmed and kept (mentally) reaching for the red pencil."[20] For

[17] "J. W. Ward American Studies Seminar," Ward Papers, Box 1, Folder 2.
[18] Ward, "Looking Backward," 208, 210, 212.
[19] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 24 May 1955, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 16.
[20] Samuel Monk to Henry Nash Smith, undated, Smith Papers, Box 4, Folder 10.

Marx, it simply reasserted that the American Studies work done at Harvard and Minnesota was more than a fad. "It may help to prove to the community that *we* have something," he thought.[21]

Ward's book appeared in 1955, two years after he had graduated with a Ph.D. from Minnesota. By the time the commencement ceremonies were taking place, he had already left the Twin Cities. For the "princely salary of $3,200," as he would joke later on, Princeton University had offered him the directorship of its American Studies program, and he had taken the opportunity without hesitation.[22] Unlike conventional majors, the "Princeton Program of Study in American Civilization" was organized around one single class: a thematic, cooperative, and highly elaborate conference course that each major participated in during his whole senior year. Up to that point, students concentrating in the field had few requirements they needed to follow, and there were no classes which they all took together. In the conference course, by contrast, they all spend an entire year discussing one single topic. They would read books on the issue, listen to guest speakers, and exchange opinions with the faculty members who attended the course.[23] In 1956, when they examined the issue of the "American Character," the fifty students who attended the class read novels, studied scientific reports, and analyzed newspaper reporting, treating each of category of document as "a set of data descriptive of the American character." The conclusion they reached over the course of that year was "that the concept of a 'national character' is not on the whole a useful concept." After listening to visiting speakers like Robert Lynd, Margaret Mead, and C. Wright Mills, the faculty members were happy to have reached this consensus. "But to many seniors," the program notes stressed, "such a conclusion was negative and discouraging."[24]

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[21] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 17 May 1955, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 16.
[22] John William Ward, "Address at the Commencement Exercises."
[23] Willard Thorp, "The Inter-Departmental Program," 28 December 1964, Thorp Papers, Box 1, Folder 9.
[24] James Ward Smith, "Program Notes - Number 12," June 1956, Thorp Papers, Box 9, Folder 21.

It was never clear to Ward that he would stay at Princeton for as long as he did. With a growing family to support, his low starting salary soon posed serious problems, and the raises the university awarded him over the years seemed to always fall short of what he felt he would need. Mainly for this reason, he was constantly looking at different jobs, weighing offers from Minnesota, California, and Stanford he received over the years.[25] That he did not leave Princeton before 1964, when he took up his position at Amherst, had several reasons. Geographically, he benefited from his proximity to Philadelphia and New York. The East Coast was not just the place he felt most at home, it was also the region the with the highest density of American Studies personnel, events, and organizations. In addition, he felt proud of what he had achieved through his work with the American Civilization program. By 1957, it had become "a respected part" of the university, helping students learn about American life while implementing "a new attitude in American education."[26] Finally, he also enjoyed the flexibility that Princeton afforded him when it came to his teaching. In the fall of 1958, he switched departmental affiliations, moving from English to history. "I have deserted belles-lettres for the prosaic fact," he told one of his friends, explaining that the history department allowed him to teach the courses he was really interested in. "I will keep my introductory course in American Civilization, teach an upper-class course in Intellectual History, and a graduate seminar pretty much of my own devising on problems in nineteenth-century history. All American, needless to say."[27]

When Ward decided to finally leave Princeton in 1964, his thinking was influenced by both personal and professional considerations. After spending much of his time on the administrative chores connected to running a program, he felt ready to move his attention back to

[25] John William Ward to Henry Nash Smith, 20 March 1954, Smith Papers, Box 7, Folder 4.
[26] John William Ward, "The Special Program in American Civilization at Princeton," Garvan Papers, Box 38, Folder 33.
[27] John William Ward to Daniel Aaron, 14 August 1958, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 27, Folder 349.

reading and writing. One thing that drew him to Amherst, he explained to a friend before leaving New Jersey, was "the promise of a quiet, more private existence, centered for me more about the typewriter."[28] Another was the prospect of joining the many distinguished Americanists who had ended up in the Pioneer Valley, and with many of whom he was friends. "There was a better faculty in American history and literature in the Valley than there was at Harvard at the time," he would note later on, listing the many people who worked there at the time. Aside from Marx, these included Daniel Aaron, Stanley Elkins, Jules Chametzky, Hugh Hawkins, and George Rogers Taylor. Ward was in negotiations with both the University of Indiana and Stanford at the time he received his offer from Amherst, and that he turned the other schools down was mainly the result of the personal ties he had to Amherst and its neighboring schools. That he would jump at the chance to join his friends in the Valley seemed "rather obvious" to both himself and the people who knew him.[29]

Once he had relocated to Massachusetts, Ward quickly settled into his job, teaching classes on the nineteenth century and helping the American Civilization program run the sophomore course it had become so famous for over the years. Friendly and energetic, his colleagues found him easy to work with, and they appreciated just how well connected he was. "John William Ward has proved a splendid addition to the department," Hawkins reported after his first six months of working with him. He appeared to know "just about everything and everybody" and was "affable withal."[30] The students, too, liked what he brought to the school. Ward's signature course, "History 59: Society and Politics in the Jacksonian Era," proved for many an unusual and eye-opening class, on par with the survey of American literature Marx

[28] John William Ward to Norman Holmes Pearson, 28 March 1964, Pearson Papers, Box 94, Folder "John William Ward 1959-1964."
[29] John William Ward to Hugh Hawkins, 10 March 1964, Hawkins Papers, Box 2, Folder 5.
[30] Hugh Hawkins to George Rogers Taylor, 12 January 1965, Hawkins Papers, Box 2, Folder 9.

taught at the time. Rejecting the "chronological method of treating the period," the class likened the study of history to "retrospective cultural anthropology," emphasizing the interpretation of concepts over the memorization of facts. "Professor Ward seeks to relate functionally the ideology and assumptions of the period and its institutions," a student noted in a review of the course. While it would not provide anyone with a comprehensive view of the period, the reviewer noted, its focus on methodology allowed students to discuss "not only the contents but also the procedures and purposes" of what they were learning. It was a course, many undergraduates discovered with pleasure, that was "intensive in its focus on a single era, extensive in its selections of a variety of materials, and relaxed but absorbing in its classroom method."[31]

Ward had no intentions of becoming an administrator when he moved from Princeton to Amherst. When he was asked in 1971 about the possibility of taking over the college's presidency, it was not the first time that he had been approached by search committees looking for people to fill academic leadership roles. In the past, he had never seriously entertained the possibility of becoming a dean, a provost, or even a chancellor. In part, this was because he considered himself first and foremost a teacher and scholar, and he assumed that an administrative position would inevitably spell an end to the pursuit of his intellectual passions. Mainly, however, it was because he did not understand why anyone would want to lead an institution that he or she had no relationship to. The idea of becoming an administrator at a university he had never even been to before simply did not make sense in his mind. Many years later, he would realize how naïve this view had been, and how difficult his closeness to the faculty had made his job at the top of the college. "It took me a long time to realize I was an

[31] "Amherst College Student Course Critique, 1966-1967," Student and Alumni Publications.

office, a role, and no longer a colleague," he would admit later on.[32] Before then, he had simply assumed that the institutional and personal aspects of his work needed to be as closely aligned as they could, and this belief had earned him recognition and respect from the people he worked with. Robert Spiller, the director of the American Studies program at the University of Pennsylvania, once remarked that he would "give his eye teeth to lure Ward to Penn," knowing how much the institution would benefit from having him there.[33] By the time of the Westover protest, however, less than a year after assuming the presidency, his belief in the unity of institution and individual had begun to break down.

Ward would spend the rest of his career doing administrative and managerial work, first at Amherst, then for the State of Massachusetts, and finally at the ACLS. What he would never return to, however, was the life of learning that he had tried to preserve for so long. The Westover protest did not make him a cynic, and much of what he accomplished over the following thirteen years, before his sudden death in 1985, was driven by the same idealism that had made him a popular teacher and a widely liked colleague. His success in making Amherst coeducational, for example, or his pro-bono service exposing corruption, were not the work of someone who had stopped being involved in the world. He never became what he had once accused Daniel Boorstin of being: someone who, "after his own disenchantment with American society and politics," had become "an apologist for what is."[34] On the other hand, he never again went back to his teaching or writing, and he never recovered his former identity as a scholar. Once he discovered that he could not keep up with new work in his field, his stopped teaching classes. And once the responsibilities of the presidency started weighing on him, his relationship

[32] "John William Ward," *Amherst Student* (28 May 1979).
[33] Record of Interview with Robert Spiller, 12 May 1958, Carnegie Corporation Records, Box 411, Folder 11.
[34] John William Ward to Mortimer Adler, 9 August 1969, Woodward Papers, Box 59, Folder 699.

with the friends on the faculty changed. Formerly a regular at the "Morgan Hall coffee hour," he rarely had time to meet and talk with his colleagues after he assumed his new role.[35] For Ward, the lesson of the Westover protest, and of the Vietnam War more broadly, was that the personal, the political, and the institutional were more difficult to align than he thought. For many of the students who were arrested together with him, this was something they had long taken for granted. But for them, like for many Americanists who began their careers in the late 1960s, this was exactly the reason to not use "two voices" when speaking in public.

III

Ward began his academic career at the exact time that American Studies created its first national publications and organizations. In 1949, when he arrived in Minneapolis to begin his doctoral work, the University of Minnesota had just helped launch *American Quarterly*, the first academic journal that emerged from the new field. Like most of things that took place in the American Civilization program at Minnesota, the journal was the brainchild of Tremaine McDowell, whom his colleagues acknowledged as "the spirit behind the magazine."[36] Within the ecosystem of periodical publishing, the journal was meant to fit into a particular niche. Written "by lay and by academic students of American civilization," McDowell explained after its launch, it was addressed to both academic readers and the general public. Aware of the numerous journals already in circulation, and committed to making American Studies hospitable to people from all walks of life, McDowell wanted *AQ* to find a happy medium between "the excesses of specialization" and "the thinness of much popularization." In keeping with his view of American Studies as an instrument for creating cosmopolitan citizens, he emphasized the journal's

[35] Friedel Dewitz, autobiographical essay, 1991, American Studies Scrapbook.
[36] William Van O'Connor to Leslie Fiedler, 12 September 1948, Fiedler Papers (BU), Box 5, Folder 3.

commitment to integrating region, nation, and globe. The publication was, he explained, "devoted to the examination and the criticism of national and regional culture in the United States, both in their own terms and in terms of world civilization." Anticipating suspicions of parochialism, he stressed this last aspect in particular. "Its articles were written in Italy, England, Australia, and the United States," he listed with pride.[37]

The field of American Studies lived for a long time with an organizational paradox: despite being dedicated to the study of a nation, it did not have any national organizations. The first intermural associations that brought together scholars interested in the field were local or regional. In 1944, in what was the first move to give Americanists a venue for the exchange of ideas, a group of professors at the University of Pennsylvania created the Society for American Studies, which held informal dinner meetings at the Franklin Club Inn in Philadelphia. Open to academics from Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey, it was formally organized in October 1946, at which point it acquired by-laws and regularized its schedule of spring and fall meetings. At that point, its organizers also decided to limit its membership to a maximum of fifty people. The Society for American Studies continued to exist throughout the early 1950s, meeting even after the American Studies Association had been created. Anticipating the organizational dynamics that would characterize the field for another three decades, the two associations existed in an "uneasy affiliation," mainly because of the membership restrictions of the Philadelphia group. When the ASA created its own Middle Atlantic chapter in 1954, the Society for American Studies was reorganized as the Fellows in American Studies, and it continued operating in that format throughout the rest of the decade. As many scholars involved with the ASA would learn

[37] Tremaine McDowell to Max Lerner, 11 May 1949, Lerner Papers, Box 11, Folder 505.

over time, at least when it came to the issue of scholarly organizations, their colleagues were usually regionalists rather than nationalists.[38]

The American Studies Association was founded in the spring of 1951, shortly after the need for an "American Civilization Society" had been discussed at the annual meetings of the American Historical Association and the Modern Language Association, which had both taken place in Chicago the previous year. Having resolved to organize "local and interest groups" and to create a newsletter, the sponsoring committee, which had been responsible for floating the idea at the two scholarly meetings, met at the Library of Congress in March and elected Carl Bode as the first president of the new organization. In May, the association set up a steering committee, of which both McDowell and Spiller were members. By April of the following year, it had worked out its affiliation with *American Quarterly*, which remained technically independent but in fact became the new organization's house publication. In June of 1952, plans were made for a conference on "European Interpretations of America," which was held in Washington, DC in November that year. In May of 1954, the American Studies Association received its first check from the Carnegie Corporation, which it had approached with the goal of securing a multi-year funding agreement. Financially liquid at last, the association was able to finally hire an executive secretary. After three years of work, the field's first nationwide organization was up and running.[39]

It was not a foregone conclusion that his would happen at all. During the 1950 meeting in Chicago, not everyone was enthusiastic about the idea of giving American Studies its own organization. In part, this was because many academics felt that there were too many

[38] "Society for American Studies," American Literature Section Papers, Box 6, Folder "American Studies Association and Society for American Studies."
[39] "American Studies Association," American Literature Section Papers, Box 6, Folder "American Studies Association and Society for American Studies."

associations already. “Most of us are asked to subscribe to so many magazines, and to belong to so many societies these days that we have to pick and choose,” even Spiller had to admit.[40] For those scholars who attended the gathering of the AHA, this seemed reason enough to feel lukewarm about the prospect of creating yet another organization that would want them as members. Writing to Merle Curti after the meeting, Arthur Bestor explained that the audience at the meeting had been “extremely cool to the plan for another organization,” and that he would be surprised if anything came of it.[41] At the parallel gathering of the Modern Language Association, however, the reception had been the opposite. “The MLA meeting,” Bode explained afterward, “was unusually promising.” As he noted in the official report: “I think the facts speak for themselves. The attendance was large—fifty-six in a conference room designed for thirty-five—and latecomers had to be turned away at the door.” What did it mean that historians and literary scholars had had such different reactions to the idea an American Studies organization? “No one can be sure yet of the importance of the fact that the AHA group did not organize,” Bode mused. Perhaps, he wondered, it had been merely a question of insufficient publicity. Given the enthusiastic response among his fellow English professors, he had had no doubt that at least there the “need for an American Civilization society” was real.[42]

No one knew what to make of the American Studies Association at first, and even academics who fundamentally agreed with its mission wondered how it would affect their lives as professional analysts of American culture. The people most concerned about its effects were scholars like Clarence Gohdes or Howard Mumford Jones, who had helped create the Modern Language Association’s American Literature Group, which so far had enjoyed a virtual

[40] Robert Spiller to Allan Nevins, 19 April 1951, Spiller Papers, Box 1, Folder 33.
[41] Arthur E. Bestor to Merle Curti, 21 January 1951, Curti Papers, Box 5, Folder 13.
[42] Carl Bode, “To the Members of the Sponsoring Committee, American Civilization Conference,” 2 February 1951, Turner Papers, Box 19, Folder “MLA-American Literature Group, 1951.”

monopoly on the study of American writing. Some people, like Gohdes, tried to be optimistic. "An American Civilization Society might possibly give us an organization through which to speak when we need to speak," he thought. Given that American literature was still a marginal subject in the country's language departments, he hoped that a national organization like the ASA might amplify the concerns of scholars like him. People like Jones, on the other hand, were more apprehensive. He considered the ASA "a compact and attractive body," and he knew that it would have "an immediate appeal to the foundations." Worried that the new organization might become the primary recipient of foundation money earmarked for Americanist projects, he wondered whether Bode and his associates should be regarded "as friends or as friendly enemies." He recognized that the question sounded absurd, but he also knew that the underlying issue was real. They might well be able to get along in the abstract, he explained to a friend, but when it came to the very concrete issue of money, he was certain that "the usual academic undercutting and getting-there-first-with-the-mostest psychology" was bound to develop.[43] And this was something that even Gohdes had wondered about, despite his otherwise optimistic outlook. As he had put it: "Whether prima donna Spiller and his boys will voice anyone excepting themselves is, of course, anyone's guess."[44]

Apprehensions over the possible power of the American Studies Association also agitated academics who did not study American literature. In 1955, Stephen Whicher, a professor at Cornell University, sent a letter to over forty colleagues at different schools. In it, he warned about the problems that he saw with American Studies, both in its intellectual and organizational manifestations. From a scholarly point of view, he feared that "the rapid emergence of American

[43] Howard Mumford Jones to Henry Pochmann, 1 April 1952, American Literature Section Papers, Box 5, Folder "Correspondence 1952-1957."
[44] Clarence Gohdes to Howard Mumford Jones, 26 April 1951, American Literature Papers, Box 8, Folder "Jones, Howard Mumford, 1928-1970."

Studies Associations and programs" would prove detrimental to the teaching of literature in colleges and universities. Given the field's method of using literary texts to study things other than literature, Whicher felt that the "humanistic function" of literature teachers threatened to get lost "in a general sea of cultural history and sociology." American Studies, he thought, was constantly pulling scholars of literature away from what they were supposed to be studying. If their identity as language professors required them "to make common cause with the students of other literatures," he explained, their affiliation with American Studies invited them "to join up with other American disciplines." In the "modern scientific university," he argued, scholars of literature were the last representatives of "the matured sensibility of the individual," and American Studies posed a threat to this endangered species of faculty member. "Heaven knows we belong to too many organizations already," Whicher admitted. "But if an organization is a center of power, and if we wish to resist one application of the power of the ASA's to our position, can we fight fire except with fire?" Would it not make sense, he asked, to create a counter-organization to the American Studies Association?[45]

Of the twenty people who replied to his letter, the vast majority did not share Whicher's concerns. Some did agree with his basic criticism, feeling that American Studies tended to turn literature into "a by-blow" of either history or sociology, and feeling that the field's champions were in most cases academic entrepreneurs who cared "little if anything" about writing. "My feelings about the American Civilization trend aren't vague at all," one of his correspondents explained. "I don't welcome it, I don't work for it, and I don't recall having learned anything from it except what not to do with literary documents." Others, by contrast, took a more nuanced view of these possible competitor programs. One of them doubted that the ASA would ever

[45] Stephen Whicher to Leslie Fiedler, 13 March 1955, Fiedler Papers (BU), Box 1, Folder 26.

become big enough to rival the Modern Language Association. If it appeared to be growing fast at the moment, this person wrote, it was merely because of "the lure of new offices," which created a type of enthusiasm that would be hard to maintain in the future. Another respondent pointed out that literary studies was hardly a "second class citizen among the other American subjects" that American Studies dealt with. "American Literature is Sovereign in ASA, and everywhere else," this person felt. Perhaps the most measured response came from a colleague who considered American Studies "a fad that needs puncturing, not an Augean stable that needs cleansing." While himself no fan of the field, this professor acknowledged that literary scholars themselves bore some blame for the rise of American Studies. As he told Whicher: "We wouldn't be in this mess if, for instance, that old generation of genteel Harvard professors—Bliss Perry was the exception—hadn't treated England as their Fatherland."[46]

For the people actually running the American Studies Association, these concerns over its influence would have been surprising to hear. In 1954, when Louis Rubin became the first executive secretary of the organization, he introduced himself to his colleagues by outlining what he assumed would be his main responsibilities. He expected that helping the *American Quarterly* achieve a nationwide readership would be among the most important jobs he would do. He was convinced, he explained, that nothing would enhance the prestige of the ASA as much as "a healthy, self-sufficient, financially sound, and academically vital and important journal."[47] What he began to realize soon after, however, was that he would spend perhaps most of his time traveling the country and assisting the various regional chapters. During his time as executive secretary, the number of regional groups had grown significantly, and he soon revised his

[46] Stephen Whicher to Leslie Fiedler, 13 March 1955, Fiedler Papers (BU), Box 1, Folder 26.
[47] Louis D. Rubin, "Remarks of the Executive Secretary on First Assuming Office at the Saturday, June 19, Meeting of the Executive Council," 1954, Rubin Papers, Box 31, Folder 1041.

estimation of their importance. “Our society depends on the health of its regional groups,” he told George Rogers Taylor in 1956, when the latter was about to take over the presidency of the organization. “I was aware of this from the start of my work; I have become more and more aware of its ever since.” What he had come to recognize, he explained, was that the regional groups rather than the national journal were the main recruitment arm for the organization. “Our chief charm for our members lies in their participation in regional doings,” he wrote, emphasizing how important it was for the secretary to provide support for the various chapters. “He must concentrate on the regional groups,” he stressed. “He must guide, cajole, suggest, persist in keeping after them.”[48] The secretary’s job, he had begun to recognize, was essentially that of an “academic visiting Rotarian” who needed to spend much of his time “asking people to join up and to hold meetings.”[49]

But if the regional chapters formed the backbone of the American Studies Association, the organization’s health seemed compromised by their uneven performance. Some groups, Rubin told Taylor, were doing quite well. The largest one, based in New York City, was “very active and strong.” So was the Middle Atlantic group, which Ward had helped found. “It does well, needs little urging, and can always be counted on,” Rubin explained. The Minnesota-Dakotas society, too, was thriving. “Goes its own way, is loyal to the ASA, and needs little attention,” he described it in his summary for the president. But many chapters, by contrast, needed significant time and support. One of the weakest groups, the one for the Southeast, had little “character and identity,” and it needed to be “urged, pushed, and threatened when suggestion won’t work.” While the Kentucky-Tennessee group had had a good start, it had to be

[48] Louis Rubin to George Rogers Taylor, 17 January 1956, Rubin Papers, Box 31, Folder 1042.
[49] Louis Rubin, Remarks on the 34th anniversary of the Texas chapter of the ASA, 19 October 1990, Rubin Papers, Box 31, Folder 1042.

"nudged along." The Ohio-Indiana society, on the other hand, required "suggestion and help but not in the form of commands." The Rocky Mountain group was "willing but weak," fighting as it did an uphill battle against to the region's "huge distances and few schools." The real problem child, however, was the New England chapter. "Of all our groups," Rubin explained, "this one is the least wedded to the national organization. Howard Mumford Jones set it up, and he being the ornery so-and-so he is, he did not help us much." The only group to not require its members to also be members in the national organization, it presented an obstacle to the American Studies Association's success. "This is a trouble spot," Rubin warned Taylor, "because potentially new England is our strongest area."[50]

Rubin was right to single out Jones as a potential troublemaker for the organization. By 1958, it seemed to many observers that "the expansion of the American civilization movement" had significantly slowed down, and this spelled problems for the national organization. With its initial grant from the Carnegie Corporation about to run out, the leadership of the association was faced with the need to discover new ways of keeping it financially liquid. In 1958, Ray Allen Billington became the vice president of the ASA, and as such he would automatically assume the presidency the following year. Familiarizing himself with the affairs of the association, he quickly became concerned about its viability for the future. With a membership of only 1,200 people and operating costs that so far had been carried mostly by the Carnegie grant, he feared that the association would eventually run into solvency issues unless it secured new sources of funding. Thinking it unlikely that the ASA would receive more help from foundations, he came to the conclusion that the only way to keep it afloat would be by significantly increasing its membership. Since English professors made up the majority of members so far, he ruled out the

[50] Rubin to Taylor, 17 January 1956.

possibility of enlarging the numbers among this demographic. The one way by which the association might be put in a safer financial position, he thought, was by making it "really appealing to intellectual historians." This might work, he thought, because there was as yet "no journal or association in this large and growing field."[51]

Initially, Billington was not certain that he would be able to help the organization. "I am so disheartened by the whole reception that I hate to waste time on the matter," he confided to Curti. "On the other hand, I hate to serve as an official of an association in need of revitalization without trying to do something."[52] After consulting with a number of colleagues, he decided that he would give it a try, and he set about organizing a conference meant to redefine American Studies along more historical lines. Jones, of course, voiced his full-throated support for the plan. He had been skeptical of the ASA from the beginning, thinking it was composed of "uncritical, over-enthusiastic" entrepreneurs like Spiller, whom he considered a "nice fellow," albeit one with "limited critical powers."[53] When Billington quizzed him about his plans for reforming the association, Jones did not hold back. Characteristically blunt, he told Billington that he had "little respect for either the capabilities or motivation of the Spiller-Thorp combine," and that he would support any attempt to make the ASA "meaningful to those genuinely interested in intellectual history." With Jones willing to help, Billington began organizing a committee to help him secure funding for his scholarly meeting. "Such a conference can not only benefit intellectual historians but give new direction to the ASA," he told Curti. It might even, he hoped, "save that body from what seems to me an inevitable decline."[54]

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[51] Ray Allen Billington to Merle Curti, 16 June 1958, Curti Papers, Box 6, Folder 1.
[52] Billington to Curti, 16 June 1958.
[53] Record of Interview with Howard Mumford Jones, 25 January 1954, Carnegie Corporation Records, Box 40, Folder 6.
[54] Ray Allen Billington to Merle Curti, 16 June 1958, Curti Papers, Box 6, Folder 1.

Supported by a grant from the ACLS, the planning committee scheduled the conference for the fall of 1960, choosing as the location for the event the historic Arden House estate outside of Harriman, New York. Closed to the public, the organizers tried to recruit participants who represented both the intellectual and generational divisions in the larger area of American Studies. Aside from Jones and Curti, the participants included Daniel Boorstin, Louis Hartz, John Higham, Richard Hofstadter, Henry May, Russell Nye, Robert Spiller, Henry Nash Smith, and Morton White.[55] Traveling the short distance from Princeton, Ward also took part in the event. The official theme of the meeting, "The Historical Study of American Culture," had been a compromise choice. It had been picked, a memorandum from the planning committee revealed, because it seemed like a "pacific title which will not annoy either wing of our membership."[56] The conference would consist of three sessions, two of which would be focused on papers prepared in advance. One of these, by John Higham, would focus on the history of intellectual history in the United States. The other, by Jones, would make the argument that American Studies as it existed was methodologically incoherent and vague, an "awkward marriage of social studies and literary theory" more than a fully developed academic approach.[57]

The opening night of the conference was designed as a purely social occasion. "Dinner. A good one, with drinks; no program," the organizers had summarized their plans for this part of the event.[58] The following morning, however, the discussion began in seriousness, and over the course of the next thirty hours, the participants extensively debated the field's methodology as well as its politics. Should American Studies include Latin America? Would formalizing the

[55] "List of Invited Members," Higham Papers, Box 2, Folder "Arden House Conference."
[56] "Memorandum on Steering Committee Meeting on Proposed ASA Conference on American Studies and Intellectual History," 14 November 1959, Higham Papers, Box 2, Folder "Arden House Conference."
[57] Arden House conference session 1 minutes, Higham Papers, Box 2, Folder "Arden House Conference."
[58] "Memorandum on Steering Committee Meeting on Proposed ASA Conference on American Studies and Intellectual History," 14 November 1959, Higham Papers, Box 2, Folder "Arden House Conference."

field squelch its dynamism? Did Americanists by default work within a "psychology of affirmation," as Daniel Boorstin called it?[59] While the historians at the occasion enjoyed these discussions, the representatives of the literary wing of the field considered them by and large fruitless. When the idea for a conference of this kind had first been discussed two years before, Spiller and Thorp had greeted it with "polite disinterest," as Billington had observed.[60] Thinking that American Studies was doing just fine, they made it clear that they had no deep interest in an event of this kind, although they did not say so explicitly then. Once the meeting was over, however, Spiller put these thoughts onto paper. Writing a report on the Arden House meeting for the executive council of the American Studies Association, he explained that the occasion had not been very productive, despite its ambitions goal of exploring "the relationship of intellectual history to the American Studies movement." It ended with little more than a loose commitment to maintain the "marriage of convenience," as Higham had referred to it, between these two areas of inquiry. "One could," Spiller wrote in the conclusion of his report, "take from these stimulating sessions whatever one wished."[61]

IV

Although meant to chart new horizons for the development of the association, the Arden House meeting reflected the ASA's past more than its present or future. The issues the conference was meant to untangle, such as the relationship between literary studies and intellectual history, were problems from a previous era, which academics had already been debating for at least thirty years by that time. The participants themselves, similarly, belonged to

[59] Arden House conference session 1 minutes, Higham Papers, Box 2, Folder "Arden House Conference."
[60] Ray Allen Billington to Merle Curti, 16 June 1958, Curti Papers, Box 6, Folder 1.
[61] Minutes, "Executive Council Meeting, Philadelphia, December 27, 1960," Turner Papers, Box 16, Folder "ASA-General 1958-1961."

a generation whose influence had reached its high point in the past. Even the most junior among them had come of age in the late 1930s, during a time which their own students now considered almost prehistoric in its difference from the present. George Rogers Taylor, who also took part in the Arden House meeting, had noticed as early as 1950 that his students at Amherst could not relate to documentary films from the Depression, finding them usually merely "amusing or overdrawn."[62] The gathering did reflect at least one concern, however, that would affect the American Studies Association again and again over the next thirty years. The problem of membership numbers, which had been the original issue behind the event, would remain a concern for the organization for decades to come. Twenty years after Billington's dire prognosis for the financial health of the association, Roberta Gladowski, under very different circumstances, faced a similar challenge. "Continued inflation coupled with declining membership and dwindling grant possibilities are serious, potentially mortal problems for this and other organizations," she reported with worry in 1979.[63] But despite being the original concern behind the attempt to reformulate American Studies, this issue was never actually discussed at the 1960 meeting.

Although the Arden House conference did not address the issues that would unsettle the field over the next fifteen years, the American Studies Association was in many ways better prepared for these upheavals than other academic associations. A relative newcomer on the educational scene, it still retained a sense of marginality and heterodoxy, enjoying the image of itself as a rogue offshoot of more conservative and staid organizations like the AHA and the MLA. Methodologically, it had always been highly self-conscious, interrogating issues and

[62] George Rogers Taylor to Merle Curti, 6 January 1950, Curti Papers, Box 41, Folder 5.
[63] Roberta K. Gladowski, "Executive Director's Report, 1979," *American Studies Association Newsletter* (March 1980).

questioning categories that traditional disciplines had simply taken for granted. Organizationally, it was used to both compromise and contention. Usually reliant on the resources of other departments, Americanists were well versed in the rules of intramural diplomacy that governed the distribution of requirements and resources within institutions. Politically, American Studies tended to attract left-liberal thinkers, like the "Redskins" at the University of Minnesota, whose preference for American writing reflected their opposition to the social conservatism of their Europhile colleagues. Even demographically, to some extent, it had shown a level of inclusivity that it took older disciplines longer to embrace. Although "largely unacknowledged and inadvertent," Marx would observe in 1979, "another purpose served by establishing American Studies as a field in inquiry was to permit entrance into the academy of teachers belonging to hitherto excluded social groups." Especially Catholics and Jews, he thought, had found in American Studies a more hospitable intellectual home than they could have in many neighboring fields.[64]

Similarly, concerns over the "politicization" of academic teaching and research, which would become ubiquitous throughout the 1960s, had affected American Studies already in the previous decade. In 1953, Tremaine McDowell had to publicly defend the Minnesota program against charges of subversion by Communist thinkers, negatively answering the question "Are American Studies Un-American?"[65] This did not prevent a local scandal occurring in the following year, however, when the university began an inquiry into two young instructors in American Studies who in the past had attended meetings of the Labor Youth League. In 1954, in anticipation of issues arising from the House Select Committee to Investigate Tax-Exempt

[64] Leo Marx, "Thoughts on the Origin and Character of the American Studies Movement," *American Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1979): 398-401.
[65] Tremaine McDowell, "Are American Studies Un-American?," *Ivory Tower* (1 June 1953).

Foundations and Comparable Organizations, the Rockefeller Foundation had begun an internal investigation into how its money for American Studies projects had actually been used.[66] In 1956, even Marx himself ran into problems when he was mysteriously turned down for a Fulbright position in England.[67] It was only after making a personal trip to Washington, and after receiving help from the upper levels of his university, that his appointment to Nottingham came through. During the hectic days before his trip to DC, he had considered what options he had for exerting pressure on the Department of State, and one thing that Smith advised him to do was to write Taylor and Spiller at the ASA.[68]

The most widely discussed case concerning the political nature of American Studies occurred in connection with the University of Wyoming. In the early 1950s, William Robertson Coe, a Welsh-born businessman with a love for Western Americana, had donated significant sums of money to a select number of American Studies programs, with Wyoming and Yale being the two most important. Coe made no secret of why he thought his money was well spent on American Studies: "For many years," a brochure explained after his death, "Mr. Coe had been concerned over the neglect of the teaching of our youth in the values of the American Way of Life to the end that they would discharge their duties and live their lives as loyal, responsible citizens of our Republic."[69] The study of American history, he believed, would convince young Americans of the virtues of the free enterprise system and put them on guard against ideologies from overseas. The faculty at Yale and Wyoming rolled their eyes at such rhetoric. "Coe is such a complete reactionary that he makes Bob Taft look fire-engine red," one professor at Yale said

[66] "Support of American Studies Abroad," 4 June 1954, Rockefeller Foundation Records, Box 36, Folder 679.
[67] Leo Marx to Henry Nash Smith, 12 May 1956, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 17.
[68] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 14 May 1956, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 17.
[69] Brochure, "Institute of American Studies at West Virginia Wesleyan College," 1958, Turner Papers, Box 18, Folder "Institute of American Studies."

about him, acknowledging that Coe had to be humored while knowing that his political views would not influence what faculty did in their classrooms.[70] In the case of Wyoming, however, the situation turned out differently. Beginning in 1958, after Coe's death, the officers managing his foundation began to make increasingly intrusive demands when it came to the issue of teaching and hiring, and it became an open secret among Americanists that "interference in academic matters" was taking place at the school.[71] This, in turn, raised questions about the responsibilities of the American Studies Association. "If the activities of the Foundation are such as to compromise the standing of American Studies in the institutions where it supports programs," Spiller reflected in 1959, "I do think the ASA ought to act." If this matter was brought before the executive council, he had no doubts that action would be taken to disclaim the foundation. The only problem, he thought, was that a particular instance of improper behavior would need to be identified, and so far, no evidence of wrongdoing had publicly surfaced. As Spiller wondered, "where is the concrete issue going to come from?"[72]

When Ward joined in the Westover protest in the spring of 1972, he might have had this history of organizational powerlessness in the back of his mind. Although theoretically capable of making public statements and intervening in political issues, the American Studies Association had remained largely on the political sidelines during its first ten years of existence. Given its financially insecure state, this would have surprised no one familiar with the organization's affairs. But the people who began to demand the most from the organization starting in the late 1960s were usually not in a position to recognize this. During the ASA's

[70] George W. Pierson to Henry Nash Smith, 19 January 1949, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 15.
[71] William Steckel to David Potter, 16 January 1959, Pearson Papers, Box 94, Folder "Robert H. Walker 1958-1974."
[72] Robert Spiller to Robert Walker, 27 January 1959, Pearson Papers, Box 4, Folder "Robert H. Walker 1958-1974." For American Studies at Wyoming, see also Liza Nicholas, "Wyoming as America: Celebrations, a Museum, and Yale," *American Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (2002): 437-65.

second national meeting, which took place in Toledo in the fall of 1969, a group of over seventy members met to form the organization's Radical Caucus. Meant to transform the ASA from a quietist association of supposedly disinterested academics into an organization aware of its political functions, Robert Merideth, one of its main leaders, laid out his vision for the future of the association in a letter to the executive council. He wanted to turn *American Quarterly* into "a vital, vanguard journal" dealing with current problems, he proposed to restructure the council so as to reflect the interests of students and minorities, and he asked the organization to publicly endorse the march on Washington "in favor of immediate, unilateral US withdrawn from Vietnam." In addition, he asked the ASA to provide fellowships and grants to underrepresented groups. What he would like to see, he wrote, was a "Woody Guthrie traveling fellowship" for graduate students or a "W.E.B. DuBois ASA Fellowship for a Third World critic of the U.S. who would speak at ASA schools." He also suggested that the organization ought to rethink where it held its conventions. Although he never went as far as some of his colleagues, who proposed to have "happenings" instead of conventions, which would include "music, films, camping, love-making," he still thought it was important to "get away from the alienating atmosphere of seedy hotels."[73]

In keeping with this agenda, the Radical Caucus soon reached out beyond the confines of American Studies. Reflecting the perceived need to affiliate with likeminded academics in other organizations and fields, it proposed to rename itself the "Community of Scholars Concerned about America." Believing that the United States had become "a repressive, dehumanizing,

[73] Robert Merideth, letter to the Executive Council of the American Studies Association from 3 November 1969, *Radical American Studies* (November 1969), Turner Papers, Box 16, Folder "ASA- Radical Caucus, 1969-1971," Robert Scarola, "The Politics of Style, or How Dull It's Been," *Radical American Studies* (May 1970), Turner Papers, Box 16, Folder "ASA-Radical Caucus, 1969-1971," "Possible Directions for the Radical Caucus of American Studies Association," *Radical American Studies*, (November 1969), Turner Papers, Box 16, Folder "ASA-Radical Caucus, 1969-1971."

technocratic, imperialistic society," they felt that their duty as Americanists was to chart "how it became what it became," to "project alternative futures for it," and "actively to resist it." Among the different things this new organization would do was to develop radical critiques of American institutions, to support more egalitarian forms of education, and to develop channels that would help "break down the isolation of the scholarly world." In terms of research, it would conduct studies meant to counter "the massive campaign" by the government to "reenforce an institutionalized interpretation of American culture." In doing so, it would make use of "alternative cultural bases for comprehending the United States in the context of world life," with a special emphasis "black, Puerto Rican, Indian, Oriental, women's and youth" perspectives. The overall point of the endeavor, as one of the young female scholars in the Radical Caucus put it, was that of "relevantizing" American Studies.[74]

The relationship between the Radical Caucus and the ASA was from the beginning marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, the insurgent scholars dismissed the organization as fatally compromised, and the *American Quarterly* became a special object of ridicule and dismay. Committed to "the fraud of neutralism and the myth of objectivity," it seemed to the radical Americanists past the point of repair. "The *AQ* as it now exists seems to me unreformable," Robert Scarola argued. "It is owned by the University of Pennsylvania not American Studies, has not been responsive to students or vital ideas since the early 1950s and I don't think, despite all rumors to the contrary, it is likely to change much." Scarola assumed that it might carry heterodox pieces "to improve its image," but the journal seemed to him so anchored in its institutional setting that it would be a waste of time to try and reform it. Merideth

[74] Betty E. Chmaj, "Reflections on the Second National ASA Conference," *Radical American Studies* (November 1969), Turner Papers, Box 16, Folder "ASA-Radical Caucus, 1969-1971," "Proposal for a Community of Scholars Concerned about America," Turner Papers, Box 15, Folder "ASA-General 1971."

agreed with this evaluation, criticizing the *Quarterly* as too focused on the past and accusing it of being a prime example of "academic establishmentarianism." Most of what it published, he thought, had "the quality of antiquarian report" rather than "relevant contention." A truly relevant journal, the Radical Caucus thought, would publish articles on the Black Panthers, Allen Ginsberg, and American imperialism. That meant, Scarola scoffed, that articles with titles such as "The Laying of the Tracks: The Development of a Railroad in Pooteet County, Western Arkansas, December 1890 to February 1891, and Its Influence on the Literature of the Frontier" were not acceptable."[75]

On the other hand, however, the Radical Caucus remained committed to what it saw as the original promise of American Studies. Twenty years earlier, Merideth claimed, the ASA had in its own way been a radical organization, trying to transform scholarship and education. "It was an anti-establishment, resisting, inventive organization of committed people," he thought. Over time, however, the association itself had turned into the establishment, despite its founding intentions. Today, American Studies to him seemed more "a place for those who wish to discuss the American past in certain professional terms" than a field committed to innovation and lively exchange.[76] Another member of the Radical Caucus, Robert Sklar, made much the same point in the first issue of *Radical American Studies*, the caucus's informal newsletter. The Radical Caucus, he explained, was not trying to do anything novel. American Studies had been radical from the beginning, championing the study of American literature and intellectual history when these were still marginal subjects. For that reason, examining current issues such as "women's

[75] Robert Scarola, "The Politics of Style, or How Dull It's Been," Radical American Studies (May 1970), Turner Papers, Box 16, Folder "ASA-Radical Caucus, 1969-1971." Robert Merideth, letter to Robert Regan from 4 November 1969, Radical American Studies (November 1969), Turner Papers, Box 16, Folder "ASA-Radical Caucus, 1969-1971."
[76] Robert Merideth, letter to the Executive Council of the American Studies Association from 3 November 1969, Radical American Studies (November 1969), Turner Papers, Box 16, Folder "ASA- Radical Caucus, 1969-1971."

liberation, the lives of workers and the poor, the nature of American imperialism and racism" was perfectly aligned with the fundamental values of the field. "Radicalism and relevance *are* the tradition of American Studies," Sklar argued, "and if the discipline should ever become as irrevocably established and conservative as the departments it once challenged, why should it continue to exist?"[77]

By the time of Ward's arrest, the Radical Caucus had become an important faction within the ASA, and many older members became concerned over its influence within the organization. In 1971, when Sklar ran for president of the association, a number of academics were perturbed enough by this prospect to circulate a letter outlining ways to preempt this from happening.[78] Others were less worried about the young cadre of radical scholars. People like Sklar would only emerge as a powerful force, it seemed to these academics, if the "exclusive management by the old and conservative" was allowed to continue.[79] Robert Walker, who was president of the ASA at the time, belonged to this latter group. Not only did he think that the Radical Caucus was not especially radical, he also knew enough about the past and present of the American Studies Association to recognize that the younger scholars were overestimating its clout. Was the ASA really "the establishment," as Sklar liked to claim? This term, he thought, implied power, money, and influence, none of which the organization possessed. "Except in our own local situations," he stressed, "I can't see that we have had much power or influence."[80] Walker was aware of these facts not just because he was the president of the organization. He also knew them because ten years before, when he taught at the University of Wyoming, the ASA had not been able to

[77] Robert Sklar, "Radical American Studies: Where We May Go From Here," Radical American Studies (November 1969), Turner Papers, Box 16, Folder "ASA-Radical Caucus, 1969-1971."
[78] Murray G. Murphey to Arlin Turner, 21 September 1971, Turner Papers, Box 15, Folder "ASA- General 1971."
[79] Norman Holmes Pearson to Murray G. Murphey, 1 October 1971, Pearson Papers, Box 5, Folder "American Studies 1961-1974."
[80] Robert Walker to Robert Sklar, 11 March 1970, Pearson Papers, Box 5, Folder "American Studies Association 1954-1971."

help him when his position was terminated under circumstances that many assumed were connected to the management of the Coe grant.[81] Compared to their younger colleagues who insisted on the importance of organizations, scholars like Walker and Ward knew too well that the academic establishment did not nearly have as much power as the radicals both feared and hoped at the same time.

[81] Robert H. Walker to David Potter, 13 January 1959, Pearson Papers, Box 94, Folder "Robert H. Walker 1958-1974."

Chapter 5

Looking Backward

I

Daniel Aaron still went to his office every day, despite the fact that he had retired almost a decade before. In December of 1991, as the fall semester came to a close, he found a letter from Germany waiting for him in the small room in Warren House that Harvard still let him use as an office. “As the Director of the Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies,” the piece of correspondence began, “I am writing to invite you to be on the Seminar Faculty for 1992.” As Aaron learned from the letter, the Stuttgart Seminar was a fourteen-day summer workshop that aimed to promote “cultural understanding between Europe and the United States,” just as its well-known predecessor, the Salzburg Seminar, had tried to do when it was established over forty years earlier. The topic for the coming year’s session was “The Idea of the University,” an issue the organizers considered especially relevant as the twenty-first century began to loom in the distance. Which functions did the modern university have? How did it serve the communities it was part of? What did the future of the disciplines look like? Housed in a lakeside resort next to an eighteenth-century castle, these were some of the questions the seminar participants were meant to debate as they listened to lectures, met in discussion groups, and talked over dinners and lunches. In a telling sign of the times, the letter emphasized that this occasion would not be limited to academics from North America and Western Europe. Just like the earliest meetings of

the Salzburg Seminar, it would also include "participants from those countries in Eastern Europe whose borders have only recently become more open."[1]

As far as senior Americanists were concerned, Aaron was an obvious choice to invite to this event. Together with Henry Nash Smith, he had enrolled in Harvard's American Studies graduate program in the fall of 1937, as part of the initial cohort of students to do doctoral work in the field. Although he was the first student in the program to pass his qualifying exams, beating Smith by mere weeks, he did not finish his degree until several years after the older man had, leaving the Texan to become the first Ph.D. in American Civilization.[2] For over three decades, Aaron lived and worked in Northampton, in western Massachusetts, where he taught American Studies at Smith College. In 1971, when presented with an opportunity to return to Harvard as a professor, he packed up the Seth Thomas clock he kept in his office and moved back to Cambridge. Unlike many other Americanists, Aaron did not fight overseas in World War II. Instead, he spent the war years in Massachusetts, fretting over his writing and wondering whether he would eventually be called up by his draft board. Partly to compensate for his anticlimactic time on the home front, he later accepted whatever opportunity he had to travel abroad, taking on more and more of a "low-grade ambassadorial role" over time.[3] Of the many countries he would eventually visit, Austria was one of the first. And in Austria, the place he came to know best was Salzburg, where he taught in one of the early summer seminars organized by Clemens Heller. "It made me more eager to go to Europe and to see some of the things you saw," Aaron wrote F. O. Matthiessen after reading *From the Heart of Europe*, the older man's

[1] Heide Ziegler to Daniel Aaron, 6 December 1991, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 37, Folder 504.
[2] Robert Walker to Daniel Aaron, 25 February 1993, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 27, Folder 351.
[3] Daniel Aaron, *The Americanist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 91.

1948 book about his experience teaching in Salzburg and Prague. “Perhaps what I need is more experience as well as an opportunity to get a look at America from the outside.”[4]

As he had often done in the past, Aaron gladly accepted the opportunity to travel abroad and meet academics from other parts of the globe. Intrigued by the suggestion that he might give a presentation on multiculturalism in the academy, he offered to talk about how his own field, American Studies, had changed over the past fifty years. In a short letter to the organizers in Stuttgart, he outlined what he would do if given the opportunity to devote two talks to the issue. “If I gave two lectures, the first might deal with the formative stage of AS, its origins, hopes, and accomplishments in the palmy days when the USA was The Greatest Power in the World,” he explained. “This lecture would reflect on American Civilization as a unifying influence, nationally and internationally. Examples: Harvard, Salzburg Seminar, Fulbright program.” The lecture would end “on an upbeat note,” he stressed. The second talk, by contrast, would paint a less rosy picture. “Then sky grows cloudy and melancholy strains are heard from a hidden orchestra,” he dramatized the change in tone his next presentation would bring. “What happened to the AS movement?” Among other things, he went on, “the Cold War, the neo-radicalism of the 60s, the formation of minority groups and the beginning of the splintering of national culture.” Instead of “reconciling national differences and shouting hosannas for the Melting Pot or Crazy Quilt,” American Studies became increasingly interested in “Race! Sex! Gender!” Where once there had been “old solidarities,” he now saw little more than “warring republics.” Begun as a unifying endeavor, his two talks would suggest, American Studies had become a force for division. “Or something like that.”[5]

[4] Daniel Aaron to F. O. Matthiessen, undated, Matthiessen Papers, Box 1, Folder “Aaron, Daniel.”
[5] Daniel Aaron to Heide Ziegler, 20 December 1991, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 37, Folder 504.

By the time he received his invitation from Stuttgart, Aaron had given many talks on the history of American Studies. Some of these dated back to the "palmy days" of the field, especially the late 1950s, when he began to give lectures on the development of Smith College's program in American Culture. The majority of these presentations, however, were delivered in the 1980s and 1990s. And at that time, Aaron was just one among many people trying to make sense of how the field had developed. Driven by a deep sense that American Studies had fundamentally changed, scholars of various ages and academic persuasions became preoccupied with finding its origins, tracing its evolution, and musing on its possible futures. Old hands penned autobiographical essays, young critics wrote new genealogies, and graduate students organized panels on new directions the field could explore. Different as they were, virtually all these reflections took one thing for granted: that American Studies had, as Aaron implied in his letter, begun to splinter at some point around 1968. Leo Marx would later refer to this as the "Great Divide" in the history of the field, a moment so important that he thought it made sense to speak of American Studies "BD" and American Studies "AD"—American Studies "Before the Divide" and American Studies "After the Divide."[6] Younger scholars, thinking along similar lines, would simply dub what they were doing "New American Studies," distinguishing it with this simple prefix from the type of scholarship they associated with the generation of Marx.[7] Even observers who had no investment in the field soon came to take this distinction for granted. If American Studies in its earliest years was preoccupied with studying a singular "American

[6] Leo Marx, "On Recovering the 'Ur' Theory of American Studies," *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 118-34.

[7] The phrase established itself through publications such as Philip Fisher, ed., *The New American Studies: Essays from Representations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and "New Americanists" book series edited by Donald Pease and published by Duke University Press. See, for example, Donald E. Pease, ed., *Revisionary Interventions into the Americanists Canon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994). For an early discussion of the New American Studies, see Frederick Crews, "Whose American Renaissance?," *New York Review of Books* (27 October 1988).

mind," the narrative went, it later realized just how many minds there were in America, and how different these minds looked.[8] Having lived through this transformation, Aaron knew that the story was more complex than that. But he also knew, as he put it, that it went "something like that."

American Studies had always been a field with a special interest in itself, and during the final three decades of the twentieth century, this inclination grew from a tendency to an obsession. By the time student protesters began to occupy buildings and chant slogans at their professors, some of the early pioneers in the field were no longer alive. Matthiessen had taken his own life in the spring of 1950, depressed over the state of the world and isolated after the death of his partner, and Perry Miller, in what many assumed was an illness linked to his habitual drinking, had unexpectedly died in December of 1963, just weeks after John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.[9] But a large number of the field's early champions were still teaching and writing in 1968, and many of them continued to do so throughout the second half of the century. As the demographics of students and faculty changed, as intellectual fashions came to be imported mainly from Paris, and as Ronald Reagan made his way from California into the White House, these scholars felt increasingly out of touch with the changing realities of education, and in an attempt to make sense of their place in this new environment, they began to trace their own biographies through the history of the field they owed their careers to. Scholars in American Studies were not the only academics who became introspective as they grew older, but the impulse to historicize themselves had a special significance in their case. More than their

[8] See, for example, Daniel T. Rodgers, "Thinking in Verbs," *Intellectual History Newsletter* 18 (1996): 21-23 and Anthony Grafton, "The History of Ideas: Precept and Practice, 1950-2000," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 1 (2006): 1-32.

[9] See Kenneth Murdock to Daniel Boorstin, 13 April 1950, Murdock Papers, Box 4, Folder "Letters–Matthiessen." On Miller, see Ann Douglas, "The Mind of Perry Miller," *New Republic* (3 February 1982) and David Levin, "Perry Miller at Harvard," *Southern Review* 19 (1983): 802-16.

colleagues from neighboring fields, they felt the need to document an experience that younger scholars did not seem to share: that of living in a world in which American books were not widely available and in which it was not clear that American Studies would succeed as an academic endeavor. But as autobiography became woven into historiography, the results sometimes surprised even the writers themselves. In 1967, the historian Peter Gay quipped that "revisionism is a young man's game," offering professional advancement and intellectual gratification mainly for those who did the revising.[10] In the case of American Studies, however, it was often a game played most effectively by older academics, who began to reconsider the past as they retraced their work.[11]

II

Aaron had always lived a peripatetic existence, even before he became the "roving ambassador" for American Studies that others began to consider him as.[12] Born in Chicago in 1912, he spent

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[10] Peter Gay, "The Social History of Ideas: Ernst Cassirer and After," in *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Kurth Wolff and Barrington Moore (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 110.

[11] For the connection between autobiography in historical scholarship, see Jeremy D. Popkin, *History, Historians, and Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and James M. Banner, Jr., and John R. Gillis, eds., *Becoming Historians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). For examples of and reflections on scholarship and autobiography, see Bennett M. Berger, ed., *Authors of Their Own Lives: Intellectual Autobiographies by Twenty American Sociologists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). For the role autobiography has played especially for minority scholars, see Paul A. Cimbala and Robert F. Himmelberg, eds., *Historians and Race: Autobiography and the Writing of History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) and Florence Howe, ed., *The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimony by Thirty Founding Mothers* (New York: Feminist Press, 2000). In this context, see also Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Colored People: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) and John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005). For the particular connection between the 1960s and scholarly biographies, see Sohnya Sayres, Anders Stephenson, Stanley Aronowitz, and Fredric Jameson, eds., *The 60s without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) and Alan Sica and Stephen Turner, eds., *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Aside from Aaron's autobiography, other memoirs by scholars close to American Studies include Henry F. May, *Coming to Terms: A Study in Memory and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), George W. Stocking, Jr., *Glimpses into My Own Black Box: An Exercise in Self-Deconstruction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), and Jules Chametzky, *Out of Brownsville: Encounters with Nobel Laureates and Other Jewish Writers* (Cambridge, MA: Meredith Winter Press, 2012).

[12] Peter Rose, "Creating and Maintaining an Academic Foreign Legion: A Short History of the Diploma Program in American Studies at Smith College," in *Smith's Foreign Legion: The First 50 Years of the Diploma in American Studies, Smith College, 1963-2012*, ed. Julia MacKenzie (Northampton, MA: Squirrel Rampant Press, 2012), 16.

part of his childhood in California, where his father, a lawyer, had connections to the film industry. An orphan by the time he was twelve, he and his siblings returned to Chicago in 1924, where they began to live with the extended family members who had suddenly become their legal guardians. In September of 1929, just a few months after his seventeenth birthday, Aaron enrolled at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Planning on becoming a doctor, he began in a pre-medical program, only to discover within less than a year that he was too young and too undisciplined to follow through on this course of study. Similarly, he soon left the Jewish fraternity he had joined, despite the many conveniences it provided him with. In its own way, he quickly discovered, the prejudices and hierarchies of clubs that were not open to Jews existed in their own way even in an exclusively Jewish organization. Looking back, he thought it would have made more sense for him to enroll at the University of Wisconsin's Experimental College, which had been opened just two years before. That he ended up in Ann Arbor instead was purely the outcome of chance: the boyfriend of one of his sisters at the time was an enthusiastic alumnus of Michigan, and Aaron let himself be easily swayed.[13]

Aaron graduated in June of 1933, into one of the Depression's most desperate years. During his time in college, he had been relatively well off, receiving a weekly allowance from his family trust for food, entertainment, and books. He used to spend some of this money on trips to Detroit, where he and his friends explored the city's nightlife and enjoyed its easy access to Canadian liquor. After he abandoned his foray into pre-medical training, he switched over to English, steered in this direction by a composition teacher he encountered early on at the school. "I wasn't interested in anything except English literature," he later recalled, and graduate school seemed like a logical next step for him. Confident that he could use his inheritance to pay for

[13] Daniel Aaron, *The Americanist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 9-27.

another degree, he applied to universities both in the United States and in England. He knew that his grades were not good enough to get him into Cambridge or Oxford, but he hoped that the University of London would take him. When this opportunity failed to materialize, it seemed to him as if he would have to continue working odd jobs to keep himself above water. One day, however, when returned home from one of his many casual jobs, he found an acceptance letter waiting for him. To his own great surprise, he had been admitted to study English at Harvard.[14]

Like Smith before him, Aaron had such a discouraging first year in Boston that he left again as soon as he could. He was surprised by the university's indifference to doctoral students, who were constantly reminded of the unbridgeable gap that existed between Harvard College and the Graduate School. If a Ph.D. student had suddenly expired in the middle of campus, he later mused about his own marginality at the time, would anyone have bothered to turn over the body to see who it was? Compounded by the grey skies, the cold nights, and the poverty he encountered in the streets outside of campus, he soon decided that he would rather return to the Midwest than spend more time in New England. He also discovered that he felt increasingly uninterested in the subject he was supposed to be devoting his time to. Subsisting on baked beans and sharing a room with two other students, he had a hard time concentrating on Anglo-Saxon and Middle English. While he had not yet developed his interest in American subjects, he was quickly losing his ambition to become a conventional professor of English. Just as it had brought Smith's initial foray into graduate education to an early conclusion, the highly philological orientation of Harvard English also ended Aaron's academic ambitions within less than a year.[15]

[14] Susanne Klingenstein, "Interview with Daniel Aaron," 30 June 1989, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 24, Folder 290.
[15] Aaron, *The Americanist*, 41-43.

After spending weeks fretting over what he should do, Aaron decided to return to his alma mater in Michigan. His former composition teacher had encouraged him to apply for a teaching fellowship, and he was lucky enough to receive one. It was only during his time back in Ann Arbor that he first came into contact with the materials he would spend the rest of his career thinking about. Disenchanted with just how far removed from daily reality his work in English had been, he felt himself increasingly drawn to American writing. And at the University of Michigan in the fall of 1935, no professor was better known for his knowledge of American literature than Howard Mumford Jones. Under the older man's guidance, Aaron began to read about American history and American culture, and by the time Jones received his invitation from James Bryant Conant, he gave Aaron the opportunity to return to Harvard together with him. Just like Jones would recruit Smith for the first cohort of the first graduate program in American Civilization, he was also responsible for bringing Aaron on board. When Smith and Aaron met each other for the first time, in the fall of 1937, they immediately discovered how much they had in common, despite their dissimilar backgrounds. Each had been at Harvard before, each had been part of the English program, and each had left after getting a taste of the rigors of philological training. Different as they were, they had both arrived at American Studies by similarly circuitous routes.[16]

Smith and Aaron quickly became friends. During the three years they were at Harvard together, they kept each other company and banded together to study for classes and prepare for exams. "It was tough," Aaron later recalled, having to work "like mad day and night" to make sure he would pass his comprehensive examinations.[17] As the first person scheduled to take the exams, he knew little about what to expect. Moreover, as the head counselor of the

[16] Aaron, *The Americanist*, 44-48.
[17] Klingenstein, "Interview with Daniel Aaron."

extracurricular program that the university had launched the previous year, he also had to oversee activities and schedule events in addition to preparing for his examinations. Partly to keep each other accountable, and partly to ensure that they were covering similar ground, he and Smith met up once a day to go over reading lists and memorize notes. "Henry and I crammed for our orals every day," Aaron would remember of their days in graduate school. Despite all their anxieties at the time, what later stood out in his memory were "a good deal of miscellaneous and extracurricular talk and politics and dancing and drinks."[18] Smith would remember Aaron as his "closest friend" during the late 1930s, when both of them were spending their second rotation in Boston.[19]

In 1939, with his comprehensive exams behind him but his dissertation still far from complete, Aaron received a job offer from Smith College in nearby Northampton. This was good news not just for Aaron. "In practical affairs, my good luck still holds," Smith wrote his friends back in Dallas after he heard about Aaron's new job. "It is all very complicated but the upshot is more money and less work next year."[20] Aaron had been hired to help the college create a major in American Studies, and by the fall of the following year, the first students were ready to enroll in the new concentration in "American Culture." His former teachers, and especially Jones, were not necessarily happy that it was Smith College that Aaron had gone to. Jones considered college teaching too time consuming, and he repeatedly advised his students against it. When Smith was offered a job at Williams College in 1941, Jones warned him that the attention demanded "by students and faculty affairs" would prevent him from getting ahead with his book.[21] On the other hand, in 1953, when it looked as if Aaron would be invited to join the faculty at Minnesota,

[18] Daniel Aaron to Elinor Smith, 8 June 1986, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.
[19] Henry Nash Smith to Morton W. Bloomfield, 4 February 1972, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.
[20] Henry Nash Smith to John Chapman, 16 July 1939, Smith Papers, Box 8, Folder 11.
[21] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 16 February 1941, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 26, Folder 329.

Jones hoped that his former student would accept the offer if it came through. "I think you have by now sucked all the juices there are out of the Northampton orange, and I should like to see you move beyond the orbit of Smith girls," Jones wrote him. He thought that the size of the University of Minnesota, and the opportunity to work with graduate students, would be good for Aaron both socially and intellectually. "I think you belong in the university circuit, not the college circuit," he told him.[22]

But Jones was not the only person dispensing advice, and in the end, Aaron ended up siding with those of his friends who thought that colleges were more amenable to the life of the mind. "It is my impression that the better private schools have more to be said for them than the big state schools," C. Vann Woodward told him when he heard of Aaron's possible move to Minnesota.[23] Whatever its drawbacks, Aaron was happy at Smith, and he ended up staying in Northampton for over thirty-two years. He enjoyed the atmosphere at the school, was an active member of the community, and became a well-known presence in local political battles. After the election of 1940, he observed with amusement that his female students, who were "about 90% Willkie," wore black for few days before turning their attention to different things. In 1948, after successfully working on a campaign that defeated an incumbent Congressman who had been in office for twelve years, he basked in his new reputation as a savvy campaign strategist. "We feel pretty good and the local politicos respect us," he reported.[24] A member of the auxiliary police force, a volunteer in the fire department, and a pitcher for the college's baseball team, Aaron found in Northampton a counterweight to his unsettled adolescence.[25] And as he began to increasingly travel the world, it also provided him with a social and intellectual anchor.

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[22] Howard Mumford Jones to Daniel Aaron, 9 June 1953, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 19, Folder 218.
[23] Daniel Aaron to Henry Nash Smith, undated, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 3.
[24] Daniel Aaron to Henry Nash Smith, undated, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 3.
[25] Alison L. Smith, "Aaron to Speak," *The Sophian* (21 October 1974)

Aaron spent the war years in Massachusetts, teaching his female students at Smith, trying to finish his dissertation, and worrying about whether he would be drafted or not. He had wanted to join the Army or Navy and work in combat intelligence, but as a partly color-blind teacher with a wife and a child, he discovered that he was not very far up on the list of the Northampton draft board.[26] For a long time, he was "much agitated" over the draft situation and the uncertainty it entailed, but once it became clear that he would likely never be drafted at all, others noticed "a great relaxation of tension and anxiety" in their interactions with him.[27] What agitated him most during the early years of the war was the need to get his thesis approved. In the fall of 1942, Murdock informed him that his work had been read but that Arthur Schlesinger had been unhappy with it, finding it thin and superficial. It "skims the surface," Schlesinger had told Murdock after reading Aaron's study on the history of Cincinnati.[28] Decades later, Aaron's thesis would get published in book form. By the time it was submitted, however, it did not arouse much excitement. "It was accepted without a request for revision and without enthusiasm," he later recalled.[29]

After spending World War II mostly in Northampton, Aaron was ready to use the opportunities for foreign travel that began to appear within years after the surrender of Germany and Japan. In 1949, when he participated in the Salzburg Seminar for the first time, he knew little about life on the other side of the ocean. Like many Americans, he did not realize how dire living conditions in Europe often still were, and Smith had to advise him to bring "supplementary things" such as canned vegetables and canned milk.[30] If Aaron was still in need of advice at this

[26] Klingenstein, "Interview with Daniel Aaron."
[27] Newton Arvin to Granville Hicks, 3 June 1945, Hicks Papers, Box 4, Folder "Arvin, Newton 1945"; Newton Arvin to Granville Hicks, 30 April 1944, Hicks Papers, Box 4, Folder "Arvin, Newton 1944."
[28] Kenneth Murdock to Daniel Aaron, 9 October 1942, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 23, Folder 278
[29] Aaron, *The Americanist*, 189.
[30] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 30 December 1948, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Folder 329.

time, however, it would soon be him whom other people began to consult before going abroad. Over the following decades, Aaron would make trips to a dozen different countries, finding himself lecturing in cities as different as Montevideo and Warsaw or Sydney and Delhi. His travels included a long stay in Finland, where a Soviet diplomat tried to gain information from him in exchange for a visa, and a lecture tour of different Latin American countries, where teachers and artists treated him as one more cultural emissary who tried to convince them that the United States was not an imperial power.[31] Of all the different roles he would play over the course of his life, the one of the "national representative" who traveled the world and spoke on American culture was the one he came to relish the most.[32]

At the beginning of his career, many people who knew Aaron had doubts about his ability to ever become a productive scholar in the traditional sense. Newton Arvin, a professor of English and one of Aaron's colleagues at Smith, thought that his strengths lay in teaching rather than research. "I more and more doubt whether Dan's line, his forte, is ever going to be writing," he confided to his friend Granville Hicks.[33] At Smith for over six years at this point, Aaron was still "riding the crest of a youthful excitement about books," Arvin found, and he could not imagine him turning into either "a ponderous and massive accumulative scholar" or an "original writer" who would attract attention from magazines.[34] Robert Gorham Davis, another one of his colleagues, thought along similar lines. While he found Aaron "eager, friendly, warm, enthusiastic," he thought his ability to perceive nuance was woefully underdeveloped. That students liked him was in part a result of his temperament, Davis assumed. "He is good with

[31] Daniel Aaron, "The American Professor and the Soviet Cookie Pusher," *The Reporter* (31 March 1953), 24-27; Daniel Aaron, "Lecture Series in Montevideo and Brazil," August 1966, Aaron Papers (Smith), Box 656, Folder "Latin America."
[32] Aaron, *The Americanist*, 2.
[33] Newton Arvin to Granville Hicks, 15 December 1944, Hicks Papers, Box 4, Folder "Arvin, Newton 1944."
[34] Newton Arvin to Granville Hicks, 23 September 1945, Hicks Papers, Box 4, Folder "Arvin, Newton 1945."

undergraduates because they respond to his enthusiasm, and because they get enough of academic reservations or activities from their other teachers."[35] Having created and directed the college's major in American Studies, both Arvin and Davis assumed that it was undertakings of this sort that were "up his alley."

While Aaron never turned into the type of ponderous scholar envisioned by Arvin, he did eventually begin to produce books, and by the early 1960s, these books had brought him national name recognition. In 1953, when Smith left Minnesota, Aaron became the top choice of the committee tasked with finding a replacement for the senior Americanist in the English department. Before he could be extended an offer, however, the administration informed the committee that the search would be cancelled due to budget constraints.[36] In 1962, Aaron received another offer from a well-known state university. At Berkeley for almost ten years at this point, Smith had frequently tried to bring his friends from Harvard and Minnesota to California. Marx had resisted Smith's attempts to bring him out West. On the one hand, he assumed that his lack of publications would make it difficult for him to receive an offer at all, given how rigorous the hiring process in the California system was at the time. On the other hand, with his whole family based in New England, he was hesitant to move to the other side of the country. "California was too remote a possibility and too remote," he reflected after accepting the invitation from Amherst instead.[37] Aaron, by contrast, seemed willing to exchange Northampton for Berkeley. After lengthy negotiations, he finally received a telegram with the job offer—but unexpectedly turned it down. For Mark Schorer, the chairman of the English department at the time, it was a humiliating occasion, and he hoped that his own value as an

[35] Robert Gorham Davis to Granville Hicks, 3 October 1945, Hicks Papers, Box 16, Folder "Davis, Robert Gorham, 1945-1972."
[36] Theodore Hornberger to Daniel Aaron, 7 April 1954, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 18, Folder 200.
[37] Leo Marx to Henry F. May, 27 March 1958, May Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.

administrator would not suffer as a result of this issue.[38] For Aaron, it meant that he would spend the 1960s not in one of the decade's political and cultural hotspots but in a sleepy town along the Connecticut River.

III

The 1960s in Northampton looked very different from the 1960s in Berkeley. Compared to what would unfold at the University of California, Smith College appeared to many observers idyllic and quiet even during the decade's final three years, at the height of worldwide student protests. Small, wealthy, and socially homogeneous, the college was able to avoid many of the issues that caused protests in other parts of the country. With a little over 2,000 students, it provided the kind of intimate environment that larger universities lacked, and since the faculty were incentivized to focus on teaching rather than research, they were always in close touch with what the undergraduates were thinking and doing. There were no teaching assistants, no research centers, and no alienating bureaucracy that stood between the women who enrolled in courses and the professors who taught them. Government contracts, weapons research, and military recruitment may have been problems for the University of Massachusetts, located eight miles to the northeast, but they rarely figured in the discussions that Smith students had with each other. In regard to concerns that did figure prominently in campus debates, such as the environment, the college could point to a laudable track record. And when it came to other issues, such as overnight guests in dormitories, it was willing to accommodate the changing values it faced.[39]

For Aaron, the late 1960s in Northampton were a time of remarkable quiet, and it was only when he heard from his colleagues at other universities that he realized just how peculiar his

[38] Mark Schorer to Daniel Aaron, 16 May 1962, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 25, Folder 321.
[39] "The Report of the President to the Board of Trustees for the Year 1970-1971," Smith College Archives, 6-7.

experience was. Without protests and tear gas outside his campus office, he was able to maintain an ironic distance to the events he saw in the news. "I am troubled but undismayed. I whistle as I go about fortifying my autonomous kingdom," he mused in the fall of 1969. "My temples are grey so that it looks as if I'm wearing a toupee that doesn't match. I am un-sideburned and grow studiedly unstylish."[40] After returning to Northampton from a visit to Berkeley, he was happy to report that the students at Smith neither looked nor sounded especially angry, and that no one had as of yet "fired any of the buildings" on campus. The one person most likely to set his office on fire, he joked, was he himself. Returning to his cluttered desk after the trip, the prospect of burning his responsibilities appeared seductively appealing to him. "Then it would be a simple matter of growing a beard, changing my name, and joining some happy commune."[41] He was no "youth-hater," he emphasized, and the "panicky and churlish diatribes" some of his colleagues had written seemed to him embarrassing and overblown.

In the fall of 1964, when the first protests erupted in front of Sproul Hall, Smith had been at Berkeley for over a decade. When he had accepted the offer from Minnesota in 1948, after a decade of annual relocations, he had assumed that he would remain in the Twin Cities for the foreseeable future. That Berkeley would make him an offer within several years was something he could not have expected. In 1950, Dixon Wecter passed away, after only one year at the University of California. Wecter, a distinguished scholar of American literature, had been hired to help process the papers of Mark Twain that the Bancroft Library had recently bought. When the question of a replacement for him came up, Smith seemed to many an obvious choice. Despite the many close friends he had made at Minnesota, Smith accepted the offer and moved his family once again to a different city. Although he had taught at other big state schools before,

[40] Daniel Aaron to Henry Nash Smith, 19 November 1969, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 3.
[41] Daniel Aaron to Henry Nash Smith, 21 April 1970, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.

Berkeley surprised him. Socially, it was not as warm and welcoming as he thought it would be, and the size of the California university system gave it its own special flavor. Whenever he thought of Berkeley, he would joke later on, he had to think of "IBM machines and registration procedures."[42] As far as his family was concerned, he was perfectly happy to have made the move to the West Coast. Despite rumors to the contrary, he found the schools in Berkeley to be of high quality, even though they included students from the "sterner reaches of the city." Advising a friend who had asked him for an honest assessment, Smith told him frankly: ""We have nothing like a true slum but there is enough poverty to make for realism."[43]

Given his troubles at the University of Texas, which he had been forced to leave in 1945, Smith was at first hesitant about his move to California. In 1953, state employees in California still had to sign a loyalty oath that required them to disavow political beliefs that could be considered subversive. Although this oath, which had been established by the 1950 Levering Act, was not as restrictive as a former oath that the university system had asked its employees to sign, it was nonetheless an issue that gave some people concerns. Robert Penn Warren, who had been a colleague of Smith's at Minnesota, had refused to sign the oath in 1951, only to later receive postcards thanking him for staying away: "We do not want disloyal and narrow-minded men like you at the University of California," one of them said. "Your refusal delights us."[44] Smith ended up signing the oath because the academics who had protested the earlier one had found it acceptable to sign the Levering statement.[45] In 1956, after almost three years in Berkeley, he had not felt any constraints on himself as a result of the measure. In fact, Minnesota

[42] Henry Nash Smith to Frederick Bracher, 17 September 1963, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 17.
[43] Henry Nash Smith to Carl Schorske, 19 January 1956, May Papers, Carton 12, Folder "Henry Smith."
[44] Postcard, 2 March 1951, Warren Papers, Box 46, Folder 895.
[45] The controversy of the oath imposed by the Regents of the University is chronicled in George R. Stewart, *The Year of the Oath* (New York: Doubleday, 1950). For context on the Levering Act, see Kevin Starr, *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace, 1940-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 328-29.

had seemed to him much more stringent in suppressing political activity on its campus. Although they had not attracted widespread attention, he remembered a number of dismissal cases that struck him as worse than anything that had happened in California. That the Berkeley faculty tended to loudly resist what they considered improper administrative orders seemed to him healthy and proper. The students, on the other hand, just like those at Minnesota, appeared to him apathetic on political issues. "Or am I romanticizing my own flaming youth at the barricades?" he half-ironically asked a friend.[46]

A year before Smith had arrived in California, Clark Kerr had become the first chancellor of the university system's Berkeley campus. Smith had known about Kerr for a while at that point, having admired the stand he had taken defending faculty members who refused to sign the original oath, and after several years working with Kerr at the helm of the campus, Smith felt confirmed in his high estimation of him. In 1958, when Kerr was made president of the California system, Smith felt elated. His "record of downright defiance of the Regents" seemed to him like an excellent qualification for this important position. Kerr was "quite simply the most admirable choice that could be conceived," Smith thought, describing him as a man with "the kind of stubborn integrity that one can read about in *Walden* but seldom encounters in actual life." In his mid-forties and of Quaker background, Smith joked that Kerr seemed to suffer daily because not every student at Berkeley was getting the close attention he had received while a student at Swarthmore.[47] "On civil rights issues Kerr is absolutely sound," he was convinced. Smith was especially fond of Kerr's direct manner and his lack of pretense. His speeches, Smith noted, were "good, clear, hard." They had no "rhetoric or pretensions to rhetoric" and were sometimes even "a little ungrammatical." His enunciation, similarly, was "distinctly non-U."

[46] Smith to Schorske, 19 January 1956.
[47] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 30 October 1957, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 17.

When Kerr spoke of the "prollems" the university faced, Smith felt that his campus was in good hands. "I am delighted that he is president here," he wrote Marx in the summer 1960.[48]

In the fall of 1964, in response to student activists setting up tables to solicit donations for civil rights organizations, the University of California announced that it would begin to strictly enforce its policy of prohibiting advocacy for political causes on campus. On December 2, several thousand students gathered on Sproul Plaza to demand that the administration reconsider its stance on political activities taking place on university property. Late that night, after Mario Savio had exhorted his audience from the top of a police car to put their bodies "upon the gears and upon the wheels," and after protesters had refused to leave occupied buildings, the police began to arrest people en masse.[49] For Smith, who had long considered the students in his classes to be politically passive, the events came as a surprise. "It is really spectacular," he wrote Marx later that month, enthusiastic to find his earlier judgment disproven. "I can only say that the silent generation has at last found a voice, and it is a deafening voice."[50] With a long history of political activism behind him, Smith quickly became involved in the negotiations between university officials and students, leaving him with little time for his teaching as the fall semester drew to a close. He had "trouble getting lectures together" and feared that administrators and politicians would jump at the chance to further restrict free expression on campus. When friends from other universities asked him about the situation at Berkeley, Smith urged them to be judicious in which sources they trusted. There were many social scientists, he warned, who had "doped out what was going to happen" only to find their analyses and predictions "brushed aside by events." Some of them, he suspected, had "a kind of ego-investment in seeing the students

[48] Henry Nash Smith to Walter Blair, 4 August 1960, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 14.
[49] Robert J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War: The 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 8-48.
[50] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 22 December 1964, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 22.

proved to be the dupes of professional agitators" rather than part of a genuine movement. Should the students turn out to be authentic and rational in their motivation, he explained, they would be "caught off base in an area where they are supposed to be experts."[51]

During the first year of protests at Berkeley, Smith assumed the role of an intermediary between students and faculty. During the initial days of unrest, he helped organize a bail fund for students who had been arrested, asking colleagues to contribute "any sum from one dollar upwards" to this endeavor.[52] Later on, he would help organize the Vietnam Day Committee and become involved in the political campaign of Robert Scheer, who ran as an anti-war candidate in the Democratic primary of 1966. Although he found himself in substantial agreement with the aims of the student movement, he never became actively involved in demonstrations or protests, choosing instead to watch events from a distance. In October of 1965, after observing an all-day event at which Paul Goodman and Allen Ginsberg had addressed several thousand people, he followed the crowd as it began to march toward the Oakland Army Terminal. "Too old and too timid," he did not join the march, despite being impressed with how well it was organized. "Perfect order, good humor, jokes with the Berkeley police," he later recalled. As the protesters crossed from Berkeley to Oakland, however, things suddenly changed. "I shall not soon forget the phalanx of Oakland cops in white helmets, with three-foot clubs, pistols, tear-gas grenades, gas masks, and complete riot equipment," Smith wrote Marx in the days following the event. It was only due to the good sense of the organizers, he thought, that no violence had occurred. "But there were a few minutes," he remembered, "when one blow, even accidental, might have touched off a massacre—which I dare say the police wanted."[53]

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[51] Henry Nash Smith to John William Ward, 28 December 1964, Smith Papers, Box 7, Folder 9.
[52] Information sheet, 3 December 1964, Litwack Collection, Box 1, Folder 7.
[53] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 22 October 1965, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 23.

Smith remained in support of the student movement throughout the following years. Mainly, this was because he agreed with its political goals. It was also, however, because he did not want to be associated with its conservative critics. "We are in a state of numbness after the bullet hit," Smith reported a week after the gubernatorial election of 1966, dismayed at how voters had reacted to the events of the previous years. "Reagan is going to be governor, God help us." The election outcome, he thought, would have serious consequences for the faculty and students at Berkeley. He was certain that Reagan would quickly move to get Kerr out of office, given that he had promised to "clean up that mess in Berkeley" during his bid for the governorship, and he shuddered to think who Reagan might choose to replace him. The last thing the university needed, he thought, was yet another change in its leadership. The one glimmer of hope he could see was the possibility of renewed solidarity between students, faculty, and administrators. An attack on Kerr by the state government, he thought, might help the warring factions put their disputes aside. "With attack from without the University may be able to close its ranks a little," he hoped. "We'll just have to see."[54]

Despite his hopes, this did not happen. A year after Reagan's election, the situation at Berkeley was as tense as ever, and instead of new solidarities, new rifts had emerged. Even Smith, who had made it a point to support student protesters wherever he could, felt his sense of alliance with the movement visibly weakened. When he was contacted by a representative of "The Resistance," an organization supporting draft avoiders, he turned down the offer to become involved in its efforts.[55] In the past, he explained, he had been happy to support such endeavors, as his work with the bail fund and the Vietnam Day Committee had shown. But as he had learned from experience, the concrete problems these organizations had been created to address

[54] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 15 November 1966, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 23.
[55] Anthony Philips to Henry Nash Smith, 13 September 1967, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 18.

oftentimes got sidelined as they grew and evolved. “In each of these cases, my interest and participation began because of a specific immediate issue,” he explained. “But in each case, as the organization developed, it began to take an interest in a much broader campaign for objectives that seemed to me not necessarily relevant to the specific issue I had been interested in at the outset.” On at least three different occasions, Smith recalled, he had witnessed what seemed to him like “the exploitation of an issue and an organization for purposes extending much beyond the original objective,” and it was for this reason that he declined when “The Resistance” asked him for help.[56]

From that time on, and particularly once there started to be riots and vandalism on campus, Smith felt increasingly caught between student protesters on the one side and university officials on the other. In the fall of 1968, he spent much of his time attending “dreadful four-hour Senate meetings” and waiting for the outcomes of student deliberations “which will determine whether the campus will be destroyed.” In this situation, he found “the plural idiocy of professors who cannot understand parliamentary procedure” little better than what seemed like the goals of the demonstrators, who appeared to try to transform the campus into “a battleground by physical collision between students and police.” What he found most frustrating about the situation was the impossible position it put him in. “One is pushed by a mighty force toward one of two extremes,” he explained, and it sometimes seemed to him as if ironic distance was the only sane response in these circumstances. After what seemed to him like months of constant interruption, with the noise of sirens and the smell of tear gas never far off, he was happy to report to a British colleague that the protests had entered a more predictable phase. The only thing that made it bearable, he explained, was that the demonstrators usually did not start before

[56] Henry Nash Smith to Anthony Phillips, 15 September 1967, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 18.

eleven and tended to stop at about three. “Some wag in our department remarked that this was the only revolution he ever heard of that kept bankers’ hours,” he joked, trying to find humor underneath his exasperation.[57]

The sense that students were merely playing at revolution was widespread among academics on both sides of the Atlantic. To someone like Smith, who had come of age in the 1920s and 1930s, it seemed that what happened at Berkeley and elsewhere was merely a “simulated revolution.”[58] Other academics shared this perspective. For the most part, faculty were able to ignore the disturbances as best as they could. They may have been annoyed by the disruption of classes and the occasional act of vandalism, but by and large they managed to live with the unrest, often observing it with a mixture of amusement and skepticism. When students at Cambridge University in England began to organize in the late 1960s, Smith received a letter from Tony Tanner, a former student of his who now taught there. What Tanner found both intriguing and perplexing was the stubborn insistence on bureaucratic procedure that the student protesters showed. “Truly I do not understand why they want to give up so much of their precious and brief time at university to meetings of such boredom that my language fails me,” he wrote Smith from England. “I spend my life struggling to stay off committees that the students spend their time struggling to get on!”[59]

At some point, however, this sense of detachment gave way to anger. When the protests entered the classroom, Smith ran out of sympathy for the demands of the students. Occupying an empty lot on the behalf of dispossessed Native Americans was one thing, he thought. Demanding that professors teach Native American Studies another. “We are supposed to have a strike of

[57] Henry Nash Smith to Frederick Bracher, 7 October 1968, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 18; Henry Nash Smith to Tony Tanner, 25 February 1969, Smith Papers, Box 6, Folder 10.
[58] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 1 June 1970, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.
[59] Tony Tanner to Henry Nash Smith, 27 April 1969, Smith Papers, Box 6, Folder 10.

Third World students tomorrow," he wrote Marx in early 1969, listing the demands that his students were making, which included programs in Black Studies, Asian Studies, and Chicano Studies. What he had a particularly difficult time understanding was the interest in Native American Studies on the part of his students. "I don't know whether this is just a joke or not," he admitted.[60] And he was not the only one who struggled to comprehend this phenomenon. Henry F. May, one of his longtime friends and a colleague at Berkeley, was equally perplexed by "the Native American Studies movement, the beads and the headbands," and he could see why Smith would be puzzled by it. "One can certainly find something nutty in white middle-class hippies adopting Indian poses," he thought, adding that as a historian of religion, however, he would never claim that "nuttiness and insignificance are the same."[61]

For Smith, the most significant experience connected to the social upheavals of the 1960s occurred in 1969, the year he served as president of the Modern Language Association. Already at the organization's 1968 meeting, conditions had been chaotic. Meetings were broken up, people got arrested, and discussions had turned into shouting matches. "The MLA this year was *really* ghastly," he reported to a friend afterward.[62] With such memories in the back of his mind, Smith dreaded the 1969 meeting, at which he in his function as president was expected to give the association's annual address. All year long, he felt himself caught between two enemy camps. On the one hand, there were the young radicals who questioned the very foundations of humanistic scholarly study. These were people like Louis Kampf, politically committed academics who tried to make the teaching of literature relevant to current events and who challenged the very idea of disinterested scholarship. On the other hand, there were professors

[60] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 21 January 1969, Smith Papers, Box 4, Folder 1.
[61] Henry F. May to Henry Nash Smith, 5 May 1970, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 1.
[62] Henry Nash Smith to Samuel Monk, 9 January 1969, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 11.

like Fredson Bowers, older academics who cared little about Vietnam and who simply wanted to go on writing their books. Smith was equally wary of both. Kampf with his combative rhetoric usually just made him angry: "I am not inclined to accept the implication that I have an obligation to explain to him," he argued, "according to his criteria, why I am interested in the scholarly and critical problems I am interested in."[63] And what Bowers made him realize was that many of his colleagues "still live in a kind of nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century world" in which "student protests, resistance to the draft, faculty strikes are things they read about in the newspapers (if they read about them at all)." These older professors, Smith sometimes had the impression, "think you can go on being genteel until the third bar of the tuba solo played by the archangel on the day of judgment."[64] And he disliked this as much as he disliked the disruptions and protests his younger colleagues engaged in.

When he went to Denver to deliver the address, Smith was so anxious that he developed "a psychosomatic sore throat." In the end, however, no catastrophes occurred. The meeting was a "mild nightmare," he admitted, but except for the passage of "some bombastic resolutions that seemed to give the young much pleasure" it went as well as could be expected.[65] "I got very little response to the MLA speech," he later told Aaron. The radicals had not cared about the speech at all—probably, Smith suspected, because they "found the thing so tiresome they couldn't bring themselves to comment on it, although they recognized a senile effort to 'understand' and to be tolerant." And the little feedback he received from the older professors merely suggested to him that they thought he had given "too much away to the subversives."[66] Trying to find a compromise, he had argued in his speech that both sides had valid points, and that these were not

[63] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 11 December 1969, Smith Papers, Box 4, Folder 1.
[64] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 21 January 1969, Smith Papers, Box 4, Folder 1.
[65] Henry Nash Smith to Walter Blair, 21 January 1970, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 14.
[66] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 15 February 1971, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.

necessarily opposed to one another. While he agreed that the concerns of the younger scholars were important, he did not think it helpful to challenge the very existence of associations like the MLA just because they had not yet found ways of accommodating a changed political climate.[67] In a sense, his point was simply an extension of the "principled opportunism" he took to be his scholarly credo. "If we wait to eliminate all hints of contradiction in our assumptions, and to examine everything we are taking for granted," he had explained this idea once, "we may find that the sun goes down before we make the first whack at chopping down the tree itself."[68] The only way to get anything done, he thought, was by getting to work and making corrections when necessary.

Smith had tried to be fair, and he had done so despite the fact that he was extremely skeptical of the ideas proposed by the radicals. Although he did not feel as threatened by younger scholars as some of his colleagues, he nevertheless shared the feeling that his life's work was under attack. He thought that many of the ideas espoused by the radicals were "violently and explicitly anti-intellectual," and this seemed to put his whole self-image into doubt. "They may be right," he wrote to a friend, "but if they are, then you and I have been wasting a great deal of time, and are now totally useless for the educational tasks of the present or the future."[69] Whether it manifested itself in students throwing stink bombs into classrooms, setting fire to library buildings, or objecting to being graded on their assignments: the longer he was exposed to it, the more Smith came to the conclusion that the whole protest movement of the late 1960s was deeply opposed to the kind of mindset he had tried to cultivate and communicate for the past forty years. Although he constantly tried to resist what he called his "O Tempora, O Mores

[67] Henry Nash Smith, "Something Is Happening but You Don't Know What It Is, Do You, Mr. Jones?," *PMLA* 85, no. 3 (1970): 417-22.
[68] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 16 January 1956, Smith Papers, Box 3, Folder 17.
[69] Henry Nash Smith to Frederick Bracher, 24 May 1969, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 18.

vein"—since, as he told his British friend, "I have been assured by my own offspring that it is my most tedious"—he eventually found it impossible not to conclude that much of what the protesters were doing amounted to little more than vandalism.[70] "I discover that I am an up-tight old man after all," he wrote Marx in the fall of 1969.[71]

IV

Among the Americanists who were part of the Harvard-Minnesota group, reactions to the student protests differed significantly. Still at Harvard at the time, Jones complained about the "fascist tactics" of student organizations and considered many protesters "hard-core irrationalists" bent on destroying the academy.[72] Marx, on the other hand, had quickly become the "leader" of the Amherst faculty left, and students saw him as one of their main allies among their professors.[73] Although hesitant at first, Ward had come back from a trip to Ireland more critical of American society than he had been before, suddenly finding himself dismayed by the "sheer pile of meretricious, shoddy junk" that the United States produced every day to meet the wishes of mindless consumers.[74] Smith had perhaps the most complicated reaction, partly because he encountered different perspectives on the relevant issues each day. Exasperated by what he had to deal with during his working hours, he gained a new appreciation for the viewpoint of his students when he talked to his own children at home. "I would not have believed, ten years or even five years ago," he told Aaron in 1971, speaking of his eldest son, "that I could have as much sympathy as I do for his repudiation of middle-class 'career patterns.'" Even though, Smith

[70] Henry Nash Smith to Tony Tanner, 28 October 1970, Smith Papers, Box 6, Folder 10.
[71] Henry Nash Smith to Leo Marx, 24 October 1960, Smith Papers, Box 4, Folder 1.
[72] Howard Mumford Jones to Merle Curti, 14 May 1968, Curti Papers, Box 21, Folder 25.
[73] Benjamin DeMott, "Letter to an Unhappy Alumnus," *Change* (Summer 1972), 25.
[74] John William Ward, "Can We Go On Like This? Education and Youth Today," *Amherst College Bulletin* (January 1969), 5.

joked, he himself was far from becoming "a convert to Consciousness III," he could recognize "the genuineness of the alienation" of his son and his friends.[75]

Smith was also the first to begin the process of introspection and self-revision that would characterize much of American Studies in the final third of the century. In 1972, two years after he had given his presidential address, he returned to the MLA's annual meeting to participate in a panel on which four prominent Americanists would look back on their earlier work and provide a current evaluation. Rereading *Virgin Land* for the first time in over a decade, and from the standpoint of someone who had seen the political discussions over fields such as Native American Studies up close, he discovered just how much his viewpoint had changed. "When I reread my book for the first time since its publication twenty-odd years ago," he confided to his friend Wallace Stegner, "I was aware that my own perspective is now different." His book, he admitted, now seemed to him "impregnated with a set of assumptions" similar to Frederick Jackson Turner's, which he now recognized as "jingoistic" and "imperialistic." As he told Stegner: "I feel embarrassed by the extent to which I accepted these assumptions."[76] When one of his younger colleagues heard of Smith's critical self-assessment, he wrote him a letter: "I hope you were not too hard on *Virgin Land*. In 1950 it gave this graduate student his first intimation that our so Manifest Destiny might not be escape-proof."[77]

Interest in the history of American Studies was not an entirely novel phenomenon in the later decades of the twentieth century. Americanists had already held panels on the field's development in the early 1960s, trying to chart the "history of the American Studies movement and its intellectual rationale."[78] After the 1960s, however, this issue began to interest a wide

[75] Henry Nash Smith to Daniel Aaron, 15 February 1971, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.
[76] Henry Nash Smith to Wallace Stegner, 19 December 1972, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 9.
[77] Richard Drinnon to Henry Nash Smith, 6 January 1973, Smith Papers, Box 2, Folder 14.
[78] Joseph Kwiat to Robert Spiller, 12 February 1960, Spiller Papers, Box 2, Folder 21.

range of people. At Berkeley, May interviewed Smith about the history of the field, wondering to what extent its emergence "had something to do with a rejection of expatriate literary precedent" or the "a certain kind of Popular Front thirties radicalism."[79] In New York, now working at the ACLS, Ward decided to speak on the history of American Studies when the ASA made him the keynote speaker at its annual meeting. Taking the field's "current lack of coherence" as his starting point, he aimed to review the history of the field to find out how it had arrived at this point. "I suspect they expect something bland and statesmanlike but they are not going to get it," he promised.[80] In Boston, the Harvard's Student Committee in American Civilization organized a panel on the past, present, and future of the field, asking in its title: "Has 'American Civilization' as an Organizing Principle Outlived Its Usefulness?"[81]

Americanists like Smith, Ward, Aaron, and Marx used this interest to reflect on their careers and the history of their field. As the most prolific among them, Aaron created the template for the topics which people reflecting on the history of American Studies would have to address. These included its roots in the New Deal, its paranoia about appearing chauvinistic, its supposed softness as compared to other disciplines, and its transformation during the 1960s. For Aaron at least, these reflections provided an opportunity to reorient his own relationship to the field. Explaining that he felt "no deep nostalgia for either the angry 30s or the strident 60s," both of which he associated with "cut and dried dichotomies," "arbitrary solutions," and "a terrible self-righteousness," he cast himself as an apolitical connoisseur of American culture. As he explained, in both decades "student evangelicals" had rallied against "ominous abstractions," whether these consisted of capitalism, fascism, or the establishment, and they had tested all

[79] Henry F. May to Henry Nash Smith, 22 March 1981, Smith Papers, Box 5, Folder 2. [P1050728]
[80] John William Ward to Henry Nash Smith, 25 February 1983, Smith Papers, Box 7, Folder 14.
[81] Student Committee in American Civilization to Daniel Aaron, 20 April 1986, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 37, Folder 498.

academic instruction by the standard of "relevance."[82] He, by contrast, had not entered the field for political reasons, he claimed. "My interest in American history and literature was not inspired by an overwhelming desire to improve the world and reform American society," he explained. While arguing that American Studies prepared students for life in American society, this did not seem to imply the type of political action or transformation that students in the 1930s or 1960s had hoped to achieve.[83]

But this was not the only way Americanists read their scholarly past. When Ward gave his talk on the history of the field in 1983, he ended on a different note. Repurposing the title of Smith's essay from twenty-five years earlier, he also asked whether American Studies could develop a method. Unlike Smith, however, who had used the phrase American Studies in quotation marks in his 1957 methodology piece, Ward let it stand on its own. The field had proven by now, he argued, that it was a legitimate academic endeavor and would remain so for the foreseeable future. Unlike many of his colleagues, who oriented their history of the field around the "Great Divide" of 1968, Ward felt less agitated about the changes the field had undergone. "Like fathers and sons," he wrote, "one generation always finds the preceding generation flawed and inadequate." In his view, revisionism was a part of every field's life cycle. He also made a different point. If academics of his generation criticized their younger colleagues, he implied, then to some extent they themselves were to blame for the state of affairs they found objectionable. The fact that American Studies now focused on issues such as race and sex simply meant that scholars of his generation had not done enough to alleviate the problems these terms describe. Had Americanists of his generation been more attuned to the diversity of American life, he wondered, they might now have "a better society," and thus "a better subject for study in the

[82] Daniel Aaron, "Fifty Years of American Studies," [1991?], Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 55, Folder 818.
[83] Daniel Aaron, notes for a talk on the history of American Studies, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 37, Folder 501.

field of American Studies."[84] The best way to change American Studies, Ward insinuated in his talk at the American Studies Association, was to change its object of study.

[84] John William Ward, "Can American Studies Develop a Method?," Marx Papers, Box 11, Unmarked Folder.

Conclusion

In early January of 2015, a little over three weeks after he had passed away, the news of Sacvan Bercovitch's death began to make its way into print. On the first Monday of the new year, the *New York Times* published an obituary about the "scholar who traced America's self-image," noting his passing at the age of eighty-one in Brookline, Massachusetts. Bercovitch had made a name for himself, the short piece explained, by connecting the dots that linked modern American culture to its Puritan past. He had recognized that when John F. Kennedy or Ronald Reagan spoke of their nation as a "shining city on a hill," they had done more than just recycle a phrase used by John Winthrop during the journey from the Old World to New England. They had also, Bercovitch had claimed, revived a rhetorical tradition that suffused American culture. Like preachers or politicians in previous centuries, they had fallen back on the structure of the jeremiad, contrasting current woes with an idealized future in an attempt to steer society away from decline. First gaining attention in the mid-1970s, by the time of his death, at least some considered Bercovitch "the last of the great American Studies scholars," as one of his colleagues at Harvard had said.[1]

In many ways, Bercovitch was one of the least likely persons to become a scholar of American culture. Born in 1933 in the Jewish ghetto of Montreal, his Yiddish-speaking parents named him after Sacco and Vanzetti, the anarchists who had been executed in Boston in 1927. With no awareness of higher education during his youth, he left high school and lived on a kibbutz in Israel for six years, shoveling manure and milking cows. "Brook Farm with a sprinkling of Marxism," he would later describe the intellectual flair of the community he lived

[1] Kenneth Chang, "Sacvan Bercovitch, Scholar Who Traced America's Self-Image, Dies at 81," *New York Times* (5 January 2015).

in. After his return to Montreal, he worked during the day at Steinberg's supermarket and took night classes at Sir George Williams College. It was during this time that he discovered his interest in literature and education. Once finished with his undergraduate work, he took his Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and went to Claremont Graduate School, which provided him with the type of beneficial neglect that more elite institutions might not have been willing to give. That he became interested in Puritanism was partly a pragmatic and partly a personal choice. With no one at Claremont an expert on the subject, he hoped that he would be able to finish his degree without much interference or supervision. But he also felt drawn to early New England for a different reason. Once he began reading their writings, he discovered that the Puritans were not the cold-hearted relationists that Perry Miller had painted them as. "What I found was that they were very imaginative, and full of dreams, and rhetoric, and myths."[2]

His first job out of graduate school was at Columbia University, where Lewis Leary and Quentin Anderson were willing to take a chance on the Canadian with the uncommon background and unusual name. After two years in New York, he relocated to Boston, where he taught at Brandeis University before accepting a position at the University of California, San Diego. In 1970, he returned to Columbia, where he stayed for over a decade. These years, in retrospect, appeared to him as some of the most interesting of his career. He enjoyed the collegial and egalitarian atmosphere at Columbia, where even senior figures like Lionel Trilling taught the same number of courses as he did. And at least in hindsight, the student protests of those years brought an excitement to teaching that he never again experienced later. "Bliss was it then to be a student, but to teach Whitman to those eager young minds was very heaven." At the edge of their

[2] Sacvan Bercovitch, interview with Susanne Klingenstein, 10 February 1988, Bercovitch Papers (Accession 2005-0074), Box 10; Sacvan Bercovitch, autobiographical reflections, 29 December 2004, Bercovitch Papers (Accession 2005-0074), Box 2.

seats, students debated fiction as if the future of civilization depended on it. "The study of literature took on a moral immediacy undreamt of by Matthew Arnold," he recalled. About what happened outside the classroom he felt slightly different at the time. From his perch in Southern California, he marveled at the ubiquity of slogans he saw everywhere. From "Dump the Hump" to "Send the Yippies to Vietnam" it seemed to him as if "every car, bike, window, garage door, garbage can" had some type of poster on it. "And," he noted drily, "the people here act like the posters."[3]

By the time he moved from Columbia to Harvard in 1983, Bercovitch had become a widely known presence in American Studies. In 1972, after Aaron had returned to Cambridge from Northampton, Bercovitch had been one of the first speakers at the American Civilization colloquium he helped organize. "Sacvan Bercovitch came last week," Aaron reported after the talk. "Very formidable. Spoke for two hours on very abstruse stuff."[4] In 1975, after the publication of his third book, an American Studies newsletter carried an article on the "scholar with the marvelous Slavic name," noting how extraordinary it seemed that "with ethnicity and pluralism as code words for scholarship," Bercovitch was nevertheless able to get people to read about the Puritan imagination.[5] In 1981, Smith referred to Bercovitch as "the most impressive scholar in his age group in the field of American Studies," pointing out that his "identification of the continuing influence of Puritan patterns of thought" made him Miller's obvious intellectual heir.[6] By 2002, it seemed to be the consensus opinion among Americanists that Bercovitch had done much to advance "current ways of understanding the evolution of an American cultural and

[3] Sacvan Bercovitch to Daniel Aaron, undated, Aaron Papers (Harvard), Box 10, Folder 90.
[4] Daniel Aaron to Henry Nash Smith, undated, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 4.
[5] Ernest Sandeen, "Forum: Who Is Sacvan Bercovitch?," *American Studies Association Minnesota-Dakota Chapter Newsletter* (April 1977).
[6] Henry Nash Smith to Gerald Freund, 29 April 1981, Smith Papers, Box 1, Folder 10.

national identity."[7] Aaron may have been baffled by his performance at his colloquium, but for others, hearing him lecture in the fall of 1972 had been an important moment in their careers.[8]

When Bercovitch began his professional life, American Studies was still preoccupied with its original goal of moving American culture from the margins to the center of academic teaching and research. In 1919, while a student Yale, F. O. Matthiessen had famously needed to go to the marine biology section of the university library when trying to locate a copy of *Moby-Dick*.[9] This state of affairs, many Americanists knew, had not changed much even two decades later. In 1946, Willard Thorp at Princeton bemoaned the fact that he could not find copies of the book for his students to read. "It is absurd that so little of one of America's greatest authors is in print," he explained. "I was not able to get even *Moby Dick* this term for my students in American literature!"[10] In 1961, another Americanist, Kenneth Lynn, still found the same to be true. Few American writers were represented in "competent and available editions," he thought.[11] A year afterward, Lionel Trilling made much the same point. "The lack of adequate editions of the great American writers has for some time seemed to me something like a national disgrace," he said in a statement of support for a publication project aimed at solving this problem.[12] Perry Miller agreed: "The situation is a national disgrace—no less."[13]

By the end of the century, this situation had changed. At colleges and universities across the country, classes on American literature had become standard fare on the curricular menu, oftentimes outnumbering competing offerings in European writing. "At the present moment,"

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[7] Emory Elliott, "Recommendation for Sacvan Bercovitch," 24 September 2002, Bercovitch Papers (Accession 2002-0255), Box 2, Folder "Loose Material."
[8] Philip F. Gura to Sacvan Bercovitch, 19 August 1986, Bercovitch Papers (1946-1999), Box 1, Folder "Correspondence, Dec. 1969-Dec. 1986."
[9] F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 45.
[10] Willard Thorp to Allen Tate, 30 April 1946, Tate Papers, Box 59, Folder 1.
[11] Kenneth Lynn to Leo Marx, 12 July 1961, Marx Papers, Box 11, Folder "Kenneth Lynn."
[12] Lionel Trilling to Jason Epstein, 10 September 1962, Warren Papers, Box 23, Folder 454.
[13] Perry Miller to Jason Epstein, 11 September 1962, Warren Papers, Box 23, Folder 454.

one of his former colleagues at Amherst told Marx with glee in 1985, "there is no course being offered next year in British Literature from 1680-1880! Times do change!"[14] Similarly, the creation of the Library of America in 1979 helped ensure that canonical texts would remain in print at affordable prices. After several attempts in the past to create an American version of the French *Pléiade* editions, none of which had been successful, the Library of America seemed to at last be able to fulfill the promise of placing basic American texts "within reach of all our people as they grow up in West Texas or East Harlem."[15] In fact, to many scholars it seemed as if American Studies had been too successful for its own good. David Horwitz was just one among many Americanists who wondered whether their field had become a victim of its own success. The field's "brand of criticism," Horwitz pointed out, had become common practice in history and literature departments, and new fields like Women's Studies or Popular Culture Studies had generated their own programs rather than staying within American Studies.[16]

But if this was the case, then what was the point of American Studies? Bercovitch's colleagues were able to think of him as the last representative of a particular type of Americanist because he had managed to carry the academic concerns and intellectual temperament of the field's founding impulse across the threshold of the twenty-first century. One of his signature courses at Harvard during his last years of teaching, a class on "The Myth of America," explained on its syllabus that it was an inquiry into "the mythic, symbolic, and ideological dimensions" of American identity as it was represented in "major literary works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." Featuring classic writers ranging from James Fenimore Cooper to

[14] Allen Guttmann to Leo Marx, 24 February 1985, Marx Papers, Box 11, Folder "Correspondence 1985."
[15] "Literary Classics of the United States Formed with Funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ford Foundation," 29 November 1979, Warren Papers, Box 40, Folder 780.
[16] Richard P. Horwitz, "Method in American Studies: A Reconceptualization," paper delivered at the ASA meeting, November 3-6, 1983, Cunliffe Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.

Frederick Douglass, the course would focus on "showing the close relation between text and context." It also, the syllabus noted, was not meant as an endorsement of what it discussed. "This course sets out neither to celebrate the myths that resulted," this disclaimer read, "nor to endorse our writers' sometimes severe criticism of American realities." For the final exam, students were asked to ponder some of the "sustained general features" of the American myth, such as "the focus on the individual" or "the context of nature."[17]

Bercovitch was not naïve about where American Studies was headed as the twentieth century came to a close. In 1988, during a visit to the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, he had pointed out that the "English-History connection" of its American Studies program was "an old and somewhat stale one."[18] Similarly, he recognized that during the 1990s all signs pointed toward the field leaving its traditional concerns behind and becoming transnational in orientation. The classic question of American Studies, "What's unique about America?," had more clearly than ever merged as "a barrier to intellectual inquiry," he knew very well. Interested in exploring this issue, he proposed the creation of a new book series to the editors at Harvard University Press, which would focus on "The Study of US Culture in a Global Perspective." Although the books in this series would represent something that could be called "Post-American Studies," Bercovitch explained, they would nevertheless focus on the United States as the center of global attention. It may be true, he thought, that Americans had become less preoccupied with themselves, but that did not mean that others around the world talked, thought, and wrote less about them. "The study of American culture, which half a century ago was restricted to the periphery of academia, has become a central concern throughout the world," he explained in his

[17] Syllabus, "The Myth of America," Fall 1993, Bercovitch Papers (2006-0057), Box 2; "Final Exam - Myth of America - English E-177," Bercovitch Papers (Accession 2001-0091), Box 1, Folder "Teaching Materials."
[18] Judith Fryer, "Minutes of Meeting," 15 April 1988, Chametzky Papers, Box 11, Folder "American Studies Program."

proposal. “America is *the* international focus for intellectual debate.”[19] For Bercovitch at least, even Post-American Studies was still very much focused on America. And this was perhaps not surprising for someone who thought of himself as a peculiarly American product. “I stand at this podium,” he said at an award ceremony shortly after retiring from teaching, “as an example of what I consider to be the most compelling and problematic aspect of the American dream: I have forged an immigrant success story through a concerted adversarial critique of America.”[20]

[19] Sacvan Bercovitch to Lindsay Waters, “Prospectus,” Bercovitch Papers (1946-1999), Box 2, Folder “Correspondence Nov. 1984-Mar. 1999.”
[20] Sacvan Bercovitch, “Hubbell Award Acceptance,” 29 December 2004, Bercovitch Papers (Accession 2005-0074), Box 5.

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