IN PRAISE OF DIVERSITY

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THE BIBLIOGRAPHY COMMITTEE'S QUESTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT, significance and prospects of our "movement" put in my mind the articles on similar topics submitted to *American Studies* each year. Though I confess that as editor I sometimes root for them, few seem to get accepted, generally because however bright their analyses and suggestions, our consultants find them too parochial: what their authors say about American Studies isn't true at places the consultants know; their curricular ideas would work only at certain universities; their suggestions of scholarly strategies do not apply to the fields in which the consultants' productive American Studies colleagues are at work. The bad batting average of such essays suggests something of the diversity of the academic activities called "American Studies," and makes me hesitant to generalize. One thinks of the blind men and the elephant, or of the fellow in the Poe story who, setting out to write his literary memoirs, considered entitling them "Memoranda to serve for the Literary History of America." This is to say that there is no one American Studies movement, no one "method," no generally-accepted "philosophy." How then to answer questions about impact on higher education or "our understanding of American culture?" Timidly, I think, in case my experience does not match yours. But not too modestly, for I like our work and our record.

Impact, first. We are, I think, the largest and most experienced interdiscipline; we may even be the oldest: Dick Lillard holds one of our Ph.D.'s, and he retired a few years ago—I hate that fact! I know of places, at any rate, where the model of American Studies and its success have suggested other imaginative new programs. It is only fair to note that there are probably also schools which developed American Studies because of the example of a thriving Latin American Area or Asian Studies program. But certainly it is safe to say that we have helped move higher education to think in such terms.

It is worth noting, too, that a high percentage of foreign service people have our training. When abroad to teach or lecture I have repeatedly been pleased to find such folks in embassies, bi-national centers and cultural

organizations. If our nation is presenting a somewhat more complex, realistic and convincing picture of itself these days to at least some foreign observers, I like to think that American Studies has helped.

And I have to think that the academic world would be poorer had there been no programs at Indiana, Irvine, Iowa, Harvard, Kansas, Brown, Minnesota or Pennsylvania—I picked that bunch just because I know at least a little about the peculiarities of each—training undergraduate and/or graduate students, at one time or another, through such approaches as history enriched with literature, literature enriched with history, comparative cultures, folklore enriched by "culture," "interrelating," the Mighty Culture Concept, opportunistic and ad-hoc exploitation of a university's American resources, paradigm study, modernization theory and course-patterns aimed at career training. Some programs have hung their reputations on a theory of what American Studies is; others, including some of the best, have operated devoid of theory—indeed, in some cases, unaware of it. We would be poorer without them, too. Although I know of some very weak programs, I feel that our field has been unduly—indeed, absurdly—nervous and self-conscious: we have trained good students; we have produced good scholarship; we have shown schools the advantages of more flexible attitudes towards curriculum and intellectual resources.

We have, as we move into expected hard academic times, certain assets:

1) The brevity of American history. Since the American historical experience is so short, almost any miscellaneous but reasonably large bundle of courses dealing with different aspects of it will produce in a good student a kind of depth and expertise unusual in graduate students and very rare among undergraduates. During the years in which the major which Ed Grier ran at Kansas offered just the A.B., he and I used to pretend that it was our elegant teaching which brought in the Woodrow Wilson (remember them?) and other major fellowships, but we both knew first, that the reputation of the major and its unusual nature attracted adventurous souls, and that, second, the heavy concentration of good courses on America did the rest.

2) Students. Such well-trained students are not only our raison d'être, they are our greatest asset. Their quality makes faculty in the various departments more likely to cooperate in order to get them into their classes, and administrators with conscience (there are some) more likely to extend credit.

3) Efficiency. American Studies continues to spread even in our tough times because it strikes hard-pressed administrators as an efficient way to utilize existing staff. At a school with a mix of good, poor and mediocre

departments, say, of English, sociology, history, art history, geography and political science, it is sometimes true that the assembled Americanists in those units constitute a stronger and sounder potential major than any or most of the departments can provide. (It is also possible that they *don't*—a Renaissance Studies program or something else might make better sense at given places, but that's fine, too; our model, again, is one of our gifts to academia.) Putting in such new programs, deans know, can improve morale and make good p.r. in days when hiring new folks may be next to impossible. In my most recent consulting (I am sometimes asked to advise schools considering new programs), this argument has been the most compelling; if I have not advanced it, deans have. Also: some small places and a few imaginative large ones like faculty who can double in brass. A person in a history (or sometimes a "social science") department at a junior college who is competent to give an introduction to sociology class or to teach "comp and lit" may be very attractive in these days of "retraining"; I know of candidates placed for just that reason.

I should list pitfalls, too, admitting that my list is idiosyncratic.

1) Inept advising and direction. I do not feel that full departmental status is critical; some great programs have operated out of unlikely (even almost invisible) structures; some still do. But the good ones always have at least one person who really belongs to the majors, who will put out time and effort in advising and helping cut red tape. This person has to have authority to approve student programs and to bend requirements within reasonable limits when, for instance, desired or required courses are not available. He or she should also monitor quality constantly.

2) Over-emphasis on methodology. Methodologists come in second. They codify what the really creative have simply done. To put it more moderately, good methodology is nothing more than honest description of the scope and limits of your study. Imposing *one* method hurts students and programs. Good students pick up sound methods from models of good scholarship. I believe in showing our methods, but not imposing them, in using whatever procedure is appropriate to the research at hand, in frankly admitting the limits of certainty. I feel further that we should not be afraid of conjecture about the wider implications of even limited studies, so long as it is labelled "speculation." Good programs have injured themselves in methodological wrangles.

3) Thinness. More important on the undergraduate level than any variable except the quality of courses available is the *number* of good substantive American courses one can allow majors to take. In my experience, the programs which produce the strongest majors are those which have found ways to get their students into lots of relevant courses, their own or those of cooperating departments; the weak programs always seem thin.

4) The pull of the disciplines. Patterns of reward and recognition run with traditional disciplines, and suck American Studies scholarship into more conventional lines. Having *American Quarterly* and *American Studies* helps, I hope, but I feel, in general, that even when he works in an established scholarly genre, an American Studies practitioner can bring his interests and training to bear.

Because, after all, the disciplinary lines *are* arbitrary. When I contracted some years ago to do a fully annotated edition of the seventy Poe tales, I thought of the work as a digression from my American Studies concerns; it was "purely literary." But explicating Poe led my wife and me into so many cultural, social and intellectual currents of Poe's day that I feel the product is a work in American Studies. I can't go armed with a tape recorder into an 1833 home and interview an American, but I feel I can get very far into the mind and associations of one American named Edgar Poe, and point connections between his responses to race, new media of transportation and communication, popular culture, psychohistory, modernization—in short, come much closer to putting together the feel of his new world than by any other method I know. I don't propose *explication du texte* as *the* method for American Studies, but, by God, it is *a* method.

It seems to me, finally, that intolerance and arrogance are the gravest dangers American Studies faces—intolerance of somebody else's way of doing things, arrogance that one's own way is the One True Way, unwillingness to engage in dialogue and learn from people whose perspectives, interests and training are different. Our peculiar diversity of approaches to the study of America does not indicate the failure of our "movement"; rather, it is its glory and its strength, insurance that we can go on learning from one another.

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