

TO JURASSIC PARK

ACTIVISM, CULTURE, & AMERICAN STUDIES ★ PAUL LAUTER

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FOR ANNIE

O my America! my new-found-land
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd,
My Mine of precious stones, My Empery,
How blest am I in this discovering thee!
—John Donne, “Elegy XIX”

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INTRODUCTION

"Whatever it is, I'm against it." Horsefeathers

First, shopper, what this book is *not*. It is not a survey of the field called "American studies," though it contains information based on much observation of what American studies programs do, at home and overseas. It is not a chronicle of American studies, though I do occasionally pass myself off as a historian of moments in what some still call the American studies movement. It is not a set of examples that exhaust the assorted tactics American studies scholars use to examine the equally varied things we study—books, movies, paintings, posters, politics, circuses, classroom practices, catalogs, whaling ships, laws, and riffs. It is not, despite my best intentions, a political tract, though I hope on occasion that it speaks to or rather against the drift to unadorned greed and superficial moralism that mark this time, Buffett to Gingrich to Starr. It is not a memoir, though somewhat to my surprise, one of its first readers pointed to how many of the essays depart from and try to interpret personal experiences. If I've now painted myself into a negative corner, I need to strike a more positive note about what I'm trying to do in this book.

"I resist anything better than my own diversity." Walt Whitman

What does it mean, American studies? The first part of this book illustrates how varied the answers to that question can be. The objects of my study include movies like *Nashville* and *Jurassic Park*, social movements like the Nashville Agrarians and the nonviolent student protesters of the early 1960s, graduate school reading lists and course syllabi, contemporary policy papers on the financing of higher education . . . and my junior high school song book. And while my primary methods are those of close reading—once an English teacher, I suppose, always one—I have gathered my evidence from sources that would not likely have enchanted my 1950s New Critical mentors: *Variety*, Rand Corporation reports, movieland blurbs. I also argue that doing American studies is a kind of political act; no, not the sort one carries out in the voting booth, much less in the streets and on the parapets of the Pentagon. I don't identify our academic pursuits with insurrection. Neither, however, is what we do tame. It isn't only that inside the academy American studies is, as it has been for half a century, engaged in a conflict for resources, all the more intense in this time of strained educational budgets. In the larger world, American studies has never offered a peaceful collegiate abode.

"America why are your libraries full of tears?" Allen Ginsberg

In its academic phase—the last fifty years or so—American studies has been marked by a tension between its reigning ideologies, relatively progressive in their time, and the field's role in nurturing America's imperial aspirations, especially in the post-World War II period. But the agon of American Studies was hardly new news in 1950, for it extends back certainly as far as W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) and José Martí's "Our America" (1891), and, if one sees them in this light, texts as historically distant as William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* (c. 1630–1650) and Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). Race and ethnicity have, of course, always been at the center of the paradox of American studies, from long before it was called that. How could it be otherwise when any serious study of the European presence on this continent needs always consider the racial record if it would not court evasion? So we ask how our field rubs up against, poaches on, sometimes embraces, sometimes avoids eth-

nic studies. And how we parade into the world where always, already, we are American, whatever our study. To such matters is part 2 devoted.

"I don't even like political poems." Lorna Dee Cervantes

The third part of the book returns to canon questions that have long taken up much of my own energies. Here I begin with a long essay about *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, since it has become something of a touchstone for debates about cultural canons in this country. In fact, however, the real subject of this essay and the terrain of this part is modernism, or more precisely its conflicted constructions in the years during and since certain ideas of a modernist order became the dominant force of American literary culture. Our own exertions in producing the *Heath* provide but one instance of how an earlier view not just of the modernist canon, but of literary value, inhibited and complicated culturally progressive aspirations. The essays on Herman Melville and on Amy Lowell track ways in which their literary reputations rose, in the one case, and fell in the other in relation to certain developments in modernist thinking. Finally, I return, not surprisingly, to the work of my own mentors, against which, in certain respects, efforts like the *Heath*, my previous books, and this collection, too, are deployed. My intent has not so much been to kill the fathers—parricides all say that, of course—as to understand how those of us with a revisionist cultural agenda have used their ways of organizing cultural power, even as we contested the very grounds upon which they stood.

"I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there." H. D. Thoreau

But what of my title? Does it stake out anything but a catchy sound bite? I went to Walden, in fact, a bit over forty years ago, at about the time I was writing a review of then recent scholarship on Thoreau for *The New Leader*. It was 1959, and I was cheerfully (and accurately) predicting a political turn in our understanding of Thoreau, who seemed to me a prophet of the social movements just then gathering strength as blacks boycotted the Montgomery buses, Dr. Spock worried about fallout, and beatniks mocked the House Un-American Activities Committee in San Francisco. The review represented my engagement in a longer project, growing from my dissertation ("Emerson's Rhetoric"),

which I imagined as a major academic tome on language and rhetoric (à la Kenneth Burke) in Emerson, Thoreau, and—down the road, my goal—Melville. I actually did complete a piece of the Thoreau section, in the form of an article, “Thoreau’s Prophetic Testimony,” for a 1962 issue of the *Massachusetts Review*. But by then life, or more precisely the Movement, had begun to intervene, and in 1963 I went to work for the American Friends Service Committee as director of peace studies. The study and practice of civil disobedience—as experience and politics—took over from the analysis of “Civil Disobedience” as text and theory. It would be two decades and more before I returned to American transcendentalism and then only by paths that led not so much from graduate school as from freedom school.

“Rigidity means death.” Gloria Anzaldúa

Ironically, perhaps, as I was completing this book I was also finishing the introduction for an edition of *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience” in the New Riverside series, for which I’m the general editor. Going back to reread my 1962 Thoreau piece for the first time in at least a quarter century, I found to my astonishment that I had reproduced in my new introduction some of the very same language I had used when Thoreau was first helping lead me away from my academic New Critical training and into nonviolence. Perhaps that only proves that what goes around comes around, or how deeply the brain runs within its groove. But I actually think that the phrases I evoked at Walden forty years ago echo differently amongst the vines and beasts of today’s Jurassic culture. For then I could assimilate Thoreau to Isaiah, to testify against nukes, racism, and complacency; whereas today he seems to me a more slippery and ironic fellow, playing out contradictions that appear not only in the woods, but in the study, the movie house, the classroom, and the bedroom. He’s no less irritating or self-involved, queer as ever, smart as any grad student, but now I can learn from him something of what one needs to know to survive Jurassic culture. So my title acknowledges the inescapable trek of American studies from its ostensibly pastoral beginnings to a famous new role in the commodity jungle of Time-Warner, Disney, AOL, and Amazon.com. But the title also registers, I suppose, the curve of my own, peculiar career, which, having passed through Mississippi, Selma, the levitation of

the Pentagon, the decline of the West, the fifty-sixth issue of *Radical Teacher*, the emergence of American studies in Vietnam, returns via Jurassic Park to the woods for as good a reason as I left there.

"I want to thank everybody who made this day necessary." Yogi Berra
Cleanth Brooks would be astonished to find himself directly following Yogi Berra, but the fact is that Mr. Brooks taught me well. Not only to read the ironies of juxtaposition closely, but—as the final part of this book suggests—how to organize intellectual workers. Perhaps, too, gentleman that he was, he conveyed to a callow Jewish kid from New York a certain small sense of grace—or, at any rate, sufficient to allow me to thank him even as I take issue with virtually all his judgments. Others have more directly had a hand in the shaping of this book—so many, in fact, that I can only apologize beforehand to those whose names I have managed to omit. They certainly include, first of all, the individuals who directly initiated or in one way and another helped edit one of the chapters: Jaap Verhuel, Hans Krabbendam, Rob Kroes, Donald Pease, Robyn Wiegman, Lucy Maddox, Hiroko Sato, Tatsuro Nomura, Ibu Puan Ellisafny, Sunarwoto, Ibu Dewi Murni, Subur Wardoyo, Roland Hagenbüchle, Josef Raab, Yassen N. Zassoursky, Isaiah Smithson, Nancy Ruff, Kim Hastings, and, over and over, Cathy Davidson. On no group of people have I drawn more than my colleagues on the editorial board of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*: Richard Yarborough, Juan Bruce-Novoa, Jackson Bryer, the late Elaine Hedges, Anne Jones, the late Amy Ling, Wendy Martin, Charles Molesworth, Carla Mulford, Raymund Paredes, Ivy Schweitzer, Linda Wagner-Martin, Andrew Wiget, and Sandra Zagarell. They and our colleagues Paul Smith, Randy Bass, and John Alberti have taught me more than they know, and a lot more than I can ever repay. On this project I must register particular thanks to Carla, Linda, Richard, and Sandy, without whose encouragement and responses, I would still be frittering away my time.

"Bare lists of words are found suggestive to an imaginative and excited mind." R. W. Emerson

A great many individuals have helped me to think about the issues these essays address. Many were kind enough to share their responses

and thoughts at presentations I gave; others helped me recognize how people in very different venues might hear my remarks. The names of some, like the colleague at a United States Information Agency winter institute in Delaware who talked to me about *Jurassic Park* as a failed utopia, I am ashamed to say have faded from memory. But some, at least, I have managed to retain, and I hope they will regard a word here as a small gesture of appreciation for their generosity and as a symbol of what they have enabled me to write: thank you, Ibu Pia Alisjahbana, Dr. Burhanuddin Arafah, Estelle Baird, Hans Bak, Sergio Luiz Prado Bellei, Jesus Benito Sánchez, Paula Bennett, Dr. Melani Budianta, Selma Burkom, Johnnella Butler, Jan Cohn, Constance Coiner (*¡Presente!*), Rob Corber, Michael Cowan, Kate Delaney, Jane C. Desmond, Micaela di Leonardo, Virginia Dominguez, Tim Drown, Emory Elliott, Ibu Estiati, SallyAnn Ferguson, Jeff Finlay, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Dick Flacks, Phyllis Franklin, Doris Friedensohn, Peggy Gifford, Robert A. Gross, Wen-ching Ho, Rich Horwitz, Gordon Hutner, Heinz Ickstadt, Greg Jay, Anne Jones, André Kaenel, Carla Kaplan, Karen Kilcup, Andy Lakritz, Lee Yu-cheng, Günter Lenz, Hsien-hao Sebastian Liao, Shirley Lim, Ana Maria Manzananas Calvo, Jim Miller, Judy Moon, Marcy Knopf Newman, Gail Nomura, Dick Ohmann, Hassan Ouzzate, Carl Pedersen, Mikhail Pelipas, Margo Perkins, Jean Pfaelzer, Fred Pfeil, Marco Portales, Alvina Quintana, Chodidah (Toto) Rahardjo, Tim Reed, Dilvo Ristoff, Lillian Robinson, Paula Rothenberg, John Carlos Rowe, Richard Ruland, Claudia Sadowski-Smith, Eric Sandeen, Rita Schmidt, Shan Te-hsing, Judy Siegel, Dr. Doddy W. Sjahbuddin, Reynolds Smith, Bruce Spear, Hortense Spillers, John Stephens, Wesley Stewart, Stephen Sumida, Sun Mi Ra, Justine Tally, Rick Taylor, Ronald Thomas, Tamara Tsintsadze, Alexandr Vaschenko, Tatiana Venediktova, Joyce Warren, Don Q. Washington, Natalia Yakimenko, Janet Zandy.

"and a person for work that is real." Marge Piercy

Louis Kampf has had the misfortune to have virtually all of these essays forced upon him; nevertheless, with his usual good sense, he pronounced them appropriate for *Darwin University Studies*. For this—and a few hundred thousand other hints and indirections—a *b'ruchah*. Ann Fitzgerald, my fiercest critic and most indefatigable promoter, has been the seldom silent partner in this entire enterprise. It is a protocol

of this form to attribute one's virtues to one's partner; in this case it is simply true to say that not a paragraph in this book remains unimproved by her editorial hand, and much that I have come to look at, here and elsewhere on the turning earth, I have come to see through her curious and loving eyes. The words of thanks are elsewhere than on this page.

PART ONE ★ PRACTICING AMERICAN STUDIES

INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE

These essays were written over a number of years and for very diverse situations. I have placed them in this sequence: the keynote talk at the 1997 meeting of the Netherlands American Studies Association in Middleburg; a talk at the first Dartmouth conference on the futures of American studies in 1997; the presidential address of the 1994 American Studies Association (ASA) convention in Nashville; the annual ASA president's speech at the 1995 Sendai meeting of the Japanese Association for American Studies; and an informal 1996 lecture on popular culture to a group of university teachers at Diponegoro University in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia. They do, however, represent a common project: my own efforts to understand what it meant that I was "doing" American studies. Clearly, having been elected ASA president in 1992, and having been sent abroad to lecture about American studies, I was seen as an American studies person. But I have to confess that I really had no clear idea of what that might mean, apart from the fact that my scholarly work, largely focused on literary texts, concerned the United States. Of course, I had been writing "political" essays about the United States since the late 1950s, including one, as I recall, on Henry Kissinger and Norman Cousins. But it had only been

in recent years that most—though obviously not all—literary folk had come to reject the sanctified divide between the “scholarly” and the “political,” indeed, to acknowledge that the two categories might be deeply implicated with each other.

Crossing over into American studies, I found little resistance to the notion that the professional is the political. It was considerably more difficult, however, to locate some consensus about what Americanists generally thought we did, much less what the political project of American studies as a field could, or even should, be. Hence the enterprise to describe our labor. These essays represent the fruits of that effort—or, perhaps, the residue of the struggle. However that might be, I hope these can be helpful to others involved in what is, after all, a broad and common project of defining and redefining what it is we do under the name—itself increasingly contested—“American studies.”

My basic contention throughout is that American studies as an academic discipline has developed a set of distinctive, somewhat eclectic, but logically connected methods for approaching its increasingly diverse subject matter. These essays attempt to describe and illustrate such methods. At the same time, I have tried to suggest methodological directions—for example, those of ethnography—in which I think American studies practitioners ought to be pushing in order to anchor our tendencies toward the cleverly speculative assertion and the abstruse theoretical design. I don’t propose that these essays will resolve the field’s methodological, much less its ideological, conflicts. But I think these pieces can prove to be useful contributions to what is and is likely to continue as an ongoing discussion.

CHAPTER ONE
**RECONFIGURING
ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES:
THE EMERGENCE OF
AMERICAN STUDIES**

Few recent books have generated as much discussion as Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Reviewers have debated its evocation of "German exceptionalism," and historians have discussed the persuasiveness of the evidence it offers as well as the cogency of its explanatory framework. But one may also wish to ask about the role the book is playing in the United States today: what cultural work is it performing at a moment in which the Holocaust seems itself an ever larger presence on the American scene? This seems to me an absorbing, indeed major question. But I do not want to address it here. Rather, I wish to ask "where should such a question be studied within the academy?"

By "cultural work" I refer to the ways in which a book or other kind of "text"—a movie, a Supreme Court decision, an ad, an anthology, an international treaty, a material object—helps construct the frameworks, fashion the metaphors, create the very language by which people comprehend their experiences and think about their world. The question of the cultural work *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is perform-