

# WHAT IS AMERICAN STUDIES?

*An ASA White Paper*

In its relatively brief history, American Studies has taken on many different incarnations and identities. Founded in the 1930s and 1940s as a locus of interdisciplinary inquiry into the national cultures of the United States, it has become a generative field of intellectual curiosity and creativity, a nexus of energy and engagement. American Studies scholars share a dynamic commitment to democratic inquiry rather than a universally agreed upon canon of required methods or venerated works. The field encompasses an eclectic array of practices and pedagogies that cohere around openness to studying diverse research objects, asking a broad range of research questions, and engaging with a wide range of scholarly approaches, methods and theories.

The work of American Studies takes place on campuses and in communities, in many different realms of scholarship and civic life, inside and outside the juridical and geographic boundaries of the nation state. It transpires through the activities of the American Studies Association (which has

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—George Lipsitz, UC Santa Barbara


more than five thousand members), in articles published in the key journals of the field, in the teaching, research and community service commitments of American Studies departments and programs, in the migration of American Studies perspectives, frames, ideas, evidence and arguments across the humanities and the social sciences, and in equity-oriented collaborative partnerships between campus and community groups.

This capacious and sometimes even ungainly configuration enables different kinds of work to be done in different ways at different kinds of institutions. No one pattern prevails, in part because American Studies departments have emerged out of a complex array of local initiatives and innovations, opportunities and obstacles, agreements and antagonisms.

American Studies is an academic enterprise that monitors, registers and responds to lived social experience. It embodies the ideals expressed by W.E.B. Du Bois when he described the mission of higher education in civic life as not primarily a place for vocational training or personal socialization but rather as “the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization.”<sup>1</sup> The key paradigms in American Studies have emerged from social upheavals and crisis—the mass mobilizations by the Culture of Unity during the Great Depression, the reorganization of the nation’s



institutions and economy during and after World War II, the rise of a corporate culture of consumption and conformity in the 1950s, the challenges mounted by democratic and egalitarian mass mobilizations in the 1960s, the affirmation of market ideals and practices coupled with the repudiation of government actions to promote distributive and procedural justice during the 1970s and 1980s, the impact of neoliberal imperatives promoting privatization, mass incarceration, globalization, warfare and securitization, and the systemic disintegration of institutions vital to the economy, the education system, and the environment. Inside American Studies, these crises and conjunctures have generated a succession of research paradigms that include, but are not limited to, analyses and celebrations of regionalism and the laboring of American culture; the study of myths, images and symbols; social science inquiries and investigations; cultural studies critiques; an efflorescence of poststructural, postcolonial and queer theories; and frames grounded in necropolitics, indigeneity, and disability studies.

Many of the most generative frameworks and paradigms in American Studies have emanated from contradictions between the national culture's bright promises and its bitter betrayals, from the paradox of the state's proclamation of a Manifest Destiny characterized by conquest and colonization and the simultaneous existence and persistence of what Toni Cade Bambara describes as the people's Latent Destiny as authors and architects of egalitarian ideas and institutions. Confronting these cruel contradictions and painful paradoxes has made American Studies into a never completed work of living sculpture, a place where strangers can meet, where ideas are aired, where problems are diagnosed and where solutions are imagined, envisioned and enacted. 

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Steven Marshall, *The City on a Hill From Below: The Crisis of Prophetic Black Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 112.

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## About the 2015 ASA White Paper Series

The ASA National Committee, in response to a proposal put forward by the Committee on Departments, Programs, and Centers, established a Task Force to coordinate advocacy efforts for ASA institutional members. Launched in 2014, the Task Force set about to produce, among other resources, a white paper series that addressed key questions and concerns that confront chairs and directors of American Studies. Authored by chairs, directors and coordinators at a range of institutional types, the 2015 ASA White Papers aim to create, understand, articulate, position, and sustain American Studies within the current landscape of higher education in the U.S. and globally.

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## About the American Studies Association

Consisting of over 5000 members and supporting scholars, teachers, administrators, writers, critical thinkers and activists from the U.S. and around the world, the American Studies Association is the oldest and largest association devoted to the interdisciplinary study of U.S. culture and history in a global context. In pursuit of these goals, the ASA has evolved into one of the leading scholarly organizations known for taking action in the worlds of politics and policy to create and defend conditions for open debate and the pursuit of meaningful, engaged scholarship, and teaching.

## Contact the ASA

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