

**"Versions of Nashville, Visions of American Studies": Presidential Address
to the American Studies Association, October 27, 1994**



Paul Lauter

American Quarterly, Volume 47, Issue 2 (Jun., 1995), 185-203.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

American Quarterly is published by Johns Hopkins University Press. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/jhup.html>.

American Quarterly
©1995 Johns Hopkins University Press

JSTOR and the JSTOR logo are trademarks of JSTOR, and are Registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. For more information on JSTOR contact jstor-info@umich.edu.

©2001 JSTOR

“Versions of Nashville, Visions of
American Studies”: Presidential Address
to the American Studies Association,
October 27, 1994

PAUL LAUTER
Trinity College, Hartford

THE BUILDING THAT HOUSES ONE OF THE TWO BIG DEPARTMENT stores in Semarang, the capital of Central Java, is laid out in a slightly flattened “V.” At one end of the ground floor is a McDonalds; at the other end, something called “California Fried Chicken.” Between them are smaller shops with American jeans, backpacks, and boots. Search throughout the building for a batik frock or some Javanese shorts to bring home to your grandchildren; you will be frustrated, for all the children’s clothing—made in Indonesia, to be sure—loudly declares allegiance to the Los Angeles Lakers or to Planet Hollywood. And presiding over all the internal space—like audible postmodern goddesses, mostly in English but occasionally in Bahasa Indonesian—are Janet Jackson, Tori Amos, Mary Chapin Carpenter.

I begin with these images of the penetration of American mass culture into an altogether remote world because they seem to bring into focus the conditions and challenges for our work today. Virtually everywhere in the world, here as well as abroad, a particular version of American ideology is in the ascendent. As people who study America, what have we to say in this distinctive moment not only to our students, their parents, and the pundits, profiteers, and policy makers who inhabit our corner of the globe but also to the many Javanese kids—and their

Paul Lauter is Allan K. and Gwendolyn Miles Smith Professor of Literature at Trinity College (Hartford). He is the general editor of the canon-revising *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. His most recent book, *Canons and Contexts*, was published by Oxford in 1991.

peers around the globe—who hang loose in the halfway house of those Semarang department stores?

I want to set out two propositions that may be helpful in trying to understand this moment in the study of what we call “America” and the place of intellectuals within it. The first proposition is this: while the term “American studies” is relatively new—younger, I think, than I—the things we now label “American studies” have been around far longer, indeed for many centuries. Here is my second proposition: the forms taken by American studies embody key political and social struggles of their era—or, to use Heinz Ickstadt’s closely related formulation, “American studies recreates or reconstructs American history in its own discourse.” In fact, to investigate the changing character of American studies is to examine the processes of change in American culture and society.

A few words about each of these propositions: American studies, as it is now named, is an effort to understand and, of course, *to shape* the changing dimensions particularly of society, culture, and politics in a certain geographical space now generally called America. I think American studies can most usefully be understood not as a discipline that, from a remote and academic standpoint, surveys a particular historical and cultural territory but as a framework within which people engage in those most significant of intellectual ventures, changing or policing the society in which we live. By that standard, the Zuni emergence story,¹ which narrates and thus helps legitimize the processes by which Zuni society was supposed to have been structured, its rituals developed, and its characteristic cultural forms determined, is as much an exercise in American studies as is *Virgin Land*. And Bradford’s *Of Plimouth Plantation* is as characteristic an example of American studies for its cultural communities as—and neither more nor less tendentious than—say, Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* is for some of ours.

Now, one might feel that such an argument dissolves useful intellectual boundaries and obliterates what little there might be to mark out American studies from any other kind of intellectual enterprise. But I want to suggest that that response—indeed, the very idea that American studies is an academic enterprise or even predominantly an enterprise of academicians—signals a particular historical era. The mark of that era is also inscribed in the name we have given our work, *American studies*. The domination of academic narratives in American studies

embodies the period of the ascendancy of the university in the United States during, roughly, the middle fifty years of the twentieth century. To give the project another name (for example, "Magnalia Christi Americana," *A New Home—Who'll Follow?*, or *Darkwater*) is immediately to illustrate how the academy is but one locus for, and the academic mode but one form of, the study of America. To be sure, in the lives of most of us in this room, that locus and that mode have been enormously powerful. But that is because for most of us, and certainly for those of us to the academic manner raised, the academy has itself been so powerful. American studies as a name emerged just as the academy was reaching the peak of its cultural authority in the post-World War II years. The name represented at once a statement about the institutional power of the academy—we do the vital task of studying America—and an effort to stake out turf *within* that increasingly significant institution against the Eurocentric forms of study that dominated American universities and colleges.

I raise these considerations because it seems to me that the era of academic ascendancy is over. American colleges and universities are undergoing a transformation as profound as—and far more painful than—that which converted them from citadels of a small, monied, and largely white and male elite into vast enterprises serving businesses, the state, enormously increased numbers of students, and—not incidentally—us. We are all familiar with the signs that, read aright, proclaim the academy's recent transformation: large-scale budget slashes accompanied by course reductions, program reorganizations, and even salary cuts in real dollars; the shifting of costs from public sources to individual students and their parents; speedup, mainly in the form of larger classes. More and more, the academy has come to resemble other institutions within American society, with the creation of a small army of the un- or underemployed, the proliferation of part-time and temporary workers, the downgrading of the future expectations of most young teachers—not to speak of the gross corruption that has increasingly marked the behavior of many senior administrators, whose salaries are regularly ten to twenty times and more those of library clerks and groundskeepers, or even of the grunts in the freshman composition trenches. Such changes represent fundamental shifts now underway in the social and economic missions of higher education,² shifts I would characterize as the shrinking of the objective of producing student self-actualization and independent learning and the

intensification of the role of colleges and universities in stratifying the workforce, training it in habits of consumption, and preparing it for more narrowly defined jobs—if any—in an increasingly constricted economy.

What is often not so clearly seen, I want to argue, is a comparable shift in cultural authority; it is this shift that leads me to question ideas about what constitutes the work we call “American studies.” And this set of questions leads, in turn, into a few paradigms we can associate with the site of our meeting, Nashville. The “versions of Nashville” I have in mind are but three of the many one might construct. My three involve, first, the Nashville Agrarians, who were and are so enormously influential in the practice of literary study in America; second, the Nashville movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s—to me, *the* defining force for nonviolent struggle among students and other young activists, black and white, during that hopeful time; and, finally, Robert Altman’s film *Nashville*, in retrospect an oddly prescient, perhaps postmodern exercise in satire and . . . American studies.

I do not propose that I can add anything very significant to the many studies of the Agrarians by such scholars as Richard Gray, Alexander Karanikas, Louis Rubin, Lewis Simpson, and Thomas Young.³ In light—or, perhaps it is more accurate to say, in sound—of today’s politics, *I’ll Take My Stand*, the primary text that emerged from the Agrarians’ work, seems less quaint as doctrine than it did to most of those who picked it up at its first publication in 1930. Indeed, there are many passages in it that one can easily imagine being spoken by William Bennett or Roger Kimball: “But why, it may be asked, have the best and most scholarly colleges of our country recently demanded from their freshmen one year’s obligatory work in English composition if the present-day high-school product has really learned to read and write?”⁴ Other passages, and particularly the volume’s central attack on the impact of industrial capitalism, might well have been grumbled by Thoreau or contemporary radicals—like me, for instance—or, more to the point, by conservatives of the previous century, such as Ruskin and Carlyle. For the fundamental measures of *I’ll Take My Stand* are traditional, arguably medieval values; in the words of the song from which it derives its title: “Old times there are ne’er forgotten.” The particular form of tradition that the book poses as the only true bulwark against the anomie and materialism of modern industrial life is, of course, Agrarianism, a term much used and, as John Crowe Ransom

acknowledges in his introduction, little defined. Lyle H. Lanier, a psychologist at Vanderbilt, was only more overt than others in propounding this agrarian theory. Community, he believed, true “association among individuals,”

exists, for the generality of people, only in the agrarian community and in the villages and towns which are its adjuncts. It depends upon a stable population, upon long acquaintances, since human beings do not bear spigots by which “fraternity” can be drawn off for the asking. The city necessarily means a diminution of these associations. . . . Another phase of the same problem is the decline of the family. This is perhaps much more important than any other phase of contemporary disintegration, since the family is the natural biological group, the normal milieu of shared experiences, community of interests, integration of personality. The segmentation of both adult and child activities which has accompanied the corporate age leaves little to the family beyond the details of finance and the primary sexual functions.⁵

Such passages construct a familiar binary. On the one side is industrial capitalism: the city, the artificial, the mechanical, the contingent, cosmopolitan, Jewish, liberal, and new—in short, modern life, whose terrifying ghost, deeply hidden in the machine of progress, is our old nemesis communism. On the other side is the agrarian: natural, traditional, harmonious, balanced, patriarchal—settled, like the medieval world; with a place for every man and, needless to say, every woman in her place.

One can read in this Agrarian discourse—the language, metaphors, shared rhetoric—a record of the struggles of provincial America in the 1920s, when the center no longer seemed to hold, western societies were ash heaps presided over by the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleberg, and re-assembling an age of innocence had not everywhere been assessed as a futile exercise in nostalgia. Large numbers of these Americans, especially among farmers and the remaining gentry, were losing economic ground throughout this period, most strikingly by contrast with the high fliers of urban America. Looking about for causes—like today’s social fundamentalists—they found the usual American scapegoats: cities, foreigners, departures from tradition, family disintegration, raucous music, reckless women, and brazen teens. *I’ll Take My Stand* was a conservative effort to reach out to such people, to offer them both a vivid analysis of industrialized America in decline and a strategy for returning to comforting sources of value. While the Left proposed collectivization of basic industrial resources, the Agrarians aimed to

attack the fundamental assumption that industrialization represented progress or that such "progress" was at all desirable.

There is no need to deconstruct this binary; most of the participants in *I'll Take My Stand* did so themselves in the years immediately following its publication. That a reactionary agrarianism stood no chance of literal implementation in the modern world seems to me to need no elaboration here. Indeed, the most articulate of the Agrarians' defenders make few claims for their practicality but, drawing an analogy between *I'll Take My Stand* and *Walden*, pose the Agrarians' project as an effort to "wake their neighbors up."⁶ I do not find the analogy fruitful, myself, since conservative calls to alarm seem to me to reify the most self-serving impulses in their audience and to offer as socially normative the interests and discontents of that declining gentry. In any case, what I find of more interest than attacking the work's utopian aspirations are its intersecting imperatives: one toward action in public domains and the other, the academic venue in which such action as ensued largely took place.

I'll Take My Stand is obviously no academic study; nor is it a collection of verbal Americana—items for Percy Gryce's collection. Indeed, as Fugitives, some of the contributors had been at pains to distance themselves from "the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South."⁷ *I'll Take My Stand* is, rather, a platform from which to argue. In the months following its publication, Ransom and others debated the issues it raised before thousands of interested people—largely in the South, to be sure. And the participants wrote other books and contributed significantly to such magazines as the *American Review* and the *Southern Review*, as well as to other symposia, such as *Who Owns America?* The book's audience, that is to say, was a wider public among literate—and largely white and middle-class—Americans. Whatever we may think of the analysis of America's malaise or of the Agrarians' program, we may find compelling their efforts to turn a kind of study of America into a project for change and thus to enact the roles of public intellectuals.

Most of the Agrarians expected to be taken seriously outside their region; needless to say, they were disappointed. But they by no means abandoned their underlying ideas. Rather, they shifted the site of struggle from the world of practical politics to a venue then rapidly increasing in importance, the academy. And they repositioned their concerns from the dubious social and economic theories *I'll Take My*

Stand propounds to the domain of art.⁸ If Ransom, Tate, Davidson, Warren, and the others were, one would have to judge, failures in what John Jay Chapman called “practical agitation,” they were amazingly successful in establishing the hegemony of their ideas in the practice of the literature classroom and therefore in the culture of the academy at its apogee.

People are seldom aware of the decisions they make to move away from agitation into art or, indeed, of precisely when one crosses whatever border exists between these territories. One can only speculate about the processes by which, during and after World War I, the repression of agitation for jobs, housing, civil rights, and against lynching helped in some sense to produce the new Negro Renaissance of the 1920s or about the role of the Nixon administration’s persecution of the sixties’ social movements in helping to produce the seventies’ turn toward theory. So I would not argue that the failure of the Agrarian program led in any direct or simple way to the critical work taken up by Ransom and his colleagues. Still, their condemnation of industrial society and of socialist solutions to its problems remained strong. And, unlike in France, there was no significant fascist movement within which to pursue political alternatives. Moreover, for Ransom in particular, perhaps the fundamental weakness of industrial society was its failure to take the aesthetic—that is to say, civilization and the conditions for its cultivation—seriously.⁹ In poetry, moreover, one might find, or at least seek, precisely those values of balance, harmony, affection, tradition, and—most of all—maturity that *I’ll Take My Stand* hypostatized in agrarian life. The agrarianism of the Nashville group dwindled away, but its ideology, as Karanikas argued thirty years ago, reemerged in the New Criticism and, with the vast post-war expansion of educational institutions, came to play an absolutely central role in American culture.

In nothing is this so fully dramatized as in connection with race. The Agrarian project altogether marginalized black people; indeed, as Gray argues, African Americans served as the unspoken other whose “structural absence” was “constitutive of the text”:

we could surely argue that the absence of any significant reference to slavery in *I’ll Take My Stand* is not only remarkable; it helps us to locate the vision of the world—or, to use Raymond Williams’s phrase, the structure of feeling and experience—that underpins all the essays in the symposium. It helps us to establish the models of belief and behaviour, the habits of language, that

enabled the Agrarians to pattern the real and perform various crucial acts of exclusion. Like any code, the one the Agrarians employed is as notable for what it does not say as for what it does, for the absences by which it is haunted; and *their* code seems intent on not bringing into speech, and therefore into the orbit of its attention, one figure in particular—the black. . . .¹⁰

This process of exclusion, of “not bringing into speech,” seems to me to describe with equal power the “habits of language,” the structures of “feeling and experience” that characterized the dominant forms of academic criticism until well into the sixties. To say this another way, the canon debate begun midway into the sixties, which has often been taken to be an academic dispute about what goes into a syllabus, has fundamentally to do with what will be heard and thus taken seriously within the precincts of what had, by then, become one of America’s key institutions, the university.

The founders of this nation were well aware of the importance of being heard. The first amendment to the Constitution, as we all know, upholds “freedom of speech . . . of the press” and “the right of people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” And courts have been careful, especially in the last half century, to identify as forms of free speech a variety of physical acts: picket lines, leafleting, sit-ins, for example. For courts have recognized the political meaning of an old romantic saying: “out of sight, out of mind.” The second of my versions of Nashville, the movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, had as its central goal placing clearly before the eyes of America the injustices constituting the central experiences of black people in the South. Like the Agrarians, the movement offered a way of thinking about a pervasive and central social disease in America; like them, too, the movement proposed alternatives to existing arrangements. That much seems obvious; less apparent are the precise qualities implied in that analysis and in those alternatives.

One reason for something of this obscurity may be the surprising dearth of writing about the Nashville movement. I have gathered around me some ten books and dozens of articles that, in part or in whole, deal with the Nashville Agrarians; I have found only two books that discuss the Nashville movement—in relatively a few pages.¹¹ Yet out of that movement came a surprising number of individuals well known for their leadership: Congressman John Lewis, Marion Barry, Diane Nash, James Bevel, the Rev. C. T. Vivian—not to speak of the

movement's generative force, the Rev. James Lawson, and the hundreds of other activists who marched, sang, endured violence, took jail rather than bail, and wrote history with their bodies. The Nashville movement provided a primary impetus for and ideological development of nonviolence as a central feature of the civil rights movement among younger people during the first half of the 1960s—and from that base outward into the wider movements for change of that period.¹² And the Nashville movement represented the flowering of a social endeavor radically distinct from that of the Agrarians but whose roots reach back to the very time in which they flourished. So I find it more than passing strange that not a single book, and precious few articles, have been written about this movement, its history, ideas, and personnel. I ask my historian friends in particular why that should be.

Part of the answer, perhaps, has to do with the form of discourse the Nashville movement adopted and the venues in which that discourse was deployed. I want to use as my literal text here the "Negro Students' Code," developed by James Lawson and a group of college students from Fisk, Tennessee A&I, and the American Baptist Theological Seminary, who constituted the shock troops of the Nashville movement.¹³ Students carried this "Code" with them to the lunch counters of Woolworth's, McLellan's, and Kress's when they began sit-ins on February 13, 1960. From one point of view, this "Code" amounts to little more than a statement of the discipline demonstrators' had agreed upon for carrying out their actions. From another point of view, however, the "Code" embodies the movement's ideological roots, an implicit conception of the sources of America's disorder, and a clear design for change. I want to read the "Code," partly because its cadences register so sharp a contrast with the learned rhetoric of *I'll Take My Stand* but partly to invoke for our own work something of the spirit that moved in the light here in Nashville.

- Don't strike back or curse back if abused.
- Don't laugh out.
- Don't hold conversations with floor workers.
- Don't leave your seats until your leader has given you instructions to do so.
- Don't block entrances to the stores and aisles.
- Show yourself friendly and courteous at all times.
- Sit straight and always face the counter.
- Report all serious incidents to your leader.
- Refer all information to your leader in a polite manner.

Remember the teachings of Jesus Christ, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King.
Remember love and non-violence.
May God bless each of you.

I resurrected this "Code," which had held a dim place in my memory these thirty-some years, from the files of the religious pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) now at Swarthmore College's Peace Collection. Reading those files back into the early thirties, I was stunned by the dissonance between the world in and around Nashville seen by the Agrarians and that pictured, for example, by the FOR's Interracial Secretary in the South, Howard Kester. Kester had written in a 1933 report, for example,

The terrific power of the anti-social forces in the South has steadily driven the Fellowship into the position of a revolutionary movement. In doing this we have merely accepted the historic position of Jesus who definitely recognized the class struggle and set his face steadfastly against the oppressors of the poor, the weak and the disinherited.¹⁴

To be sure, Kester's language, no less than that of the Agrarians, is much of his time. In another way, however, it reflects the community out of which he spoke.

The FOR's southern race relations work was, for more than thirty years, largely centered in Nashville; in the year in which *I'll Take My Stand* was published, the Fellowship's Southern Advisory Committee contained far more people from Tennessee than from any other state, and the executive committee, drawn from the Nashville community, included the president, dean of women, and minister at Fisk, as well as professors at Vanderbilt and at Scarritt College.¹⁵ After a certain hiatus during the post-war years, when an FOR spin-off, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), carried the burden of interracial activity, James Lawson, then one of three black students at Vanderbilt's Divinity School, was hired part time by the FOR to develop nonviolent solutions to race-relations problems.¹⁶ In 1959, Lawson conducted a series of workshops on nonviolence that helped prepare a large group of students in and around Nashville for direct action. In fact, late that year—about two months before the first widely publicized sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina—two such test actions were held at Harvey's department store and at Cain-Sloane's in Nashville.¹⁷

I mention these details not to establish a meaningless priority for

Nashville but to underline the long-term continuities of a movement often portrayed as essentially a departure from the culture of the black South. The "Negro Students' Code" emphasizes in particular the connections of the movement with the forms of religious radicalism represented by the names of Jesus, Gandhi, and King. Lawson himself, apart from being a minister, had served a prison term for being a conscientious objector to the Korean war and had also worked in India with the Methodist Board of Missions for three years before returning to divinity school.¹⁸ In commenting on an FOR Institute on Nonviolence in July 1959, he had complimented the organizers for providing "excellent psychological background on nonviolence." But, he continued, "the theological and biblical were sadly neglected." Such matters were particularly important, he believed, since—like many of the students with whom he was working in Nashville—"most of the people who attend these Institutes come from churches and think in these terms."¹⁹ Similarly, the first statement of purpose, heavily influenced by Nashville delegates, proposed for the newly organized Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began by affirming "the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our belief and the manner of our action."²⁰ Implicitly, the ground of conflict is here posed not in economic, legal, or structural but in "philosophical or religious," that is, moral terms—terms, I want to stress, available to the power of individual action.²¹

The "Code" and the forms of action preferred by the Nashville movement—sit-ins, freedom rides, direct actions—carried this ethical imperative into particular forms both of individual and group conduct: controlled, open, polite. For some movement activists, of course, these were no more than the tactics of a physically weak minority, designed to clog "by its whole weight," and even to mask a deep-running sense of anger. In the long run, as is well known, the view of nonviolence as a useful maneuver prevailed in the movement. Most of the Nashville group, however, emphasized less the tactical virtues of nonviolence than its transformative potential; again in the words of the SNCC statement: "Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian tradition, seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial, first step toward such a society." The issue, that is, is segregation, "the problem of the color line," as DuBois had said.²²

The foe, then, is not a system of ownership or a structure of laws but—to borrow once again a phrase from Thoreau—“the all but universal woodenness of both head and heart, the want of vitality in man, which is the effect of our vice.”²³ The students’ nonviolent conduct, their discipline, their very mannerliness were designed to transform such fearful, wooden responses. For, to cite one last time the SNCC statement, “through nonviolence courage displaces fear. Love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Faith reconciles doubt. Peace dominates war. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supercedes immoral social systems.”

As we all know, the movement was gradually to step away from this emphasis on the ethical high ground, to the issue of the ballot, to the courts, and later, tentatively, toward the economic questions that every day grow more intense. My point, however, is again not so much to question what might well be seen as the utopianism of the advocates for religious nonviolence. I want, rather, to emphasize the forms of learning and the venues therefor that this movement provided. These students and their supporters were engaged, I believe, in a kind of study of America widespread in the 1960s. It is encapsulated in sentences I found myself often citing then: “If you want knowledge, you must take part in the practice of changing reality. If you want to know the taste of a pear, you must change the pear by eating it yourself.” Many of the students engaged in these practical studies also devised means for carrying on alternative kinds of learning, freedom schools in unlikely locations. Pauline Knight, who had been arrested as a freedom rider in 1961, described some of her time in Mississippi’s Parchman prison:

... we organized to pass the time. In the morning we first had a quiet hour and then meditation. Then we all took exercises. Next came devotions. There were Protestants, Catholics and Jews among us, so we read from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Catholic prayerbook.

After that, we conducted workshops in the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence, and shared our experiences in nonviolent action. Then we would have discussions on many different topics. Different ones of us would give lectures on our major fields of study at school; we had a wide variety—biology, education, economics, all the liberal arts, Greek and Roman history. It was very educational.²⁴

Ironically, many of you may remember, James Lawson’s career at his educational institution, Vanderbilt, was terminated when he—alone of

all the Nashville protestors—was expelled for engaging in civil disobedience.

That action came early in the process that would lead many students during the sixties to discover with revulsion the complicity of their educational institutions in the social policies, including segregation and war, they sought to change. Indeed, in certain important ways, the transformation of colleges and universities from the institutions they were in the 1950s to what they are today can be traced back to the civil rights movement and to the demands it articulated for equal access. On the other hand, a central part of that process has to do with the rise in importance of the media, and that brings me to my third version of Nashville, Robert Altman's film.

My first two versions were driven by their ideologies; therein lay both their power to compel and, from a postmodern perspective, some profound weaknesses. Altman's film self-consciously offers no ideological center; indeed, the center of the film is a void inhabited by Hal Philip Walker, the presidential candidate of the prescient Replacement Party, who in fact never appears. Around this abyss dance an enormous number of characters marked primarily, like the film itself, by contradiction and, like the images of a metaphysical poem, "yoked by violence together." While Altman has not in this film altogether abandoned plot, it is surely not the soul of his tragedy—if tragedy it is. The film is remarkably episodic and improvisatory, and it is held together—to the extent that it is—by its general focus on the Nashville country music scene, by a very large number of self-conscious visual parallels, and by the general drift of events toward an outdoor rally for Hal Philip Walker. In fact, Altman's directions to his screenplay writer appear to have been limited only to the concentration on Nashville's music setting and the seemingly arbitrary stipulation that someone die at the end.²⁵ Even the dialogue was subject to the actors' emendations; many of the songs were created by the people who sang them. Not surprisingly, then, interpretations of the film have been wildly divergent and evaluations contradictory. Like a poststructuralist theoretical text, it invites, indeed valorizes, contradiction and seems designed to resist closure.

For example, one of the more powerfully affecting songs in the film is "I'm Easy," created and sung by Keith Carradine. In effect, however, the song comes down to yet another of the many ambiguous gestures the Carradine character uses to captivate one more woman into his bed.

Again, in the end, after country-queen Barbara Jean has been shot, Albuquerque, who has been hanging around the edges of the music scene hoping for a break, calms the crowd and wins a place by leading them in singing. But the song itself, "It Don't Worry Me," turns out to be a paean to political apathy and emotional disconnection—a far cry from "We Shall Overcome," whose communal singing, Ann Fitzgerald has suggested, it ironically evokes. I think it's fair to say that no one of the film's characters escapes its corrosive cynicism, and the entertainment industry is subject to hilarious satire, yet the film feels, at least to me, not precisely cheerful but by no means an exercise in gloom or even skepticism.

I think Altman is able to sustain these contradictions by a gambit that, I fear, has not been unfamiliar to us in academic American studies. It is a move to replace the force of ideology with the play of culture, to substitute *jouissance* for *credo*, and to marginalize civic debate as nothing more than the suspect gestures of what passes for politics in the United States. In this vision, Nashville is not the staging area for a backward-yearning attack on modern industrial life, not the ground upon which citizens are immersed in a moral drama, but the platform upon which people play out in larger-than-life images the contrary dimensions of their fragile humanity. I confess I find that unsatisfying. Not because I yearn for the relative certainties of sixties politics—though I do. Nor, I think, because I'm largely bored with forms of celebrity gossip—though I am. But because, for me at least, politics does not consist in the sleazy sound bites that now fill the air around us—and that Altman so aptly expresses through Hal Philip Walker's soundtrack. Politics is, rather, that form of moral philosophy concerned with the social organism as a whole, the *polis*—concerned, that is, with how we work things out together, or don't.

Altman's film brilliantly captures—and is also, I suspect, captivated by—some of the major social processes of the last quarter century and more: the shift in cultural authority toward the media, including his own; the erection of the Market as today's golden calf; the reduction of politics to tweedledum choices or, at best, to what Sid Lens used to call "lesser weevilism"; and the substitution of Wonderbread, Ringling Brothers, and heavy breathing for bread, land, and peace. All of these tendencies have likewise opened dangers in what we do as American studies practitioners.

It seems to me that there is a certain lesson that one can draw from

my versions of Nashville; it is a lesson having to do with American educational and political history. (And I have to say parenthetically that, being an old fogey, I'm much less nervous than some of you might be about drawing lessons and constructing master narratives.) In the period subsequent to the First World War, colleges and universities rapidly increased dominion over culture relative to other institutions, so that by the fifties it was virtually impossible to imagine success in America without first acquiring the habits of mind as well as the decorum and largely the cold war values of the academy. Universities were, of course, material supporters of such democratic institutions as Ngo Dinh Diem's police, the Institute for Defense Analysis, segregated professional schools, and ritualized patriarchy. But I want to stress that higher education was more critical to the processes of shaping our minds and spirits to a kind of Mandarin culture than even those of us who came to be "radicals" understood. A major component of the imperial culture that much of the academy, until after the sixties, seemed committed to sustaining was, of course, the form of literary study given shape and impetus by people such as T. S. Eliot and his Nashville champions.²⁶ Our ability to thrive within the precincts of this cultural stockade calibrated our reliability as well as our maturity, our capacity to maintain "balance" and "perspective," even as our hopes for transforming America slid away in the jungles of Vietnam.

Still, while many of us in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) during the sixties focused on the grotesque perversions of higher education represented by Columbia's gym and Michigan State's police program, we generally also acknowledged the academy's capacity, however limited, of fostering human rationality, and its potential, however attenuated, to play a significant role in human liberation. When the civil rights movement turned its attention to colleges—whether in demanding admissions, black studies, or jobs—it largely did so with what I found to be a genuinely touching affirmation of the fundamental values of educational institutions. We believed—as an SDS slogan of the time had it—in "a free university in a free society." Both were, we thought, imaginable, and American schools and colleges could be leaders in that ethical quest.

That hope was short lived, I'm afraid, not because of the academy's lack of virtues but because its authority has so thoroughly eroded. Today's students hardly look to the academy for their social values, much less for their ideas of cultural significance. These, I think, they

derive much more from the media and its attendant complex of entertainment, advertising, and promotional activities. The underlying message of the media in late twentieth-century American practice seems to me to come down to the one inescapable motive of marketplace ideology: everything can be made into a commodity and sold for profit. Everything: stories, obviously; intellect, of course; AZT; babies. And kidneys, hearts, livers, teeth, eyes, genitalia, identities, hopes, prayers, desire, the air itself, and the grass we tread to the graves we must buy. Perhaps I am merely rationalizing my work and constructing one of those simplistic Enlightenment binaries, but I think that at this moment the values toward which the academy at its best struggles *do* stand over against the corroding hegemony of marketplace doctrines and their underlying assumption that competition, profit, and self-aggrandizement are the only reliable sources of human motivation.

It was such a conjecture that led me to interrogate our visions of American studies, which in this talk I have tied to “versions of Nashville.” We cannot retreat into self-enclosed forms of cultural study: emptied of politics, cultural study, indeed culture itself, becomes an exercise in self-acclaim or even managerial control.²⁷ Nor do I believe that American studies can be backward yearning, however apt its critique of contemporary society. Yet I think it is time we insisted upon exploring and teaching the powerful expressions of democratic values many of us have experienced right here in the United States, like the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties—especially now, when outrageously racist ideas about human beings are rationalized as science and validated in the front pages of influential newspapers and journals.²⁸ For it seems to me the duty of those of us who study the past to help sustain those rare moments in which humane values emerged into human practice.

In declaring ourselves students of America we undertook a certain responsibility—not only to those we encounter in the corridors and classrooms of the institutions we inhabit but also to those in less congenial institutions, to those Javanese kids hanging out in Semarang’s Americanized department stores, to the folks we meet at Nashville’s malls and lunch counters. It is a responsibility we cannot execute walled in by obscure language and academic assumptions. To contest the prevailing veneration of peddle, purchase, and profit with which America has become identified, to challenge the runaway individualism that has always threatened to bury ideas of community in this country,

requires that we speak and act in all of those worlds my versions of Nashville invoke. I want to offer, as a concluding symbol for the directions in which I think we are traveling, the move, fewer than two weeks ago, of the national ASA office from the Francis Scott Key Building at the University of Maryland, to 1120 19th Street, Northwest, a block and a half from DuPont Circle in the District of Columbia and perhaps half a mile from the White House. The move expresses a stride from the consolations of the campus and into the circle of politics, wherein we are finding a voice. There will be times when, like Jonah, we will curse the cold and blackness there near the belly of the whale. And while I do not see us as instruments for the repentance of Ninevah, I want to, indeed I can, imagine us as, in Father Mapple's words, "speaker[s] of true things" to the "proud gods and commodores of this earth."²⁹

NOTES

1. See "Talk Concerning the First Beginning," in Ruth Bunzel, "Zuni Origin Myths," *Forty-Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C., 1930). A slightly abbreviated version is included in Paul Lauter, et al., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 2d ed. (Lexington, Mass., 1994), 27–41.

2. See, for example, Cary Nelson and Michael Bérubé, eds., *Higher Education under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (New York, 1994).

3. Richard Gray, *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region* (Cambridge, 1986), 122–64; Alexander Karanikas, *Tillers of a Myth: Southern Agrarians as Social and Literary Critics* (Madison, Wisc., 1966); Louis D. Rubin, Jr., *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Baton Rouge, 1978); Lewis P. Simpson, *The Fable of the Southern Writer* (Baton Rouge, 1994), 13–23; Thomas Daniel Young, *Waking Their Neighbors Up* (Athens, Ga., 1982), and "The Fugitives: Ransom, Davidson, Tate" and "The Agrarians," in *The History of Southern Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., et al. (Baton Rouge, 1985), 319–32, 429–35.

4. John Gould Fletcher, "Education, Past and Present," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York, 1930), 117.

5. Lyle H. Lanier, "A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress," in *I'll Take My Stand*, 146.

6. See, for example, Young, *Waking Their Neighbors Up*, 60ff.; and Rubin, *Wary Fugitives*, 237–40.

7. The phrase appears as part of the foreword to the first issue of *The Fugitive*. In view of the backward directions in which the Agrarians' ideas seemed to lead, some of the rest of the statement bears repeating:

Official exception having been taken by the sovereign people to the mint julep, a literary phase known rather euphemistically as Southern Literature has expired, like

any other stream whose source is stopped up. The demise was not untimely; among other advantages, THE FUGITIVE is enabled to come to birth in Nashville, Tennessee, under a star not entirely unsympathetic. THE FUGITIVE flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South.

8. George Core argues, correctly I think, that "to say that Ransom, Tate, and Warren simply transferred their energy from Agrarianism to the New Criticism is simplistic at best, and it denies what one knows not only of these men but of artists in general" ("Agrarians, Criticism, and the Academy," in *A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians after Fifty Years*, ed. William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan [Baton Rouge, 1982], 128). As I suggest below, no simplistic theory can account for this shift in direction. Still, the fundamental views of the men involved persist. As Core himself points out, "The leading Agrarians wrote criticism not only in a positive response to Eliot and the others [I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis, for example] but in a negative reaction against Marxism and Marxist criticism (one remembers the alternative title that was proposed for *I'll Take My Stand—Tracts against Communism*) . . ." (129).

9. See, for example, Ransom's "Introduction" to *I'll Take My Stand*, xv; his "The Aesthetic of Regionalism," *American Review* 2 (Jan. 1934): 290-310; and Donald Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," *I'll Take My Stand*, 40-50.

10. Gray, *Writing the South*, 145.

11. See particularly, Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 21-25, 34-35; and James H. Laue, *Direct Action and Desegregation, 1960-1962: Toward a Theory of the Rationalization of Protest* (Brooklyn, 1989). The only article I have found wholly devoted to the Nashville movement is James E. Jackson, "Three Brave Men Tell How Freedom Comes to an Old South City" (New York: Publisher's New Press, 1963), which is a twenty-eight page pamphlet mainly devoted to interviews with John Lewis, the Rev. J. Metz Rollins, and the Rev. C. T. Vivian.

12. The first statement of purpose for what was to become the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), prepared for the Raleigh meeting of sit-in leaders, April 15-17, 1960, was written by the Rev. James Lawson, the primary organizer of the Nashville student movement. It emphasized the transformative power of nonviolence: "By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities" (quoted in Laue, *Direct Action*, 7). Nashville participants in the SNCC continued to stress nonviolence as a fundamental philosophy of life both during the southern movement and afterward in such venues as Chicago. In 1961, when people from Nashville took up the freedom rides, the city became the site of nonviolent training for participants.

13. The "Code" is reprinted in full in Harrison E. Salisbury, "Negro Cleric Sets Nonviolent Aims," *New York Times*, 2 Mar. 1960. A flyer containing the "Code" in a slightly altered version, among other materials, is contained in the Fellowship of Reconciliation Race Relations Files, DG 13, series E, box 5, file for John Nevin Sayre, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Penn. In the margin is written, perhaps by Sayre or another FOR staff person, "James Lawson worked this out."

14. "Annual Report of Howard Kester, Southern Secretary to the Annual Conference of The Fellowship of Reconciliation, October 1933," FOR Race Relations Files, DG 13, series E, box 1.

15. See letterhead for Fellowship's Southern Advisory Committee, FOR Race Relations Files, box 1.

16. See the variety of materials in FOR Race Relations Files, box 2.

17. Paul Laprad, "Nashville: A Community Struggle," *Sit-Ins: The Students Report*, CORE pamphlet, May, 1960, FOR Race Relations Files, box 5. Laprad was a student at Fisk University. See also William V. Shannon, "Sitdowns in the South," *New York Post*, 30-31 Mar. 1960.

18. See "Violence, Non-Violence and the Struggle for Social Justice," undated [1969?] FOR flyer, and J. Robert Nelson, "Vanderbilt's Time of Testing," *The Christian Century*, 10 Aug. 1960, reprinted in *The Lawson-Vanderbilt Affair: Letters to Dean Nelson* (Nashville, 1960), both in FOR Race Relations Files, box 2.

19. J. M. Lawson, Jr., "Evaluation, Institute on Nonviolence, Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia, July 22-24, 1959," FOR Race Relations Files, box 2.

20. "Report of the SNCC Meeting, Atlanta, May 13-14, 1960," FOR Race Relations Files, box 5.

21. James Laue quotes Diane Nash as follows: "The feeling of right, the moral rejuvenation is the only thing that carries you over . . ." (*Direct Action*, 205). Laue's comment, as both a participant and observer of the southern movement, is also of interest here: "The research of others as well as my own interviews indicate that most sit-in participants in 1960 felt that for the first time they were actually *doing* something to help bring social reality in line with their ideals" (205).

22. James Laue twice quotes the Rev. James Lawson as follows: "Most of us work simply for concessions from the system, not for transforming the system. . . . But if after 300 years, segregation is still a basic pattern rather than a peripheral custom, should we not question the 'American way of life' which allows segregation so much structural support?" (*Direct Action*, xviii).

23. "A Plea for Captain John Brown," *The Works of Thoreau*, ed. Henry Seidel Canby (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), 833.

24. Pauline Knight, "Notes From Prison," *Southern Patriot* (Sept. 1961), FOR Race Relations Files, box 6.

25. Gerard Plecki, *Robert Altman* (Boston, 1985), 77.

26. See William H. Epstein, "Counter-Intelligence: Cold-War Culture and Eighteenth-Century Studies," *ELH* 57 (1990): 63-99; and Paul Lauter, "Little White Sheep, or How I Learned to Dress Blue," *Yale Journal of Criticism* (Spring 1995).

27. So, very persuasively, argued Christopher Newfield in "Corporate Pleasures for a Corporate Planet" and Avery F. Gordon, "The Work of Corporate Culture: Diversity Management" (papers presented at the convention of the American Studies Association, Nashville, Tenn., October 1994).

28. See Malcolm W. Browne, "What Is Intelligence, and Who Has It?" *New York Times Book Review*, 16 Oct. 1994, 3, 41, 45; and *The New Republic* 211 (Oct. 1994): esp. 27-37.

29. I want to express my appreciation to Anne Jones, Peggy Gifford, Louis Kampf, and especially Ann Fitzgerald for suggestions, criticism, and most of all encouragement.