EASTERN AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

Volume 23 Issue 1

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

American Studies Newsletter

From the Editor's Desk

Shhhhh! Can you keep a secret? I have a confession to make. At the start of each fall semester, as students congregate in the lobby in need of this and that, I slip stealthily into my cozy little office, taking all necessary precaution to avoid detection. Then – after pulling the blinds and applying the lock – I indulge in a guilty little pleasure. Blocking out the cacophony emanating from the lobby, I remove a stack of old EASA newsletters from the shelf, blow off the dust, and settle in for a delightful afternoon to be spent luxuriating in the cultural richness of our region's past. A review of a folk art exhibit from 2003? "Let's recall what that was all about," I say to myself. A Presidential Address from 2005? "I wonder what the hot button issues were that year!"

And so it goes for the better part of the afternoon. "Job well done," I congratulate myself after putting down Spring 2007. "Another triumph!" I exclaim upon finishing Fall 2009. Typically, my stroll down memory lane ends when I have completed the most recent issue to date. But this year, something prevented me from returning the stack to the shelf. Why, you ask, was that? I sensed that I was on the verge of making a heroic insight, but what it was I could not yet tell, the great idea remaining inchoate. In an attempt to bring forth the revelation, I rapidly reviewed the highlights of our chapter's history in my mind: the inaugural issue of the newsletter…the first conference…the advent of the undergraduate roundtable… the introduction of student awards …the name- change from MAASA to EASA…and now the piloting of our field's very first Honor Society. *Why, this is no sequence of random events*, I thought, *there is a pattern behind it all*. And then, it hit me.

"Teleology!" I shouted, at the top of my lungs. As you have probably guessed, that spontaneous outburst brought my splendid isolation to an end, as in mere seconds came the first knock at the door. And though I proceeded to see the students, one by one, for the remainder of the day, I did so happily, fully rejuvenated, and with a clear sense of mission. For I now knew that EASA had – quietly, piece by piece, and right under our noses – been building itself into something truly wonderful. No mere sideshow to the national organization, EASA has now become a *bona fide* intellectual and cultural entity!

As you peruse the pages of this issue, you will undoubtedly find ample evidence in support of this fact.

Continued on p. 3

EASA Unveils Honor Society

For the first time in the American Studies universe, talented undergraduate students will be able to join an Honor Society. At this spring's EASA conference (Rutgers University, March 30-31, 2012), the first class will be inducted into *Epsilon Alpha Kappa*, Greek letters standing for "excellence in the study of American culture." It will truly be an unprecedented event.

The idea for an American Studies Honor Society was first conceived by Dr. Francis J. Ryan of LaSalle, EASA's current president. Back in 2007, Dr. Ryan shared his thinking with John Stevens, Executive Director of the ASA, who responded favorably. The two agreed that EASA should pilot the Society, with the understanding that it would, in effect, "go national" either when the ASA embraced it or when other regional chapters adopted the model. That will apparently take place sooner rather than later. Last year at the Annual Meeting of the ASA, Dr. Mark Sawin (Eastern Mennonite University), former EASA President and current Chair of the ASA's Regional Chapters Committee, broached the idea to the assembled representatives from the other chapters. All voiced their enthusiasm for the idea. Later that spring, the final pieces fell into place within EASA: the Executive Board drew up a Constitution, decided that Penn State Harrisburg should serve as the society's headquarters, and approved the selection of Dr. John Haddad as the Society's first president.

If you teach American Studies in this region, please keep an eye out for promising undergraduates who might like to join the Society. Likewise, if you are an undergraduate student seeking recognition for your academic work, please let your professor, advisor, or program head know about the new Honor Society in EASA. The Nomination Procedure is outlined below in step-by-step fashion.

- Students eligible for induction will be identified by the respective AMST program director of each university located within the region.
- Eligibility will be restricted to undergraduate American Studies majors who have completed 6 courses or 18 credits in AMST or related courses.
- An inductee must have a minimum overall GPA of 3.0, and a minimum GPA of 3.4 in all AMST or related courses.
- Inductees should exhibit active participation in and service to the AMST student association sponsored by the student's home department or program.
- Inductees must submit a research paper, project, film, or cultural/performative artifact assessed as "excellent quality" by an induction committee, consisting of three AMST professors (or professors from related disciplines) from the inductee's home campus.
- Once the induction committee has confirmed that the student has met all criteria, it should submit the student's name to John Haddad by January 15, 2012.
- After submitting a fee ($30), inductees will receive both an official certificate and a red, white, and blue honors cord to be worn at graduation.
- For any given year, inductees will also enjoy the option of being inducted into the Society at the annual EASA conference.

Please contact John Haddad (jrh36@psu.edu) with any questions.

Call for Papers: 'Tradition and Innovation in American Culture'

Eastern American Studies Association
March 30-31 2012, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ

The Eastern American Studies Association annual conference will be held at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, on Friday and Saturday, March 30 and 31, 2012, with the theme "Tradition and Innovation in American Culture," Proposals are invited for presentations that give interdisciplinary perspectives on "Tradition and Innovation in American Culture." Tradition, of course, is the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction. Innovation, on the other hand, is the introduction of something new. The binary opposition of tradition and innovation is a concept quite familiar to folklorists, but it can be readily applied to ideas in the realm of popular culture and elite culture as well. New Brunswick, the home of Rutgers University, is the county seat of Middlesex County and is located on the Northeast Corridor rail line, 27 miles southwest of Manhattan on the southern bank of the Raritan River. New Brunswick is noted for its rich ethnic heritage. At one time, one quarter of the Hungarian population in New Jersey resided in the city. Today, much of that Hungarian community continues to thrive as well as a growing Hispanic community.

The conference will be held at the Rutgers Continuing Studies Conference Center, nestled on 21 beautiful wooded acres in the heart of the Rutgers campus. It is an ideal location for a small meeting such as ours. Surrounded in tranquility, the Center features guest rooms thoughtfully designed to provide comfort while attending the meeting. No need to drive back and forth between a hotel and the conference. All guest rooms include a separate workspace, ample lighting and high-speed wireless Internet access. The Center plays home to sun-washed dining room surrounded by a panoramic view of the lawns and woods. Here, we will enjoy all our meals during the conference.

Graduate students should identify their status and program/school affiliation when making submissions. Accepted graduate students will be encouraged to submit their final papers electronically several weeks prior to the conference, so as to be considered for the Simon J. Bronner Award for the outstanding graduate paper in American Studies. During the luncheon near the conclusion of the conference, the award is presented along with the Francis Ryan Award for Undergraduate Research.

Submit abstracts and resumes no longer than two pages to "EASA Conference" at agillespie@amst.rutgers.edu before January 10, 2012. For more information, call the American Studies Department at Rutgers University at 732.932.9174.

From the Editor *Continued from p. 1*

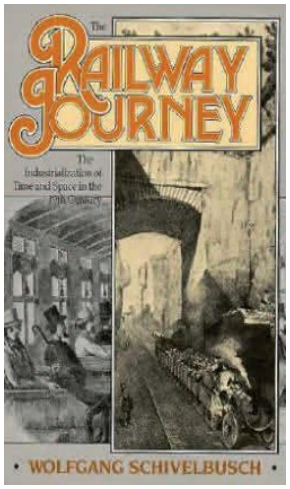
First, I ask that you note the "Call for Papers" and strongly consider sending a proposal; we hope to see you at Rutgers University in late March! Second, please pay special attention to the article on the new Honor Society, as it explains exactly how talented American Studies undergraduates can – for the first time in our field's history – receive this form of recognition.

In closing, I urge you to get involved this year, to create fresh knowledge, and to never forget our motto or fail to carry out its awesome mandate:
Enjoy Culture!

John Haddad
Penn State Harrisburg

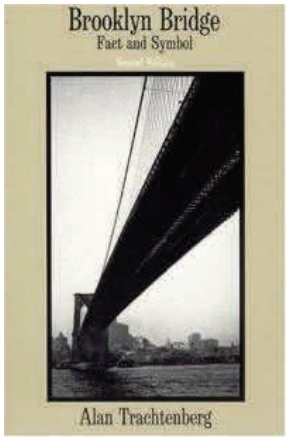
Light My Fire!

Did you ever take a class from or read a book by an American Studies professor and wonder what book had turned him or her onto the field? Now is your chance to find out. In preparation for this article, our editorial staff interviewed several American Studies professors in the region and asked them if one book had inspired their careers – and if so, what was it? This is what they said in response.



Stephen P. Rice
Professor and Convener of American Studies
Ramapo College of New Jersey

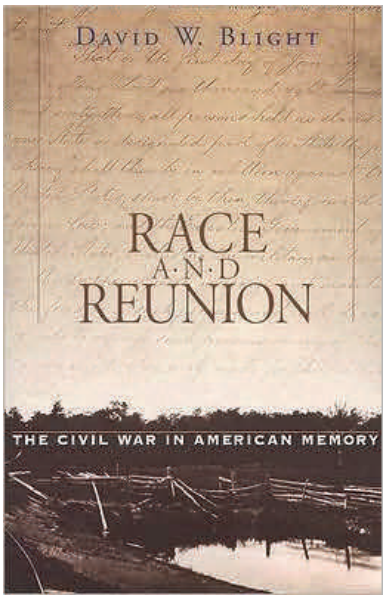
"I've often wondered about the books that people in our field found to be especially inspiring early on. For me, I'd say two books, both of which I read after college. The first was Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey*, and the second was John Kasson's *Civilizing the Machine*. These were the books that introduced me to cultural history, and to the idea that technology (which I was interested in studying) takes the form that it does in part because of cultural values, even as it challenges the perceptions or assumptions upon which those values are based. While both books consider technology and culture in the nineteenth century, Kasson's is the one that focuses on America, and it was that book that made me think for the first time that I would go to graduate school in American Studies."



Angus Gillespie
Professor of American Studies
Rutgers University

"When I was a young graduate student in American Civilization at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1960s, I came across Alan Trachtenberg's *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol.* The book made a tremendous impression upon me. The author skillfully put together all kinds of material about the Brooklyn Bridge including history, engineering, literature, and art. It struck me that this approach was precisely what American Studies scholars should be doing, because Trachtenberg's book was so aggressively interdisciplinary. The book was so exciting! Here was Hart Crane's poem alongside the paintings of Joseph Stella and the photography of Walker Evans. The underlying idea was to take a heroic piece of civil engineering and to tease it for its cultural implications. That's exactly what I have tried to do in my own writings—with a highway, a skyscraper, and a pair of tunnels. First there was *Looking for America on the New Jersey Turnpike*, written with Michael Aaron Rockland, and published in 1989. Then ten years later in 1999, Rutgers Press published *Twin Towers: The Life of New York City's World Trade Center.* My most recent effort, published in 2011, is *Crossing Under the Hudson: The Story of the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels.*"

Erin Battat
Assistant Professor of American Studies and Ethnic Studies
Penn State Harrisburg



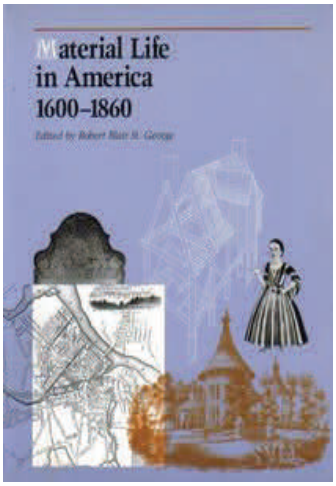
"The book that comes to mind is David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. It was published during my first or second year of grad school, and I ended up doing a general exam field on history & memory. Blight inspired me by showing how cultural texts – novels, stories, monuments, pageants, etc. – are historical forces that shape how people think and act, that alter the course of politics and society. In other words, contests among writers, artists, and ordinary people over the meaning of the Civil War had direct bearing on African American social struggles in the postwar period. Blight's book is a blend of brilliant close reading, richly textured historical analysis, and beautiful prose – a wonderful model for a young American Studies scholar."

Mark Rice
Professor and Chair of American Studies
St. John Fisher College

"There actually wasn't a particular book. My brother [see above] turned me on to the field. He was working as an editorial assistant at the University of California Press, working for their American Studies editor. He loved the field, so went into graduate school for it. When I told him my interests and ideas for graduate school – which found me torn between History and English – he suggested I look into American Studies graduate programs. I did, liked what I saw, and went into the field. What I found myself drawn to was the freedom to be creative in my approach to the questions that I found interesting. If I had to think back to a book that first made me sit up and really notice what American Studies could do, it would probably be Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*."

Lisa Jarvinen
Assistant Professor
La Salle University
Vice President of EASA

"I'd have to say that the book that comes to mind is T.J. Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. The strength of the book is that it draws on insights from literature, art, religion and philosophy while grounding these in a densely documented historical study of a transformative period in American culture. It's persuasive in suggesting that the moral and philosophical concerns of the ruling elites of the period led them to critique the ravages wrought by modernity even as their "antimodernism" ultimately served to legitimate the new order produced by it. But its brilliance – that has led me to read parts of it, especially the opening chapter, over and over – is in the way it evokes a sense of the unease and alienation that are part and parcel of the modern condition. By using a range of disciplinary approaches to get at such profound questions, Lears's book made it clear to me how crucial it is to understand the past in its full complexity."



Cynthia G. Falk, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Material Culture
Cooperstown Graduate Program
SUNY Oneonta

"As an undergraduate in the early 1990s, I was fortunate to earn degrees at Penn State in two interdisciplinary programs, American Studies and Integrated Arts. While my majors allowed me to take courses in a variety of departments on a wide range of topics, it was really as a graduate student that I discovered scholarly literature that supported truly cross disciplinary work. The anthology *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, edited by Robert Blair St. George, was especially instrumental in showing me how others, with academic homes in various departments and institutions, were able to use objects to support the study of people, community, and ideas. At the time, it assured me that I was not the only one who thought buildings, furniture, and foodways shed light on human history."

Simon Bronner,
Distinguished University Professor of American Studies and Folklore
Director, American Studies Doctoral Program
Penn State Harrisburg

"My undergraduate institution did not have an American Studies major, but I read Richard Dorson's *American Folkore* in a freshman survey and thought that his holistic approach was a breath of fresh air compared to some of the other pedantic humanities courses I was taking. His bio mentioned that he was one of the first Ph.D.s in the world in a field called American Civilization and reading him led me to the other pioneers such as Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, and R.W.B. Lewis. Later I would take American Studies courses from Dorson in a fabled course called "Folklore in American Civilization" where he regaled us with stories of the birth of American Studies at Harvard (he also wrote about it, and as a Harvard man didn't think much of Yale's parallel development, but I digress). I served as his editorial assistant and he was on my dissertation committee. My relationship with him linked me to the mothers and fathers of American Studies, and I hope as their offspring we have served them well, even though we recognize as befitting American patterns, the children are always a bit rebellious and want to go in their own direction."

Miles Orvell, Professor of English & American Studies
Temple University

"Studying American literature in graduate school in the Sixties, I had a peripheral awareness of a doctoral program called "American Civilization," but no idea at all what that meant or how it could be possible to cross the strong fences that seemed to have been built by the disciplines. When I read Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* during that period, I was reading it exclusively to see what he was making of American literature; but the fact that there were extra-literary considerations in that book was startling and exciting to someone who'd been raised in the New Criticism: the discussion of Whitman and music, the brief considerations of W.S. Mount and of Thomas Eakins, and above all the brief note on the illustrations, which, for me, brought photography into the discourse of literature for the first time. Not long after reading Matthiessen, I read *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and although I had no idea what to make of that book, it was a puzzle I kept alive until I felt able to deal with it in *The Real Thing*. Matthiessen, and then Agee, had made the subject of literature part of a much larger cultural discourse; I could see that when I first read them in the Sixties, but it took me more than a dozen years before I could imagine what an interdisciplinary approach might be, and by then I could begin to connect those works with many other things I was reading in the growing field of American Studies."

Interview with Mark Metzler Sawin, Former EASA President

By Peter Lehman

Mark Sawin discusses the regional chapter, his current academic position, and some possible future directions for the field.

What were your added responsibilities when you were the EASA president?

When I served as the president of EASA (then the Mid-Atlantic ASA) from 2006-08 I found the experience to be challenging but highly rewarding. Thanks to the wonderful support of the professors and staff at Penn State Harrisburg which serves as the administrative home of the EASA, the heavy lifting of conference planning and newsletter creation does not fall to the president. This centralized administration creates great stability in the EASA (something lacking from other ASA regional chapters) and allows the president to focus on other things. While I was in office, we as the Mid-Atlantic ASA were beginning to take on some new territories (West Virginia, etc.) and were considering the name change to EASA because we felt that "Eastern" was becoming a more appropriate adjective to describe us than "Mid-Atlantic." But my favorite part of the role was being forced to take the time to sit back and think about what it meant to do American Studies and about the direction I thought the discipline should move. I'm proud of the fact that EASA is a different sort of ASA chapter, one that is more grounded in historical research and primary sources and less on theoretical models and the jargon-fueled scholarly trends that are always rolling through the academy. It's not that theory or trends aren't important (they definitely are, and we do take them seriously), but EASA has a tradition of staying more grounded in evidence-based research and what I would call "hard" scholarship--ideas backed not just by other ideas, but by research into primary sources. I focused both of my presidential addresses on this general topic and pushed the chapter to keep with this tradition, which wasn't a hard sell as many (perhaps most) of my colleagues in EASA seem to agree.

Do you have a one-sentence answer to give someone who asks "What is American Studies?"

A scholarly, interdisciplinary examination of what makes America American.

You now teach History at Eastern Mennonite University. How does your American Studies background affect the nature or focus of the history courses you teach?

One of my dirty little secrets (that is hardly a secret) is that my official training and regional/national academic affiliations do not match my academic position. I've served as a president of a regional chapter of the ASA and I'm currently chairing one of the standing committees of the national ASA, yet I teach at a school that doesn't even have a minor (much less a major) in American Studies. That said, I feel that what I teach is American Studies, though it is labeled history in our course catalog. When I teach history at Eastern Mennonite University, and when I taught English at the University of Zagreb during my Fulbright year there, I really teach American Studies. I lecture in a broad, interdisciplinary manner, covering aspects of intellectual history, politics, art, international relations, literature, etc. And the readings for my classes are almost always primary sources (usually novels, memoirs, or popular media) from the period the class is examining. For example, when I want to cover the years immediately following WWII, I don't go with scholarly works on the topic (though I do often assign an article or two framing an issue) but instead focus on texts such as the highly influential 1946 film *The Best Years of Our Lives* that focuses on the lives of returning soldiers and their families; or the architectural and sociological plans of Levittowns that changed the face of America, moving it toward a suburban culture; or issues from LIFE magazine that illustrate, via their ads and

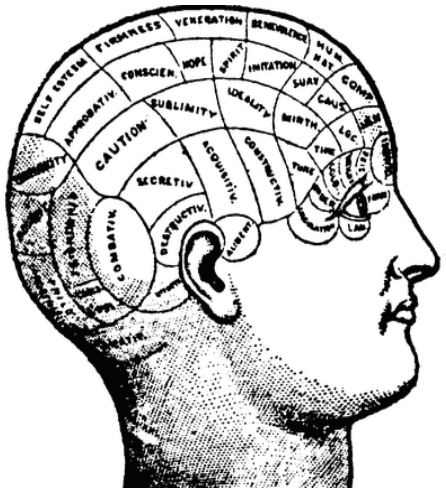
articles, the shifting ideas of what Americans were seeing as their roles in their families, in their communities, and in the world; or a memoir of a Chinese immigrant who came to the US in the 1930s as a "paper son" and how he struggled to define himself as an American during the WWII years when being Chinese was an asset, and in the McCarthy years when it was a distinct liability. In this way I convey a lot of information from a variety of forms, but all getting at the central question I noted above -- what makes America American?

Your specialty being America's antebellum years, are there any modern-day subjects/ issues that especially draw your attention from an American Studies point of view?

My primary academic work has and continues to be focused on how people in the antebellum era constructed and understood media and the creation of image--how people became famous, or infamous, and the methods they used to achieve this status. But this is hardly my only American Studies interest. In the past few years students and I have been exploring a comparison between the 1950s and 1980s, looking at them as similar but strikingly different eras, and seeing what those similarities and contrasts can tell us about how the United States has changed and is continuing to change.

If you had to pick a favorite outdated pseudoscience, what would it be?

Definitely phrenology. I have a Fowler phrenology head in my office, and I recently acquired a very precise calipers that was being discarded by our science departments. We, like all schools, are being forced to do increasing amounts of assessment -- the quantification of



ideas and skills that are largely unquantifiable -- so I've been often tempted to begin collecting and submitting phrenological measurements of my students from the beginning and end of their academic careers and using that data to "prove" with good hard numbers how they are changing! I mean this partially as a joke, but also as a very serious critique of our current educational models, because I highly suspect that many of the measurements and "sciences" we're so heavily investing ourselves in today will be seen by future generations as just as erroneous and misguided as we see phrenology today.

You have some experience teaching American Studies in Croatia. How does the study of the US differ overseas?

What I found in Croatia was that students study the United States today as they study England in the 18th and 19th centuries, or Rome of the classical period. They see us as the most recent global empire. Croatia is a country that has been conquered and ruled by many, many different forces during its

Continued on final page

The Eastern American Studies Association (EASA) is a regional chapter of the American Studies Association organized to promote and encourage the study of American Culture in the Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania areas. EASA sponsors an annual conference, special lectures and events, and publishes the newsletter twice a year.

spectacularly long history (the Romans were the 4th empire to rule Croatia) and so they have a keen interest and long-ranging perspective on what it means to rule and govern other groups of people--seeing it from the eyes of those who have been ruled and governed. As one student told me one of my first weeks there, "America is the best Empire we've had... you're still an empire, but you're a good one--you guys drop bombs, but then aid packages too. And usually you don't use weapons at all, just massive economic pressure to get what you want." That was a sobering statement for me, and one that forced me to rethink how I study America. It has also compelled me to take seriously the push to include non-Americans more fully in American Studies, because they provide a very different and much needed perspective.

"In many ways, American Studies has actually pioneered this flexibility and interdisciplinary approach."

American Studies is fond of redefining itself, in a way re-justifying its existence at every opportunity. Is this becoming more difficult or easier as we move toward the future? Other challenges or opportunities on the horizon in the 21st century?

Because of its interdisciplinary and flexible nature, I think American Studies by its very definition and out of its very nature will always be redefining and reexplaining itself. In many ways American Studies has actually pioneered this flexibility and interdisciplinary approach, and most other disciplines in the Humanities (certainly Literature and History) have adopted similar approaches, making it at times difficult to tell whether one is doing history, literature or American Studies. I believe the big challenge for American Studies in the coming decade will be to come to terms with the international power of the United States and the recognition that, in many ways, most of the world is now "Americanized" to some degree or another. A recognition of this will force the discipline to look at ideas such as colonialization and cultural assimilation, destruction and creation in different ways. I think this is an exciting and important time to be looking at such ideas, and thus, an ideal time to be engaged in American Studies.

PENN STATE HARRISBURG

Penn State Harrisburg
American Studies Program
W356 Olmsted Building
777 W Harrisburg Pike
Middletown PA 17057

PENNSTATE Harrisburg