This is no ordinary time for American studies. It has never been more difficult—yet never more important—to explain how the abstract idea of “America” works in the world, to analyze the social relations it both enables and inhibits, to examine both the bright promises and the bitter betrayals of egalitarian and democratic aspirations that are voiced in its name. At this moment of danger, scholars in the field are asking, where does American studies stand and what do we do now?

The nation whose history and culture frame American studies scholarship and teaching seems to be unraveling at the seams. Its economy, environment, and educational system are all in crisis because of the cumulative consequences of four decades of neoliberal dispossession, displacement, and disciplinary subordination. Unprecedented prosperity for the upper classes creates austerity for the masses. Privatization schemes enable elites to loot public resources for private gain. Corporate-controlled media outlets promote a pervasive culture of cruelty, callousness, and contempt. Warfare is now embraced enthusiastically as a permanent condition rather than tolerated reluctantly and regretfully as a temporary emergency. Long-standing legal and moral commitments to due process, habeas corpus, and equal protection have been abandoned. Relentless regimes of race-based surveillance, mass incarceration, and targeted voter suppression systematically undermine the capacity of aggrieved communities of color to defend themselves politically. The criminal justice system routinely degrades and punishes poor people, but refuses to hold employers, investors, and owners accountable for continuously violating laws that prohibit housing and hiring discrimination, that protect the environment, that require payment of minimum wages, and that guarantee decent working conditions. Fear-laden fantasies about allegedly nonnormative sexual practices and gender identities fuel waves of moral panic about welfare, gay marriage, immigration, and religious differences. A small cadre of affluent individuals—who comprise what surely must be the most sullen, surly, self-pitying, and sadistic group of “haves” in the history of the world—are no longer content with directing recreational hate against their usual targets: people of color, immigrants, Muslims, the
poor. Now they vent their rage even against groups that used to be considered middle class and normative such as public employees with pensions, student loan seekers, workers unemployed during economic downturns, and women who use contraceptive devices. As the New Orleans activist Kalamu ya Salaam argues, in this society people who control nothing are blamed for everything. The reverse is also true: the people who control everything are blamed for nothing.¹

These conditions do not represent simply one more episode in the nation’s long history of periodic economic downturns and intermittent social ruptures. This is the chaotic breakdown and systemic disintegration of an entire way of life. The people in power cannot fix the things they have broken. They cannot repair the damage they have done to the planet and its people. Yet this makes them more dangerous than ever. More than a half century ago, Aimé Césaire argued that “a civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization.”² This decadent, stricken, and dying civilization is wreaking havoc around the world and unraveling at home. It has reached a turning point from which there will be no turning back. At a time when corporate profits have reached record levels, when the chasm that separates wealthy people from everyone else continues to grow, the rich want still more. In the wake of an economic meltdown caused by their own unregulated, speculative greed, capitalists have decided to stage a general strike, refusing to invest in productive economic activity in order to deepen the crisis and force the public to accept even greater tax cuts for the wealthy, more privatization programs that transfer public assets into private hands, and even greater reductions in government spending on education, housing, transportation, and health care. Both the New Deal welfare state and the post-9/11 warfare state are being superseded by a fragmented, delinked, and devolved neoliberal state.³ It is no longer a question of whether there will be radical changes but rather a matter of which changes will be made and whose interests they will serve. As things fall apart, it will matter who tries to put them together again, whose voices are heard, and which interests are represented.

American Studies in a Neoliberal Era

It is not easy under these conditions to carry out the core mission of American studies, to explain the links between the nation and its imagination, to analyze the distinctive culture produced by the national polity. A new sense of urgency pervades the field. It manifests itself in special issues of the American Quarterly.
Quarterly devoted to research on religion and politics, on the nation and migration, on the mishandling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, on indigeneity and globalism, and on race, empire, and the subprime crisis. It permeates recent American Studies Association presidential addresses by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Kevin Gaines, Philip Deloria, and Vicki Ruiz. It shapes classroom pedagogies and off-campus conversations in the many different kinds of college and university campuses where American studies scholars do their work and find themselves forced to consider how the radical reconfigurations of power, politics, and personhood that dominate these times cohere around the goal of establishing the global market as the center of the social world. This move may seem to eclipse the nation and thus to render obsolete the core concerns of American studies. Yet, paradoxically, neoliberalism cannot rely solely on the transnational imagination it creates for unimpeded capital accumulation. It also needs national differences of all kinds to ensure its implementation and its ideological legitimation. National and nationalist narratives produce and preserve the diverse categories of differentiation and unevenness that capital needs in order to profit from inequality, that it uses to force low-paid workers to compete with even lower-paid workers, that it deploys to induce governments to give subsidies to corporations to prevent them from moving production and investment to even more vulnerable localities, that it cultivates to prevent masses of people around the world from recognizing their linked fates and acting in concert against their common misery. Nationalism provides psychic compensations and emotional reparations for the rapid declines in opportunities and life chances experienced by the overwhelming majority of the population. Military interventions guard the global investments of elites, but they also offer the masses a modicum of vicarious participation in power through spectacular displays of violence. Images of bombing raids, drone strikes, fire fights, and tortured and mutilated bodies inure the populace to the suffering of others and stoke desires for punitive power over them. The self-alienation of this populace is so deep that, as Walter Benjamin anticipated years ago, it not only enjoys the destruction of others as a pleasing spectacle but also confronts “its own destruction as a pleasure of the first order.”

The political discourses of power that pervade the “America” that scholars study today honor the flag but dishonor the Constitution. They provide what appear to be endless consumer choices, but allow for no real democratic agency. They promote the free movement of capital, but require the mass incarceration of people. They privatize reward, but socialize risk. They protect investors, but not the environment. They substitute vengeance for justice.
The neoliberal elevation of market times and market spaces over all other temporalities and spatialities conflicts directly with the core concerns of American studies. The field’s traditional attention to the particularities of place and the challenges of change over time are subversive to the neoliberal project because these preoccupations reveal the existence of alternatives to market time’s infinitely renewable present and its seductively speculative futures. American studies scholarship challenges the unlimited fungibility and interchangeability of space needed by the market mentality. The avaricious and acquisitive economic subject privileged by neoliberalism has no need for tradition, history, culture, or moral judgment. Under these conditions, it is not just American studies or even the humanities and the social sciences that are imperiled today. Neoliberals view the entire university as an anomalous social and cultural institution that needs to be disciplined to conform to the interests of owners and investors. The current crisis provides a convenient excuse for radical changes, for what Cameron McCarthy aptly calls the fiscalization, virtualization, and vocationalization of higher education. Even though colleges and universities traditionally have been essentially conservative institutions, preparing students mainly to be successful market actors, schools today are not conservative enough for the neoliberals because any kind of education not connected directly to market outcomes is seen as subversive to profit-making principles. As sites that have not yet succumbed fully to the logic of market capitalism, and as sites from which critical perspectives can still emerge, institutions of higher learning are viewed as impeding the hegemony of market times and market spaces. The privatization of the university is both an economic and an ideological project, an effort to create new sites for selling profit-making modules for teaching and testing, but also an attempt to replace attention to social and historical times and places with a focus on market spatialities and temporalities.

The colleges and universities where scholars of American studies work are important institutions in US society. In one way or another, they will play an important role in determining the outcome of the shake-up in society that is now under way. The crisis is not out there, but rather in here, evident every day in the routine practices of higher education through the rapidly changing conditions that teachers and students confront. Although local circumstances produce distinctly different conditions at community colleges, teaching-oriented state universities, liberal arts colleges, and research institutions, there are commonalities among these sites as well. Everywhere students pay higher fees to sit in increasingly crowded classrooms where overburdened part-time teachers drill them to take standardized tests. The debts students incur from loans constrain their career choices and impede their chances of acquiring future
assets. Students encounter increasingly limited vocationally oriented curricula and demoralizing pedagogies designed to accustom them to rote learning and following orders. Teachers are urged to credential students but not to teach them, to ignore how the proliferation of commercially prepared research modules and high stakes tests in K–12 education is producing generations of students who lack the ability to read carefully, write clearly, or think logically. Trained to quickly fill in the right bubbles on scantron-graded, timed multiple choice tests, students skim through assigned readings. A painful literalism leads them to look for the phrases they think they will need to reproduce when asked to write short literal answers to short literal questions. Without self-actualizing reading strategies, they often mistake the views that authors criticize as the views that the authors espouse. They reduce complex arguments to simple propositions. Their responses to assigned readings foreground their satisfaction or dissatisfaction as consumers based on the accessibility of texts but display little engagement with the evidence, ideas, and arguments of the authors.

Under these conditions of crisis, the traditional temporal and spatial contours of American studies take on new significance. Neoliberalism naturalizes hierarchy and exploitation. It promotes internalized preferences for profits over the needs of people. It demands the individuation of collective social processes. It cultivates hostile privatism and defensive localism by stoking exaggerated fears of difference. Yet neoliberalism is rife with contradictions. It promises prosperity, but delivers austerity. It speaks in terms of empowerment, but delivers dependency. It produces many of the very crises it purports to prevent. Perhaps most important, it constantly generates resistance among the populations it seeks to suppress and control. Neoliberalism’s injustices and inequalities provoke the development of new social movements like the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011–2012, which generated new optics on culture, power, and social identities. These movements echo many of the traditional concerns of American studies in that they pose alternatives to the temporality and spatiality of the market. They invite people to compare the past with the present. They revisit the strengths and weaknesses of what has come before. They seek out discursive spaces and physical places where alternative ways of being and knowing can be envisioned and enacted.

As Homi Bhabha argues, “The state of emergency is also always a state of emergence.” In a moment of crisis, however, it is not always easy to distinguish the emergent from the residual, to discern exactly what is dying and what is being born. At any given historical moment, many temporalities exist inside the same time. Even when people occupy the same location, their cognitive mappings can be different. Inside American studies, these multiple times
and places can become sources of conflict and division. American studies is a field where deep commitments to the civil rights paradigm of the last century coexist uneasily with a contemporary skepticism about state-centered politics and rights-bound solutions to social injustices. Questions about “Who is an American?” or “What is American?” may seem outdated to people contesting the very legitimacy of the citizen-alien distinction and seeking to assess the nation’s role in the world and the world’s role inside the nation. One of the creation stories of American studies condemns its origins in the containment culture of the Cold War and assumes that it remains unwittingly shaped by an uncritical celebration of American exceptionalism. A competing narrative locates the origins of American studies in a flawed but nonetheless valuable effort to promote national unity around democratic and egalitarian ideals, an effort that was thwarted by the rising influence in the field of ethnic studies and postcolonial studies. These competing narratives provide scholars with convenient authorizing gestures to announce their own projects as a break with the corrupt foundations of the field, in the first case, or as an exposure of the field’s betrayal, in the second case. As Amy Kaplan notes astutely, these antagonisms do not serve us well. They obscure the diverse, complex, and radical aspects of the American studies past while demeaning and caricaturing more recent work forged in the crucibles of social transformation and change. They reduce profound differences of social and intellectual location to simple oedipal conflicts while magnifying minor differences in interpretation and analysis into incommensurable moral commitments. Scholars are not going to find many areas of easy and uncomplicated agreement in a time of dramatic transformation and change. There is no one formula for scholarly and political work; no one-size-fits-all solution exists for the problems people face. Scholarly debates will oscillate wildly between fervid hopelessness and naive hopefullness—neither of which will succeed because both perspectives contain part of the truth, but only part. There is room for humility on all sides. The field of American studies has always profited greatly from the fact that it does not speak with one voice, that people participating in its dialogues are not the same. The differences that hurt can also help if scholars develop an imagination of unity that does not require unanimity or uniformity. People do not need to be identical to identify and ally with one another.

Because a neoliberal society needs to create neoliberal subjects that are pliable to the demands and desires of a market society, it does not need or want critical readers, creative thinkers, or lifelong learners. In this context, American studies and attendant fields like ethnic studies, feminist studies, and queer studies are certain to come under concentrated and sustained attack by vested
interests threatened by the potential power of these fields’ repositories of collective memory, their practices of ethical instruction, and their propensities for identifying and honoring new publics, new polities, and new politics. The current balance of power is likely to produce heightened struggle but repeated defeats. Defeats can lead to demoralization. Demoralization can lead to division, to mutual blaming and shaming. Being hurt can make people want to hurt others. Injured individuals and groups see a mirror of their own subordination in the eyes of the people closest to them. They can come to perceive people who might be allies as enemies, to be repulsed by the powerlessness they see in others, to long for escape from association with them and their problems. Unable to confront directly the people and institutions that actually cause their suffering, aggrieved groups can quickly turn on each other. Under these conditions, a radical divisiveness permeates popular life and culture, encouraging people to imagine that making others lesser can make them greater. As scholars of American studies, we both examine and participate in an affective politics that can disempower our struggles against neoliberal conditions. How our scholarly community carries these burdens will determine a great deal about what the future of American studies will be.

American studies scholars often see themselves as merely enduring neoliberal hegemony rather than dwelling within it. Yet despite recognition of its failings, scholars also inhabit neoliberalism. The academy is not an innocent victim of neoliberalism but instead one of the institutions where it is learned, legitimated, and implemented. Part of the subjectivities of scholars has been produced by discourses that may seem “natural” to them, yet ultimately work against scholarly and political goals of antisubordination. Scholars who feel like victims of neoliberal hegemony may actually be working as its co-creators through the form and content of their academic arguments, their teaching, and their pursuit of recognition and reward. In consequence, they may fail to identify how competitive neoliberalism works even within American studies debates that appear on the surface to make radical and oppositional claims. As Deloria reports, many graduate students and junior faculty believe that they will not succeed in the profession if they honor the past in any way, if they do not claim to be overturning past scholarship, replacing it with “a new political intervention, a new methodological innovation, a new paradigm that redefines the very questions being asked.” There are very real structural imperatives that pressure scholars to take this path. But one of the most important lessons to be learned from the history of the field is that destructive pressures can be evaded, inverted, subverted, and resisted.
Researchers and teachers cannot assume that they are already prepared for the consequences of neoliberal thinking on their scholarship, that their teaching and writing activities are immune to neoliberal influences. The discourses we inhabit seek to shape not merely what we think but, more importantly, how we think. While scholars have examined the assumptions of neoliberal argumentation in popular culture and public discourses, we have devoted little attention to the infusion of neoliberal assumptions inside the form and content of our own scholarly arguments. We tend to focus on what scholars argue, what dangers their arguments signal for us, and what satisfactions or dissatisfactions emerge from reading them. In doing so, we incorporate without examination neoliberal assumptions about how arguments should be conducted, what should count as successful argumentation, and what kind of evidence should be necessary to criticize or shut down a line of argument. Neoliberal assumptions may frame scholarly debate within the terms of consumerism by celebrating new topics and focusing on slight realignments of theoretical arguments. This search for the new does not emerge “organically” because problems have been solved or debates have been exhausted, but rather because the appearance of change speaks to desires for novelty, diversion, and distraction promoted by neoliberalism. Neoliberal consumerist assumptions encourage scholars to look at academic arguments with long histories with jaded, bored, and impatient eyes. This taken-for-granted consumerist mentality has enormous political consequences. What could be more useful to neoliberal hegemony than “oppositional” scholars who declare the work of other “oppositional” scholars hackneyed and banal? What could be more useful for neoliberalism than the establishment of bored detachment and disdain as significant affects in a scholarly field that would otherwise be attempting to counter histories and cultures of subordination? To absorb, ignore, or fail to challenge neoliberal stances that may pervade our own debates is to render our scholarly work intellectually and politically marginal at a time when it can provide vital alternatives.

The exigencies of these times need not create a sense of despair or defeat for scholarship in American studies. Instead, its role in rethinking and countering neoliberal hegemony becomes more important than ever. As Cedric Robinson reminds us, “We are not the subjects or the subject formations of the capitalist world-system. It is merely one condition of our existence.” To ensure that scholars can see that neoliberal thinking is merely one condition of our existence requires that we transform the terms of reading and writing to counter unacknowledged neoliberal assumptions about argument that influence our debates. To transform the terms of reading and writing requires, most urgently,
a position of dramatically critical self-reflection about our methods of scholarly argumentation, an unrelenting interrogation of the ways in which neoliberal assumptions of argument can inadvertently undermine the possibilities of American studies. Condemning previous arguments and constantly replacing them with new and improved claims can give the appearance of radical debate while merely “churning” the discussion. Debates about particularity and universality, sameness and difference, identification and disidentification, rupture and continuity in American studies may appear to represent resistant political positions while in fact reflecting and reinforcing neoliberal thinking. In a neoliberal society, even resistance is structured in dominance. Claiming to transcend received categories is not to do so. Being in opposition to other scholars—finding them not resistant enough, or in the right ways—is not the same as being in opposition to hegemonic power. Staking out positions is not the same as waging the war of position. What is presented as an oppositional identity can become just another “brand,” totally congruent with the market niches promoted by neoliberalism.

The future of American studies requires scholars to know the work we want our work to do; to frame our scholarly relations not as competition but as accompaniment; to insist that we infuse our ideas and activism with ethical judgment and wisdom; to clarify the significance of different aspects of our scholarly lives; to acknowledge that our work speaks for us but also for others; and to recognize the dialogic and dialectically related nature of our views of American society. The success of American studies depends not only on what scholars know but also on how we go about knowing.

What Is the Work You Want Your Work to Do? American Studies as Accompaniment

Centrally important to the success of our scholarly endeavors is knowing the work we want our work to do, taking responsibility for the world we are creating through our endeavors, for the ways of being in the world that we are modeling and promoting. The work of American studies can be organized around the concept of accompaniment. Accompaniment is a disposition, a sensibility, and a pattern of behavior. It is both a commitment and a capacity that can be cultivated. Two metaphors of accompaniment are particularly relevant: (1) accompaniment as participating with and augmenting a community of travelers on a road; (2) accompaniment as participating with others to create music. Thinking about American studies in terms of these acts of accompaniment can promote new ways of knowing and new ways of being that can equip scholars
appropriately for the challenges we face. The metaphors of people traveling down a road together or creating music collectively offer devices for individuals from different backgrounds with different experiences, perspectives, and interests to recognize and reinforce each other’s dignity by working together. Accompaniment recognizes the inescapably and quintessentially social nature of scholarship and citizenship. It requires viewing everything that happens to and in American studies as part of a broader social field of action, not as an isolated, atomized, hermetically sealed site relevant only to the academy. It focuses on making connections with others, identifying with them, and helping them.

We draw the term *accompaniment* from the social justice work of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador during the 1970s. Archbishop Romero lived in a nation controlled completely by its wealthiest families. For most of his life his work as a priest pleased the rich. He was nearly sixty years old when he started to break away from their influence and engage extensively with the poor. At the very moment when he was on the brink of ascending to the top levels of the church hierarchy, he instead moved closer to the people and the problems of their everyday lives. From peasants and radical priests conducting what they termed “national reality” classes, he learned things that encouraged and enabled him to see his nation and his mission in it through new eyes. Romero believed that the social ills plaguing El Salvador required ordinary people to become “protagonists of very decisive events.” He came to feel that social justice could not be secured primarily by individuals, that meaningful social change could come only from “the strength of a people who together clamor for their just rights.” Romero believed that the class divisions that separated the rich and poor alienated them from each other and from God. The rich cannot possibly know what it is like to be poor, no matter how much they sympathize or empathize with others. The poor can never possibly totally trust the people whose class positions enable them to benefit from the exploitation and oppression of others. Yet Romero believed that people from all backgrounds could come together in shared work, uniting around the needs and interests of the most oppressed. He presented a preferential option for the poor as the key nexus of action. This did not mean uncritically supporting anything poor people wanted or refraining from criticizing their failings and misdeeds. Instead, it meant making the needs of the most powerless and most oppressed people everyone’s first priority. It entailed working for social justice together and finding common ground as humans despite the radical divisiveness inherent in a stratified society. His rebellion made him unpopular with the church hierarchy and government officials. Romero told his followers that if the National Guard attacked peasants: “You should be there next to
the campesinos. Accompany them. Take the same risks they do.” Ultimately, these actions led to his assassination. Yet this accompaniment also brought him unprecedented joy and fulfillment. By forging unity around the needs of the most oppressed, accompaniment allowed Romero and his followers to not only battle against exploitation and hierarchy but also create new social relationships that enacted the utopian hopes that religion and radical politics alike had previously only envisioned. Action led to new ideas, analyses, and interpretations. “I thought I knew the Gospel,” Romero explained, speaking of his former life, but because of his contact with struggles by large groups of people, he felt that he was “learning to read it another way.”

Despite the enormous difference in contexts, American studies work done in the right ways can function as something resembling a US equivalent of El Salvador’s “national reality” classes. Accompaniment can help transcend the pervasive segregation of this society. It can show scholars new ways of reading cultural and social texts they think they know well. It offers an opportunity to build on both the dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness. It can help people work together respectfully as equals recognizing and battling against the inequalities that permeate all of the practices of this society. Accompaniment does not erase differences or suppress disagreements in the name of an artificial and premature unity. In accompaniment there are times when it will be wise to work together and times when it will be wise to remain apart. Yet accompaniment allows disagreements to be seen as evidence of problems yet to be solved, discussions yet to be conducted, understandings yet to be developed.

The social divisions that Archbishop Romero sought to redress through accompaniment were not merely matters of economic inequality. People from different walks of life have different skills, different speech patterns, and different problem-solving strategies. Working together entails a sometimes painfully slow process of learning from each other, of working hard to forge mutually beneficial relations and relationships. The many different forms of segregation that plague this society give people precious few opportunities to cross social barriers and work with others. Teachers and students at elite colleges and universities work inside class-based institutions that systematically exclude the thoughts, ideas, histories, archives, and imaginaries of aggrieved people almost as relentlessly and effectively as they exclude the people themselves. Envisioning American studies work as accompaniment organized around the preferential option for the poor, however, can produce seemingly unlikely alliances, associations, affiliations, conversations, and coalitions with aggrieved and excluded individuals and groups. As scholars and activists, we have not yet
made ourselves into the people we will need to be to work effectively across all kinds of borders and boundaries. Yet by asking and answering questions important to the increasing numbers of displaceable, disposable, and deportable people in this society, and by working with them in social movement organizations large and small, scholars can respond honestly and honorably to the indignities and injustices we see.

_Accompaniment_ is also a musical term. In music, to accompany other players entails more than simply adding new sounds to the mix. Accompaniment requires attention, communication, and cooperation. It means augmenting, accenting, or countering one musical voice with another. Harmonic and rhythmic accompaniments enhance melodic lines, but they also produce dialogues between melodies and countermelodies. A musician playing block chords augments the primary melody through a succession of chords that move in the same direction to the same rhythm. Sometimes accompaniment means _saying less so that others can be heard_. A drummer can play sparally and simply to make the bass lines more audible, while compositions played in stop time include breaks that make room for others to play solos. The dull and routine work of accompaniment can play a crucial role in enabling others to shine. The rhythm and blues drummer Jockey Etienne explains that the simple task of playing on the beat contributes greatly to the virtuosity of others. “You stay on it,” he says. “I don’t care what they do up there. When they come back, you have to have room to come back. We call that ‘stay in the pocket.’ You have to hold that bottom down. You got to have the foundation.”

When people accompany each other, every one contributes. Like practice and improvisation, accompaniment is one of those many musical terms that have much to teach scholars about how we conduct our scholarly and civic work. The music industry and its fans generally ignore accompaniment and pay attention instead only to individual virtuosos. Yet musicians know that every player has important work to do, that when music sounds good it is because of the many people who are doing different kinds of jobs well.

Accompaniment is not generally valued in the activities favored by a competitive neoliberal society. In a world of market times and market places, people are encouraged to think of themselves as entrepreneurs of their own identities, careers, and public images. The dominant reward structures in this society cultivate antagonism and aggression among individuals. Students learn to desire higher grades than their classmates; scholars pursue more prestige and reward than their colleagues. Yet researchers always know that the importance of their work stems largely from what it contributes to the collective conversation. Many students know that they learn better when they learn together.
The diversity of their experiences and perspectives teaches all of them lessons that they cannot find in lectures and books alone. Accompaniment can thus be the basis of a powerful counterculture inside academia as well as an important bridge to all the creative, critical, and contemplative thinking that goes on outside it. It can guide us in our efforts as reviewers, editors, and teachers to support work that is contributive rather than competitive, that eschews shortcuts like attack mode, degradation ceremonies, and sectarian sniping. While still requiring effort and excellence, accompaniment can help transcend the social isolation and intellectual trivialization that permeates the neoliberal university. In a society that constantly urges people to have more, the real task, as Archbishop Romero insisted, is to learn how to be more.23

Yet individuals primed to think of themselves primarily as soloists do not automatically know how to accompany others. People cannot learn accompaniment only by imagining it or asserting it; they have to inhabit it and practice it through the embodied learning experiences that emanate from walking down a road with other people. Ideas and identities do not emerge out of thin air. Antonio Gramsci argues that “ideas and opinions are not spontaneously ‘born’ in each individual brain,” they emanate from practical experience in the world in “centers of formation, of irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion.”24 Acts of accompaniment set in motion a process that can produce different kinds of people through the organizational learning that emerges from practices and processes that build our collective capacity for democratic deliberation and decision making. American studies as *accompaniment* means American studies as *action*. Rather than merely producing ever more eloquent descriptions of other people’s suffering, scholars can join with others to address the suffering and to create ways of ending it. Rather than merely giving people something to feel, accompaniment entails our helping them find something to do along with us.

The Way You Do the Things You Do: *Konesans* and *Balans*

Even the most well-intentioned actions of accompaniment will fail if they do not include preparation for complex and contradictory realities, if they do not infuse ideas and activism with ethical judgment and wisdom. Good intentions do not guarantee good results. Being against bad things does not make people good. Opposing the social relations of this society does not automatically qualify people to establish a new one. The right thing can look like the wrong thing and the wrong thing can look like the right thing. What seem like victories can really be defeats, while apparent victories can set the stage for devastating failures.
For those reasons, accompaniment needs to be implemented through the concepts of *konesans* and *balans*. The brilliant and generative work of the Haitian studies scholar Claudine Michel explains that *konesans* and *balans* are important ways of knowing and being. *Konesans* expresses the understanding that knowledge is more than a matter of mastering empirical facts and abstract theories. It connotes experience blended with wisdom, a quality gained with age and honed and refined by showing respect for the people who have walked the path before us. Mastery of *konesans* requires people to place proximate events in a broader perspective as a historian might do, but also to acknowledge the pull of the past on the present, to recognize ourselves as always indebted to the suffering, struggle, and sacrifice of ancestors and elders. The world in which we work as scholars was here before we got here, and it will be here after we leave. We cannot “will” ourselves to be outside it, to disavow its negative as well as positive impacts on us, or to disown our responsibilities to it. By itself, however, *konesans* is not enough. It needs to be infused with the quality of *balans*.

*Balans* holds that everyone has a part of the truth, that people’s weaknesses come from many of the same sources as their strengths, that the truth and the lie—or the right thing and the wrong thing—are not mutually incommensurable opposites but instead different poles of a dialogically and dialectically connected unity. The moral judgment cultivated by the concept of *balans* cannot be reduced to a set of rules to follow. Moral excellence comes from reconciling opposites rather than choosing between them. It is something that emerges from appreciating differences and embracing contradictions. *Balans* demands forging unities out of opposites: knowing and honoring history, but not being bound by its limitations; being open to new things, but not with contempt for the past. In this way of thinking, moral problems stem less from evil than from imbalance. Through *konesans*, wisdom amounts to more than the accumulation of facts. Through *balans*, morality consists of more than simply avoiding evil. *Konesans* and *balans* require discernment, deliberation, and constant decision making. Like the physicians of antiquity who recognized that the same things that cause diseases can be used to cure them, thinkers deploying *konesans* and *balans* understand that things that can kill can also cure, that poisons can be medicines when they are used in the right ways.

When analyzed through the lens of *balans*, domination and resistance, optimism and pessimism are not polar opposites but rather dialogic and dialectically related aspects of the same reality. Paula Ioanide argues for a kind of scholarship capable of recognizing these relationships by using the metaphor of two mirrors to describe the work that American studies research and teaching entails. The first mirror reflects all the injustice, inequality, brutality, exploitation, and
dehumanization in US society. This mirror shows people what the dominant culture rarely admits: that the advantages, wealth, and opportunities of the comfortable classes are stained with blood and originate in oppression. Many people shown that mirror will feel compelled to look away in shame and guilt, some because they are identified with the oppressor, others because they do not want to be identified with the oppressed. But just when everyone starts feeling like the system is too big and too powerful to overcome, just when people start thinking “what’s the point of resisting anyway—things are never going to change?,” Ioanide explains that we can pull out the second mirror. It reflects a long legacy of struggle against oppression, of exercises in autonomy and self-determination, of interdependency and freedom dreaming. In this mirror we see that cultural and political expressions produced in the spaces occupied by aggrieved communities are often critical places for producing models of being and thinking crucial to the survival and dignity of all.

American studies scholars hold up these two mirrors to the national culture. One mirror shows the hard facts and occluded realities that celebratory culture covers up. It exposes the myths and mystifications that distort and excuse unjust social relations. The other mirror shows that people do indeed long for freedom and do indeed desire democracy. The second mirror helps us see what Ernst Bloch termed the “Not-Yet-Conscious,” the emancipatory and utopian hopes that lie embedded inside even the most reactionary elements of hegemonic culture.27

Many of our closest allies and their students are eager to hold up that first mirror, but have no interest in the second. They are ready to scorn tradition, but fearful of embracing the traditions of the scorned.28 They are wary of what Seth Moglen calls “the torment of hope.”29 They are eager to “not get fooled again,” so they author work that is steeped in radical negativity, that expresses what Raymond Williams saw in the 1920s work of Berthold Brecht: “a raw chaotic resentment, a hurt so deep it requires new hurting, a sense of outrage which demands that people be outraged.”30 It is understandable that people feel this way. But left by itself, this stance acquires the quality that Bloch calls “half-enlightenment.” It recognizes the need to denounce and destroy, but abdicates the responsibility to construct and create. It finds pleasure in alienation, anger, and anomie. It builds a besieged in-group mentality that displays contempt for the everyday suffering of ordinary people. It promotes a kind of intellectual and social gated community where people speak only to people like themselves. Holding up the second mirror is vital for infusing this work with konesans and balans. Accompaniment is an important way to wield the second mirror adequately and appropriately.
When Is a Menu Not a Meal? The CV, the Simulacrum, and the Struggle

We argue that American studies scholarship should seek to develop a collective capacity for *accompaniment* by deploying the concepts of *konesans* and *balans* in scholars’ professional lives in a way that combines critique and affirmation, that blends generative ideas with generosity, that uses ego, energy, and ambition not primarily for personal gain but to help and serve others. For scholars in American studies, *konesans* and *balans* can be especially valuable in helping negotiate the contradictions embedded in some of the main institutions in academic lives that we encapsulate here as the CV, the simulacrum, and the struggle. In our discussion of these institutions, we raise some criticisms and make some recommendations about personal conduct and behavior. We believe that the choices people make do matter, yet we insist that these choices are not made in a vacuum. Practices and processes saturated with power pressure people to act within the logic of the dominant system. Ethical conviction and personal courage are not sufficient tools for challenging an entire system structured in dominance. The potential for misjudgments, mistakes, and wrong choices that we explore below should not be attributed to the personal failings of individuals but should instead be seen as evidence of the implied and inscribed logic of neoliberal society. Even if we were somehow capable of becoming radically different kinds of people on our own, we would still need to make systemic changes in society to create room for these new personalities, dispositions, and character structures to survive and thrive. Yet relentless exposure to neoliberal pedagogies is designed to prevent us from becoming those kinds of people—individuals who can even envision and enact meaningful social change. We cannot become different kinds of people unless society changes, but society will not change unless we become different kinds of people. This might seem like an unsolvable conundrum, but we believe a blend of *konesans* and *balans* can help us see how addressing each half of the problem can help solve the other half, how changing institutions is an important step toward changing ourselves and how changing ourselves is a necessary part of changing society.

The CV

The hierarchies, reward structures, and pressures of academic life make it easy to lose perspective. Individual professional histories and achievements are recorded on curriculum vitae that establish a public record that looms large in the lives of scholars. Because of the publications, presentations, positions,
honors, and awards enumerated on it, the CV circulates out in the world as a strange surrogate for the person whose work it describes. As an “other directed” document designed to be examined by strangers, the CV functions as a professional passport that can open doors or leave them closed. It takes center stage every time scholars are reviewed, every time they apply for jobs, grants, and fellowships, every time their departments are evaluated. Because past accomplishments augur well for future achievement, an impressive CV can make everything scholars do easier, while a weak CV can make everything more difficult. In academic life, moreover, no level of achievement is ever enough; every CV can be made to look small in some way. The importance of the CV can spur people to take on tasks they should pass up. It can lead them to disregard being tired, depressed, or ill because they want their CV to be healthy even if they are not. The CV can be a haunting presence, constantly rebuking its namesake for not containing enough entries or not enough of the right kinds of entries.

Differences across institutions can give the CV more or less weight. At some teaching colleges where pay is determined by rank rather than individual merit reviews, the CV may matter less than at Research 1 universities. Expectations about the quantity or quality of work recorded on the CV are not the same at state universities with comparatively lower tuitions and fees than at tuition-driven elite private colleges. Yet very few scholars are completely unconcerned with the CV, since its power looms so large in academic life.

Yet while too much emphasis on the CV can be a problem, so can too little emphasis. Winning peer validation of original and generative contributions to scholarship is an important part of the work that scholars need to do in the world. From this perspective, writing is not something scholars have to do but something they get to do, a rare privilege in a world where most people do not get any public opportunity to express what they know or believe. As a record of peer-validated success, the CV testifies affirmatively to the existence of important achievements in the world, achievements that cannot be undone.

Yet balans is needed. The CV represents scholarly achievement largely as individual activity capable of being measured in quantitative terms. The work that scholars actually do, however, is innately collective and qualitative. Recognition and reward may flow to individuals, but scholarly conversations are cooperative creations, the product of collective communications in which all participants play a part. The CV will always be an inadequate and even inaccurate reflection of scholarly work. The full range of roles that scholars take on as researchers, writers, reviewers, editors, interlocutors, teachers, mentors,
and colleagues will never be registered on a CV. Senior scholars with impressive CVs have more freedom to devote their time to these behind-the-scenes endeavors, while junior scholars can lose their jobs for doing so. Yet absolute capitulation to the logic of the CV is a mistake at any stage. Choices that appear merely tactical at the beginning can become thoroughly internalized after a while. No change can occur without some risk. But knuckling under and expecting to be rewarded is also a risk. It is risky to bite the hand that feeds you, but it is somewhat easier to bite the hand that is no longer feeding you and never intends to feed you again. It all depends on the work you want your work to do.

The same CV that can earn a scholar the right to be heard and taken seriously can also become a paralyzing presence. The persistence and peculiarities of peer review coupled with the significant degree of personal exposure that comes from the public dimensions of teaching and writing can easily undermine confidence and self-esteem. People cannot produce scholarly books and articles unless they possess a measure of self-confidence or even arrogance that makes them think that their ideas, arguments, and opinions matter. Yet they cannot produce good work unless they have the requisite degree of humility needed to accept criticism graciously and learn from it. This balance is difficult to acquire and maintain. It is possible to become self-impressed to the point of clinical narcissism, or to become self-doubting to the point of paranoia. \(^{31}\) In effect, the CV is a knife that cuts two ways: held by the handle it can be a useful tool, but grabbed by the blade it leads to injury. Scholars need to take the CV seriously, but not so seriously that it distorts our understanding of our work and ourselves. Its panoptical presence can take over our lives unless we create a counterculture of serious shared work and mutual support. Yet we are often hindered from doing so because of the pervasive power of another panoptic force in our lives which we describe here as the simulacrum.

**The Simulacrum**

The vagaries of the CV, the difficulty of knowing how much our scholarly work matters and to whom, and the psychic injuries endured in a field where most of what researchers and teachers read and hear about themselves is likely to be negative, all can lead scholars to seek success and respect in the realm of reputation and prestige, the arena in which public praise and admiration serve as reparations for the indignities and humiliations of systematic surveillance by colleagues, administrators, students, and sometimes a broader public. Jean Baudrillard’s term *the simulacrum* is appropriate here because this realm
American Studies as Accompaniment is a phantasm, an apparition with no real presence, yet it serves to shape destructive real-world consequences. Scholars learn that disdain injures and provides others pleasure, so they may try delivering disdain in hopes of not receiving it. Much harm can emanate from this understandable desire. It can lead to familiar behaviors that take many different forms: aiming arguments at individuals rather than ideas, or treating legitimate political and scholarly differences as moral hierarchies. These practices set in motion a machine that runs by itself. It can become more pleasurable to see good work belittled than to help it be developed, augmented, assimilated, and acknowledged, so that hard-won intellectual assets and institutions can be squandered in service of insatiable emotions, ambitions, and egos. The simulacrum recruits largely powerless people into an unbreakable circle of reciprocal recrimination and envy. The simulacrum works to make people produce less work rather than more. Fear of criticism keeps some people silent. Some of them promise work that is never produced, because a promise cannot be criticized in the way that actually produced work can be. They see praise for their past works not as incentive to contribute more to the conversation but as a kind of cultural capital that could only be diminished by a new vulnerable round of exposure.

In his sermon “The Drum Major Instinct,” Martin Luther King described reputation, renown, and acclaim as a kind of Vitamin A for the ego. Yet recognition never fully satisfies. It only stokes desires for additional rewards. The simulacrum is a trap because its pleasures are both unreal and superficial. Like the CV, the simulacrum is other-directed, but even more so. It revolves around the image that people imagine that others have of them. It is understandable that scholars want to be noticed, respected, and admired. When used in the right ways, this desire can lead people to cultivate their capacities and achieve a reputation for honesty, integrity, and loyalty. Yet in a neoliberal society that entices every individual to fabricate his or her own “brand,” the simulacrum opens the door to regrettable forms of self-promotion and puffery, bluster and bullying. The central discursive form of the simulacrum is the shortcut, the casual move that attracts attention through its sensationalism rather than its substance. Shortcuts include branding one’s own work as newer, hipper, and deeper than work done by others, coasting on the imagined pedigree that comes from knowing famous people or attending prestigious schools, speaking for aggrieved groups rather than speaking from their experiences and struggles, dismissing entire schools of thought because of minor quibbles with them. Familiar shortcut formulations that appear at the beginnings of books and articles include claims such as “no one has ever studied x,” or that “many people have studied x but all of them have been inadequate,” or that
“the work in field x is deficient because it has not anticipated something else that I am more interested in.”

Inside the simulacrum, some seek attention by dismissing all previous scholarship as inadequate and outdated, while others assess research conducted by others as valid or invalid on the basis of the identities of its authors, their discipline, their age, their race, their gender, their sexuality, or their politics. Moral posturing often substitutes for analysis inside the simulacrum. Serious intellectual disagreements become trivialized into purported evidence about the moral failings of antagonists rather than as evidence of problems unsolved and perspectives that need to be reconciled. In a neoliberal society where envy and contempt dominate social media, the easiest shortcut of all is what we have described elsewhere as “attack mode,” a form of argument based on belittling and denigrating others. Very different from the kinds of substantive critiques needed to take ideas seriously, attack mode engages in what Herbert Garfinkel describes as “degradation ceremonies,” public performances of moral indignation designed to denounce and humiliate the victim before witnesses. As a key trope routinely used by others against scholars in American studies, ethnic studies, feminist studies, and queer studies, attack mode can also be especially appealing to these scholars precisely because it offers a way to inhabit the superior position so often used against them, to imagine that they can rise above someone else by making them the objects of derision and scorn. These ways of seeking a place in the sun in the simulacrum require always having someone to look down on, someone who is not radical enough, not transgressive enough, not virtuous enough, or not smart enough. It is a form of neoliberal collaboration masquerading as critique. It provides temporary satisfactions grounded in the smugness of cynicism and the pleasures of sadism, but it undermines the causes it purports to promote. Just as popular teaching is not necessarily good teaching, being acknowledged as a person of notice in the simulacrum is not the same as doing something right or helpful. No one should need to look down on others in order to raise themselves up. As the character Esperanza Quintero explains in a crucial scene in the film Salt of the Earth: “I don’t want anything lower than I am. I’m low enough already. I want to rise. And push everything up with me as I go.”

The same simulacrum that leads scholars to dismissive negativity can also, on the other hand, lead people to be reluctant to make needed critical judgments. Every piece of scholarship has flaws. Every scholar has room for development and growth. The principles of peer review depend on open and honest exchanges of ideas. Everyone’s work benefits from serious scrutiny by readers who think of themselves as custodians of a collective conversation, as
accountable to the profession and to society at large. Yet when they imagine how they might be seen in the simulacrum, many scholars take the path of least resistance. They may refrain from delivering news that might be hard to hear. They place more importance on their personal popularity and friendships than on their responsibilities as scholars. They may seek to preserve the comity of a department than its quality, to seek succor in the solidarity of insider networks from which they benefit. Their lack of *konesans*, however, often hurts the very people they imagine they are helping—because their actions deprive colleagues, students, and themselves of criticisms all need in order to improve. Every time they let things “slide”—when they sign off on an inadequate MA or PhD thesis, when they make a faulty faculty hire, when they approve a deficient tenure and promotion file, or when they recommend acceptance of a manuscript that should be rejected—they strip their own side of the assets needed for the third major institutional frame in scholar’s lives: the *struggle*. Through these failures to uphold high standards, each generation learns how to teach the next generation *how not to do the job*. Teachers pretend to teach and students pretend to learn. But literally as well as figuratively, no one is any the wiser. In such conditions, scholars lose sight of the work they want their work to do.

**The Struggle**

The contradictions that vex scholars’ relationships to the CV and the simulacrum can be contained and channeled in positive directions through engagement with the *struggle*. American studies scholarship emerges from and speaks to conflicts, contestations, and contradictions in national life. This work is done best when these connections are openly acknowledged and engaged. Precisely because institutions like the CV and the simulacrum loom so large in academic life, antisubordination struggles can become important alternative sites where these features matter less, where work entails developing what Antonio Gramsci and C. L. R. James call the new “personalities” and politics that people need to do their work well. *Struggle* is not defined simply as participation in public political actions and mobilizations. Because power is widely dispersed throughout social institutions, a war of position needs to be waged inside all of them. In classrooms and public forums, in teaching and writing, in mentoring students and faculty governance, and in educational, political, and cultural practice with communities far from academia, the struggle is a uniquely promising realm. It can also connect concerns inside the university to other constituencies in the broader society. For example, efforts to reform personnel review procedures by challenging the practices that privilege quantity
over quality can be sensible responses inside higher education to the power of
the CV, but it might be beneficial to work as well both inside and outside the
university by allying with K–12 teachers, parents, and students challenging
the entire audit culture and its premises.

The structures of professional validation and reward encourage people to
pioneer new discoveries or to carry previous work forward. They promote
desires to be the one to have the first word or the last word. The struggle, how-
ever, like the best scholarship, compels focus on the middle word, on building
on what came before and setting the stage for what will follow. Although not
immune to the personal preoccupations and individualistic opportunism that
pervade the CV and the simulacrum, the innately social and interactive nature
of the struggle can help develop new ways of knowing and new ways of being,
especially when framed in the terms of accompaniment.

Scholarship is often conducted in solitude, but never in isolation. The
colleges and universities where scholars work are often physically separated
from the lives of broad segments of society, but academic work is never au-
tonomous, never untouched by the concerns in the communities from which
teachers and students come and to which they return. In the present moment
of danger, it is important to remember that American studies scholarship has
always been connected to social upheavals and social movements. Part of the
konesans needed for accompaniment lies in recognizing the legacy bequeathed
by previous generations.

American studies as a field of inquiry is grounded in a long and honorable
history of examining and evaluating the specificities of historical times and
places, especially the complex and contradictory history of democracy’s bright
promises and its bitter betrayals. American studies entails confronting both the
nation’s proclamation of its manifest destiny of conquest and control and what
Toni Cade Bambara describes as its latent destiny as a crucible of democratic
and egalitarian ideas and institutions.39 The field asks and answers questions
about the promise and peril of national places and spaces, about how the
patterns of the past both enable and inhibit possibilities in the present. These
central concerns of the field emerged historically out of specific periods of
crisis that mirror the problems we face today. From the links between early
American studies scholarship and the laboring of American culture in the
1930s, through the focus on myth-image-symbol during the Cold War era,
to the democratization of the field in response to the democratic and egalitar-
ian social movements of the 1960s, American studies scholarship has always
constructed its core concerns and categories in dialogue with social crises and
upheavals.40 The era of right-wing reaction that dominated the 1980s provoked
new questions about the meaning of the nation and its culture. Balanced budget conservatism, deregulation, and the combination of militarism and national chauvinism stoked popular desires for what Susan Jeffords critiqued as “the remasculinization of America.” It became clear by the 1980s that the gains won by democratic and egalitarian struggles of the 1930s and 1960s had provoked powerful reactionary counternarratives that required identification and analysis. Raymond Williams explains that the defeats suffered by the social movements of the 1960s forced many scholars to confront the discovery in ourselves, and in our relations with others, that we have been effectively incorporated into the deepest structures of this now dying order than it was ever, while it was strong, our habit to think or even suspect. Many of those, even, who had most clearly distanced themselves from it, who had tried to live differently and to imagine differently, and had in part succeeded, find now that unknown fibres, unsuspected neural connections, exert their pressures, report their limits, and can be broken, of course painfully only by rigorous and relentless self-examination and new relationships.

Post-structuralism, interpretive ethnography, deconstruction, feminist studies, queer studies, disability studies, postcolonial studies, and many other methods and fields of study emerged in part to examine and explain the power of the deep resistance to change that confounded social movements in the past. The swing of the political pendulum to the right, however, also provoked reactions and responses of a different sort. From the nuclear freeze movement to the environmental justice movement, from feminist “take back the night” campaigns to queer of color mobilizations, from activism in support of AIDS victims to campaigns against apartheid, new social movements contested the dominant narrative of national culture. The Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992, the Zapatista uprising in 1994, the coalition that came together to protest the meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999, the massive global protests against the Iraq War in 2003, and the massive demonstrations by immigrants rights activists in 2006 helped create the climate that led to new emphases in American studies revolving around transnationalism, postcolonialism, queer theory, necropolitics, indigeneity, and disability studies. Over the past two decades, American studies has increasingly become a hospitable site for situated knowledges and grounded optics on power that originally developed among aggrieved groups but then became partly institutionalized in ethnic studies, feminist studies, and queer studies.

Research and social outreach initiatives by scholars in American studies have made the field a locus inside credentialed campus academies that nonetheless maintains strong links to alternative academies in communities. Scholars as-
associated with American studies have done scholarly and civic work through acts of accompaniment with (among others) hemispheric antifeminicide activists; low-wage, limited-English-speaking immigrant women workers; Black and Latino anti-AIDS projects; Native American water rights activists; graffiti writers; gang members; families of inmates and ex-offenders; environmental justice groups; homeless activists; fair housing and fair lending advocates; and people displaced and dispossessed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The American Studies Association’s Community Partnership Grant Program has helped civic-minded scholars fashion programs offering language, literacy, and computer-training classes to new immigrants, to produce a theatrical and photographic exhibition about the work of women leaders in environmental justice campaigns in impoverished communities, and to connect scholars and community youth in the shared work of uncovering, preserving, and increasing knowledge about the diverse culture of inner-city neighborhoods. American studies is thus uniquely positioned to promote democratic discussions and deliberations about the causes and consequences of the problems of the present, to serve as one of the sites where the capacity for democratic renewal can be developed and deepened.

**How Does the Work You Do Speak for You—and for Others?**

At every stage, American studies scholarship has been shaped by both residual and emergent elements, by the ways in which crises connect constituencies that have long memories of unresolved past grievances with emergent polities thrown forth by shake-ups in social relations and social identities. No part of the past ever disappears completely, yet remnants of the past never suffice to solve the problems of the present. When scholars in American studies *accompany* each other down the road, *all parts of the past are present* including the New Deal, the Cold War, the antiwar and civil rights movements, the revanchism of the 1980s and 1990s, new social movements and neoliberalism. Similarly, scholarly paradigms including myth-image-symbol, critical social science, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies are all here at once in diverse recombinant formations. The ways in which ungainly, overlapping, and intersectional perspectives can come together in a time of crisis can be great assets to both social movements and scholarship, but they can also serve as flashpoints for division and conflict.

Generational antagonisms can become especially divisive and destructive. Elsewhere we have warned about attacks by senior scholars on junior scholars, about the dangers of reducing serious intellectual and political disagreements to
generational antagonisms and allowing the affective appeals of loss, mourning, and nostalgia to frame differences of opinion across generations as discourtesies or to misrepresent argumentative multiplicities as bad manners. Yet we have also argued that the neoliberal valorization of new products and new brands can lead younger critics of previous paradigms to discard them too casually in hopes of establishing their own arguments and themselves as a kind of superior brand. These tensions are not merely manifestations of oedipal or generational differences. They have important relations to the presence of absence of social movements. It is not easy to criticize a society while living with its contradictions. Robyn Wiegman explains that when participants in social movements suffer defeats—as most do—they develop desires for distance from the forms of struggle that seem to have failed. Because they long to be free and because the available forms of struggle have thus far not brought freedom, participants can come to desire a newer and purer kind of politics, one uncontaminated by the past. Although understandable as desire, the practices that flow from this distancing help destroy the very institutions and communities most needed by aggrieved people. The past is not so easily dismissed simply through disavowal. Of course, criticism of outworn patterns and practices is always useful and necessary. Social movements fail if they do not realize how yesterday’s solutions can become today’s problems. But political movements are doomed if they attack only their own pasts, if their adherents wage war against friendly and safe internal enemies without advancing the cause of social justice in society at large. As Malcolm X once remarked in exasperation, looking back at the sectarian infighting he experienced earlier in life, “We thought we were being militant, but we were only being dogmatic.”

Nearly every approach that enables something inhibits something else. Desires to connect scholarship in the academy to the experiences of people outside can be particularly nettling sources of disagreement. Connecting teaching and research to the work of large social movement organizations can do important work in deepening the capacity for democratic deliberation and decision making in society at large while infusing scholarly work with insights and ideas relevant to the urgent problems that large numbers of people face. These connections, however, can also lead scholars to absorb and accept the hegemonic and heteronormative models of identity, association, and affiliation that so often pervade social movement groups. Miranda Joseph has wisely warned against the romance of community that can easily morph into communitarian and even totalitarian constraints on individual and collective praxis. The trope of community can enable opportunists to disguise self-interest as service and solidarity. It can privilege heteronormative forms of association and affiliation
at the expense of what Nayan Shah describes as queer sociality and “stranger intimacy.” Yet disidentification and disavowal of collectivities entail problems of their own. It may become tempting to savor the counterhegemonic possibilities of involvement with small groups of like-minded individuals who share the same identities, experiences, and values. These sites can be powerful sources of solidarity and support, places where working together builds reciprocal relations of care and concern. Yet the solidarities of sameness on which small groups depend also make them susceptible to becoming cliques made up of insiders who bond together mainly through shared aversion to those they exclude. They run the risk of replicating neoliberalism’s privileging of private solutions to public problems. Friendship can serve as one valuable model of accompaniment. Yet as Francesca Polletta shows in her research on social movements of the 1960s, groups based primarily on the friendship model find it difficult to expand beyond their original members, and their aversion to formal rules allow informal and status hierarchies to remain beyond criticism and impregnable to challenge.

Just as paradigms of generational succession turn potentially productive conversations into destructive oppositions, frameworks of unbridled optimism versus paralyzing pessimism impose a Manichaean binary on dialectical relationships. In an age of displacement, dispossession, and disciplinary subordination, any acknowledgment of popular agency can seem to some like dangerously uncritical celebration of—and ultimately collaboration with—neoliberal regimes of racialized security and austerity. This sensibility rooted in a legitimate desire to avoid underestimating centralized power and state violence can, however, also overestimate it—unwittingly confusing power’s most grandiose stories about itself with the actual social relations of society. Such a position can discourage and disarm the very populations that most need to fight back. Yet unwarranted pessimism cannot be countered effectively by an equally unwarranted optimism. Decades of defeat and the paucity of short-term victories may lead some scholars to see any sign of agency as evidence of effective political resistance and transformation, to refuse to be critical of social movements because they seem to be the only visible marker on which hopes for change might rest.

At a time when American studies itself is certain to come under attack, these tensions can be either productive provocations for new and better work or sources of destructive internal divisions and spats that poison the well from which we all have to drink. Through acts of engagement and accompaniment, American studies can become one of many sites in US society where a collective capacity for democratic deliberation and decision making can be nurtured and
sustained. In the process of attempting to build a better society, this work can also lead to better scholarship because its research objects and research questions emerge out of the actual contradictions of social life. Social engagement requires scholars to vet their ideas widely among large groups of people with very different experiences, to appraise, verify, or check for accuracy, authenticity, and validity. It offers an opportunity to connect work inside class-bound, monolingual, and nationalist educational institutions to more cosmopolitan and critical conversations among people who feel compelled to develop new ways of knowing and new ways of being in order to resist the unlivable destinies that neoliberal society parcels out to them. In an era when the hegemony of market space and market time threatens to engulf all activities, it keeps the door open for new and better forms of association, affiliation, and understanding.

Archbishop Romero developed his ideas about accompaniment in the midst of the profound political, personal, and pedagogical transformation that working alongside peasants provided him. For most of his life he was a conservative cleric who defended the privileges of the wealthy and feared social upheaval. Yet he changed when he decided that his ministry compelled him to accompany the poor as they walked through life. By traveling the road with them, he came to see things differently. Peasants shared their experiences with Romero and asked him to stand up for them. His willingness to listen led to a great change. “I’ve often been accused of consulting with too many people,” he said, “but that’s the nicest thing anyone could accuse me of, and I don’t intend to mend my ways.” Listening to the peasants enabled Romero to see things differently. Accompanying them in their struggles transformed him completely. He explained to his friend Father Cesar Jerez that it was as if a piece of charcoal had been lit inside him. Charcoal can be difficult to light. It can fail to catch fire several times before it ignites. Even when lit, it is not always evident that it still burns. Yet once it has been kindled, “you don’t have to blow on it much to get it flame up again,” Romero observed.

There are many things we cannot do as scholars inside American studies. The years ahead will be difficult for us and even more difficult for others. The indignities, injustices, and indecent social conditions of our time will not change without a fight. Yet the practice of accompaniment informed by konesans and balans, a shift in emphasis—away from the CV and the simulacrum to the struggle—can make a difference. Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something. Our work can be like igniting a piece of charcoal. It will be a slow, painstaking, difficult, and often frustrating endeavor. But once the charcoal is lit, it will last for a long time, burn hot, spread warmth, shed light, and flare up powerfully at the slightest breeze.
Notes
12. This argument is developed at greater length in Barbara Tomlinson, *Feminism and Affect at the Scene of Argument: Beyond the Trap of the Angry Feminist* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).
14. We thank Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd for the brilliantly generative and characteristically principled discussion of accompaniment in their joint autobiography *Stepping Stones* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).
16. Ibid., 248–49.
17. Ibid., 248.
18. Ibid., 272.
19. Although indebted to Archbishop Romero’s formulation and deeply respectful of it, we do not presume that our projects are the same. We do believe that Romero’s ideas can be transposed to a different setting with salutary results.
21. We thank Mario Garcia for teaching us the importance of this phrase, which comes from Luis Leal.
22. We thank Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, Susan McClary, and Rob Walser for rich dialogues over the years about music that inform this part of our argument.
25. Karen McCarthy Brown, “Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study,” in *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers*, ed. Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1–26. We are grateful to Claudine Michel for all the guidance and instruction she has given us on the moral, spiritual, and epistemological significance of vodou, and we recommend her work to all readers. As with our use of accompaniment, however, we recognize that the situations facing students and scholars of American studies are far different from those confronting peasants in Haiti, that in some ways we have the luxury of exploring their ideas because their oppression creates privileges for us. But we engage with the concepts of konesans and balans as acts of accompaniment, of a move that might help turn poison into medicine.


31. There are interesting parallels between the kinds of mood management and mental activity required of academics and the advice that thoughtful athletes offer about their endeavors. See, for example, Ken Dryden, *The Game* (New York: Times Books, 1983); and Dirk Hayhurst, *The Bullpen Gospels: Major League Dreams of a Minor League Veteran* (New York: Citadel, 2010).


36. For a particular kind of attack mode aimed at feminists, see the evidence, analysis, and arguments in Tomlinson, *Feminism and Affect at the Scene of Argument*, especially pages 87–113.


38. This line comes from the character Cedric Daniels played by Lance Reddick in the television series *The Wire*.


42. Williams, *Politics of Modernism*, 98.


45. The work of our late (and deeply missed) colleague Clyde Woods was exemplary in this regard. See the special issue of the *American Quarterly* that he edited, “In the Wake of Hurricane Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions.” See also “Community Partnership and Grant Program Existing Projects,” www.theasa.net/prizes_and_grants/cpp/cpp_exiting_projects/.


54. Ibid., 159.