

however, the 'ecological Indian' is by now an iconic figure, who raises his teepee not only in successful revisionist westerns like *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Pocahontas*, but also in much post-1968 'alternative' discourse. By contrast, Ingram himself sympathises with a left-leaning 'social ecology' which has never been and probably never will be co-opted by Hollywood. The proposition that some varieties of radical ecology tacitly collude with the entertainment industry in perpetuating uncritical myths that retard rather than advance real environmental understanding is a provocative notion bound to cause some controversy, but it is surely one that deserves to be taken seriously.

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George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*. Critical American Studies Series, George Lipsitz, series editor. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001. 384 pages; £16.50, paper (ISBN: 0-8166-3949-3).

Is it relevant to talk about a nationally defined discipline like American studies in today's transnational – even post-national – world? George Lipsitz, Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego, and Director of the Thurgood Marshall Institute, raises this question in his book *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*, the first in the 'Critical American Studies Series' from the University of Minnesota Press. More specifically, Lipsitz asks how 'nationally inflicted understandings of citizenship, race, class, gender, and sexuality change when they become international, transnational, and national all at the same time?' (8). Or to put it succinctly, today, how can we be sure that we are talking about the same thing when we talk to each other about the United States or American studies?

Lipsitz covers two aspects of American studies as it can be understood primarily in a US context. First, he presents an historical overview of how the academic field has been transformed by social movements from the 1930s until the present. Secondly, and more importantly, the book offers a rendition of how an academic discipline defined by its national scope has faced a rapidly changing world where transnational and cross-cultural understanding has come to transform the various forms of knowledge that make up critical inquiry. Lipsitz is thus not only concerned with the past of American studies and how that past has shaped the subject; he also engages the crucial question of how today's globally initiated social, ideological, and cultural agendas will shape the future of what we now know as the United States. Consequently, the book offers both a study of an academic subject – American studies – and a broader discussion of the limits and possibilities that this subject can, and to some degree must, exist within, namely the United States as a national construct.

Lipsitz identifies two co-existing types of American studies. First, there is the institutional, canonized form of American studies which relies on established methodological practices and intellectual paradigms, like myth-symbol-image, anthropology,

social history and cultural studies. These are, according to Lipsitz, 'tied to connections between culture and place that may no longer be operative' (27), although they can still offer essential ways of understanding culture in the United States. Secondly, there is what Lipsitz calls the 'other American studies,' which is made up of 'organic grassroots theorizing about culture and power that has informed cultural practice, social movements, and academic work for many years.' This 'other American studies' can, according to Lipsitz, offer ways of understanding the displacement, frustration, anxiety and instability that a rapidly changing technological, economic, and political world produces, that may not be accessible to us as scholars and critics if we don't seize the moment of 'unpredictable creativity,' as David W. Noble has called it (28). Far from a lamentation over how social and political developments have fragmented what was once understood to be a coherent discipline, Lipsitz's book is thus a probing analysis of the possibilities that a 'crisis' can offer. Indeed, the starting point for the discussion is the observation that 'yesterday's solutions can become today's problem' (56). With this unsettling and stimulating premise, the author sets out to re-define not only the perimeters of American studies, but also the underlying presumptions that make up the foundation for the discipline.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part relates the radical social movements of the 1930s and the 1960s and the conservative refashioning of culture and politics in the 1980s to American studies as an academic field. This part of the study is indebted to Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 1996), a book that might be an accompanying piece to *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*, something which Lipsitz also acknowledges. The historical exposé not only gives the necessary overview for the rest of the book, but it also relates the migrating qualities of American national identity in the 20th century to the changing phases of American studies from its conception in the 1940s to today's diverse sets of practices and ideological positions known as cultural studies.

Lipsitz argues that 'national knowledge' must be understood in global terms. Indeed, globalization, or, perhaps more specifically, the intersection between geography and identity, is at the core of Lipsitz's investigation. When a pair of Nike Air Jordan athletic shoes are sold at a retail price of \$ 90, but cost \$ 1.20 to manufacture, and the Indonesian woman doing the actual labor would have to work 60,000 years in order to earn as much as Michael Jordan does in one year from his Nike endorsement, we cannot even begin to relate to US commercial culture without, at least in some fashion, taking the global economical dimension into account. American studies, then, by default, has gone global. If American studies is in danger, it is clearly not from the lack of intellectual development or ability to adapt to new circumstances, something to which Lipsitz's own study is a testament.

The second part of Lipsitz's book focuses particularly on the relation between ethnic studies and American studies. Here, Lipsitz uses ethnic studies as the starting point for a discussion of the epistemological ground from which inquiries into relations between culture, power, and *social* identities – rather than *national* identities – can be

conducted. In other words, this section moves from the historical perspective on American studies to the ideological dimension of American studies after the 1980s. Lipsitz background as a labor historian and radical activist colors this section (and indeed the whole book), as he uses examples derived from popular music, poster art and movies in separate chapters. His analyses encompass everything from hip-hop and pokemon cards to IMF and World Bank policies towards progressive grassroots efforts in Jamaica. This span highlights both his rhetorical strategies and his zeal to reveal new perspectives on both cultural and social issues. When Lipsitz writes in his introduction that '[p]owerful corporations try to convince us that our only important identities are as individual consumers, not as members of cultural communities' (xviii), we know that this is not going to be a conventional scholarly study of cultural politics, but a *tour de force* that wants to call attention to connections between culture and politics.

In the third part, Lipsitz looks to what might come of today's 'new social movements' (his definition is 'community-based coalitions that emphasize democratic participation and address issues of culture, identity, and the environment' [214]) and how they will have an impact on tomorrow's American studies. If the events of Seattle, Milan, and Gothenburg indicate a new global social agenda that questions notions of transnational economies, while at the same time embracing technological and ideological developments that transgress national boundaries, then American studies as a subject primarily concerned with the historical, political, and cultural construction of the United States of America will either render itself obsolete in relation to these new social movements or develop into a trans-academic field that is far removed from both myth and symbol, social rights struggles, and inquiries into the relationship between culture and power. The world no longer allows us the luxury, Lipsitz writes, 'of scholarship that [...] is like Scandinavian cooking – something "passed down from generation to generation for no apparent reason"' (228).¹⁰

Lipsitz can at times be amusingly flippant in his choice of metaphor and example (the final chapter is called 'Don't cry for me, Ike and Tina,' referring to the role of popular music in the formation of a local St. Louis identity), but more often than not he is deliberately confrontational, as when commenting that NRA chairman Charlton Heston's 'description of his progun politics as a 'holy war' suggests that he failed to grasp the meaning of at least one of the commandments that he brought down from the mountaintop while portraying Moses in the 1956 film *The Ten Commandments*' (237). Lipsitz uses this many-layered image to show how lines between politics, entertainment, and commerce have become blurred, thus underscoring the argument that cultural images can be used to highlight important issues of history and ideology. Indeed, Lipsitz never seeks a neutral position in the debate. His home is clearly in the more radical camp of Academia. Lipsitz fiercely attacks the neo-conservative 'countersubversive' forces that try to de-politicize American studies. He argues for a rein-

10. Lipsitz paraphrases Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

stated Keynesian fiscal policy. He advocates an activist scholarly stance, provokingly stating that 'ethnic studies is doing very well, ethnic people are faring very badly' (118). A reader not inclined to side with Lipsitz on political matters will probably find it hard to stomach his more eloquent tirades. In positioning himself aggressively thus, Lipsitz will inevitably fail to reach the readership that most deserves a book like this, namely his adversaries or rather those who Lipsitz refers to as '[n]eoliberal intellectuals and other ruling-class mythmakers' (289). Nevertheless, at his best, Lipsitz cuts through the jargon and presents a thorough analysis of the legacy of the ideologically motivated budgetary and structural actions that have affected American studies over the past decades, providing numbers and statistics to support his observation that the battles fought over culture and education in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States 'resonate with the struggles over resources operative in society at large' (113). At times, however, for someone who tends to agree with the author's bottom line on most issues, reading *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* becomes an act of confirmation rather than of revelation, which is not necessarily what you would ask of a book.

Politics aside (a move that Lipsitz would refute, by the way), one major issue remains. American studies is not and has not been for a long time a domestic US academic discipline, and the failure to take this into account weakens Lipsitz's arguments for a new turn in the development of the field. When Lipsitz argues that American studies must seek global approaches in order to remain a relevant field of study, he seems to regard only work being done in the United States. Surely, that is a limited outlook, if anything, for a truly transnational type of American studies cannot only be defined by its *receiving* end, so to speak. In other words, a transnational American studies can also be conducted from a transnational *production* end, that is by Americanists who are not by birth, breed, education or cultural identification from the United States or working within a US context, for that matter. Whereas the different historical and even ideological brands of American studies, as they have been conducted in the United States, have sometimes been blind to transnational perspectives, this is arguably not so with most strains of American studies as they have developed in other countries over time. One case in point would be the Scandinavian contributions to the field, where much work has been conducted relating Nordic national, social, and cultural constructs and positions to efforts being done in American studies 'proper,' both at home and abroad. Instead, we, who at least to some extent are transnational Americanists by default, at times run the risk of becoming Americanized – for lack of a better term – in our outlook and practice as scholars and teachers. From our vantage point, American studies, then, already is a transnational discipline, and Lipsitz's book can remind us that we must maintain our position.