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Roundtable

PROFESSOR AMY KAPLAN: A TRIBUTE

The American studies community was left reeling after learning of Amy Kaplan's passing a year ago in the summer of 2020. The essays in this roundtable testify not only to Kaplan's enormous contributions to American studies scholarship, but also to her inspirational mentorship and friendship to scholars and students across the world. We are grateful to each of our contributors, Rafael Walker, Alex Lubin, Mark Storey, and Poulomi Saha, for sharing their reflections in challenging circumstances, and we offer to Kaplan's family and friends, and the American studies community, our condolences for this immense loss.

Co-associate editors

ZALFA FEGHALI
AND
BEN OFFILER

In the wake of Amy Kaplan's much-mourned passing, the Internet was flooded with heartfelt remembrances, not only in the usual places, such as social-media platforms and e-mails, but also in an improvised Zoom-hosted memorial co-convened by Penn English – Amy's professional home for the past fifteen years – and the annual conference of the Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists. As someone who held Amy in the highest regard, I was gratified and moved to witness this outpouring, even if disappointed that a pandemic had robbed me and others of the chance to exchange the hugs and other physical comforts that are our due after such losses. Yet the most striking aspect of these remembrances was neither their warmth nor their volume; it was the remarkable consistency among the portraits that they painted. How often do we find ourselves reading through vignettes of the deceased that confound us either because they vary so widely from one to the next or because, mired in clichés, they eulogize the person to the point of abstraction? This was not so in Amy's case. Testifying to the indelibility of the mark she left, Amy's mourners constructed vivid pictures of her that did exactly what such memorial sketches are intended to do – namely keep the departed loved one alive in the mind. The precision and concreteness of these sketches are, I think,

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attributable directly to the qualities for which we all remember Amy most – her trenchancy and intellectual creativity.

These features of Amy were introduced to me well before their possessor was. In the course of research for my undergraduate honors thesis on Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, I naturally came across Amy's classic first book, *The Social Construction of American Realism* – a book now more than three decades old yet still among the top three studies of the heyday of the realist movement in the US. I recall that, on picking up the paperback edition initially, I was spectacularly unimpressed. It is a slim volume that, with the exception of the uninspiring black-and-white photograph adorning its cover, is overspread by a hue of yellow that calls to mind the tormenting wallpaper in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's bizarre short story. Never did the hackneyed admonition against judging books by their covers better apply. Methodically and understatedly, Amy's book upended assumptions about American literature that had endured across roughly three generations of critics, from Henry James to Richard Chase, who had portrayed literary realism as a mode incompatible with the American scene. After cogently and coolheadedly refuting "the romance thesis" – the prevailing view that romance, not realism, was the American way – she also repudiates the tendency of many of her precursors to denigrate realism as imaginatively impoverished or politically naive. "Realists" – Amy asserts in her characteristically matter-of-fact fashion – "do more than passively record the world outside; they actively create and criticize the meanings, representations, and ideologies of their own changing culture."[1] Demonstrating this claim through penetrating readings of novels by William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, and Theodore Dreiser, Amy's study proved instrumental in restoring interest in American literary realism, and I am convinced that, without her intervention, that period probably still would be languishing in a condition of neglect that it never deserved in the first place.

It wasn't long after completing my honors thesis that I would come to learn that the quiet majesty of this important book belonged in equal measure to its author. I spent the better part of the fall semester of my final year of college applying to PhD programs, and Penn was high on my list. The tenor of this tribute might lead one to suspect that it was Amy who sparked my interest in that program, but real life rarely lends itself to such tidy narration (yet another insight from Amy's book on realism). In fact, I owed my interest initially to the friendly urgings of a medievalist professor of mine who recently had graduated from the program. While I had read and admired Amy's

[1] Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 7.

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work, I had no idea *where* she worked, too callow then for the impulse I now have to look up every academic I hear mentioned. However, it was she who in great measure sustained my interest in Penn. And here is where the storytelling resumes its tidiness: it was none other than her voice that I heard in the voicemail notifying me that I had been admitted to the program! In this respect, I wasn't special; as graduate chair, she called everyone admitted. But I didn't let that inconvenient little fact interfere with my delusion that *the* Amy Kaplan had singled me out as her protégé, the heir apparent to the stewardship of American realism. (There were, in fact, about four others in the admitted cohort who had plans to work with Amy.) After I had arrived in Philadelphia, and the time of our meeting drew nearer, my nerves were nigh ungovernable. Consultations with people vaguely acquainted with Amy, the scientific precision of her prose, our short phone call about my offer – all these hints had left me skeptical of finding in Amy the gushing, warm-and-fuzzy type, and I was perfectly fine with that (I always had been suspicious of such teachers anyway). Nonetheless, I was anxious for us to click.

I am not sure, exactly, what I expected, but there is no doubt that it wasn't the woman I met. On arriving at the house where we all were to be welcomed and fed, we were greeted by Amy, who was discernibly glad to meet us but no less daunted than we were by the immense social demands and sheer artificiality of the occasion. The evening grew increasingly more relaxed as the wine flowed, and one could detect Amy's great relief at being able to chat with people if not individually, then at least in smaller groups. It was amusing to watch her demurely resist the urge to roll her eyes over the slight flexing that occurred as many of us ostentatiously prated on about the other elite departments that had admitted us. Despite its faint aura of awkwardness, that evening, paradoxically, put me at ease, having humanized this personage whom I had so long lionized, while giving me a glimpse into her generosity. (I seriously doubt that, in her place, I would have been able to abide our braggadocio with such equanimity.) The next day was exceedingly more structured, for we were now getting down to brass tacks. Clearly, Amy was in her element, impressive both in her understanding of the program's and the department's nuts and bolts and in her inimitable efficiency in explaining it all. By the end of the trip, I was all but sold on Penn.

My next encounter with Amy introduced me to new and more profound facets of her. In my second year at Penn, I and all the other aspiring Americanists enrolled in Amy's Transnational Melville seminar. For anyone even vaguely familiar with Herman Melville, that title probably reads as oxymoronic. Who is more American than the author of the Great American Novel, *Moby-Dick*? This is one of the many examples of the expansiveness and daring of Amy's mind. As many readers are doubtless aware, Amy was an expert not only on American realism but also on empire studies, establishing credentials in the latter subject with the publication of *The Anarchy of*

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Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture and the collection that she coedited with Donald Pease, *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*. It is rare enough for a scholar to establish bona fides in two distinct areas, but it is rarer still for one to distinguish herself in both. While I knew entering Penn *that* Amy had done so, spending a semester observing her approach to thinking about Melville showed me *how*. To regard that classically American author as possessing a transnational dimension, Amy had to remove the thick lenses of critical commonplaces about Melville that had been handed down to her and examine Melville with fresh, independent vision. Once one is able to do that, Amy helped us to recognize, examples of Melville's transnational orientation start to proliferate wildly (the heterogeneity of the *Pequod*'s crew, for instance, or the proclamation at the beginning of his novel *White-Jacket*), and works that once seemed outliers in Melville's *oeuvre* begin to fall into line (e.g. *Clarel*, his 18,000-line epic poem about a pilgrimage to the Holy Land that most of us enrolled in Amy's seminar didn't even pretend to have read).

Although thoroughly convinced of Melville's transnational orientation, I did not leave the seminar any more enamored of him than I had been on entering it. I did, however, exit even more enamored of Amy's mind and with the certainty that I wanted her to help advise my dissertation. She was kind and charitable, from start to finish, and I mean that quite literally. Our arrangement began with an awkward solecism. In countless ways, I lacked the polish that virtually all my grad-school colleagues possessed. The first in my family to go to college (to say nothing of graduate school), a matriculant straight out of college into a PhD program that many enter having earned master's degrees from elite schools here and abroad, and the sole black person in my graduate cohort – I sometimes stumbled in navigating the complex social terrain of an Ivy League doctoral program, even if I was able to manage its academic demands. For example, believing it a given that Amy would serve on my dissertation committee, I approached her about it on a five-minute break during the seminar, my solicitation going something like, "Hey, Amy. Would you be on my diss committee?" I did not know enough then to be embarrassed by miscalculation, and Amy was too kind to make me feel my error, as many less kind luminaries surely would have done. She simply looked at me, concealing any bemusement she might have harbored, and explained gently that this would need to be a longer conversation, urging me to send her an e-mail to set up a time to discuss my ideas. Eventually, I got fully socialized, and such missteps became rarer, but, to the very end, she treated me with the utmost respect and forgave my foibles. I think, deep down, she recognized how alienating my first years were but never broached the subject for fear of embarrassing me. I appreciated her quiet but firm support; it was kindness in her way.

Her respect for me and my work was most vividly on display during the dissertation years and thereafter. The delight she felt when I had alighted upon a

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new idea or solved a new problem was palpable, whether we were discussing chapters in person or over e-mail. She encouraged the rigor, boldness, and precision of expression that she herself had modeled both as a scholar and as a teacher. I am reminded of one ostensibly unremarkable remark that she left on one of my drafts that bears this out so well. Next to a passage in my chapter on *Sister Carrie* that I had labored over and therefore was quite proud of, Amy simply wrote, "Too rhetorical." I couldn't even get upset, for I understood instantly the provenances of "Too rhetorical." The comment was at once an expression of Amy's impatience for expository language that isn't in the service of exposition and, in its economy, proof positive that she practiced what she preached, an indication that she would give you no nonsense and expected no nonsense from you. Those two words may well constitute the most Amy comment ever.

For me and so many Americanists who came out of Penn, Amy was a guiding star through this labyrinthine profession, teaching us, through example and exhortation, how to write, teach, and think. If mine have not, the remembrances of some of these other Americanists – which I share with their permission – should make her impact unmistakable. My friend and fellow Penn alum Emily Ogden, for instance, described Amy as "a shining example of what an intellectual, a scholar, and a mentor can be." Excerpts from other fellow alums and students of Amy's tell a similar tale. In an extremely affecting tribute to Amy, Thomas Dichter counts it "a privilege to know her as a mentor and a role model and a friend," fondly remembering the lessons that she imparted about "being brave and speaking the truth in plain terms."[2] Noting Amy's great skepticism about drawn-out sentimentality – indeed, she'd probably object to my lengthy, sometimes sappy tribute – Phillip Maciak remembers her as "a brilliant, unsparing, unindulgent reader," yet as someone who was "unequivocally supportive"[3] of him at a time in his life when he nobly chose to prioritize family above profession.

We as a field and many of us as individuals have incurred a great loss in the passing of Amy Kaplan. To read her final major scholarly contribution, *Our American Israel: The Story of an Entangled Alliance* (2018), is to feel the cosmic injustice of a mind taken in its prime, all the potential contributions she might have made tantalizing us like a phantom limb. Still, even though her life was cut short, she has left the world far better than she found it. To that fact, I am walking testament.

Baruch College, City University of New York RAFAEL WALKER

[2] See https://twitter.com/tdichter/status/1289694149894078464.
[3] See https://twitter.com/pjmaciak/status/1289211311386062848.

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Amy Kaplan leaves a significant legacy as scholar and mentor. I had the honor of developing a friendship with Amy beginning in the early 2000s, when the two of us found each other at poorly attended conference sessions organized around the question of Palestine, the US "special relationship" to Israel, and the politics of academic boycotts. While Amy and I often sat next to each other in these sessions, early on, we were there for slightly different reasons. I was raised in a family that had broken with Zionism in the 1980s, which meant that I had no emotional connection to Israel and had already encountered the vitriol that comes with Palestine solidarity. Amy, on the other hand, had a moral and intellectual commitment to justice for Palestine, but like many Jewish Americans she had not encountered many Jews who were willing to publicly challenge Israel's policies and Zionism in general and she felt an affective connection to Israel. Although she fully believed that Israeli occupation was unjust, and recognized Palestinian human rights, she had been raised in a world in which Zionism was just part of common sense. She frequently joked about how appalled some of her relatives would be if they knew of her participation in discussions focussed on boycotting Israel.

But Amy was always there, eager to learn, and willing to push for deeper analysis. Over time, as the American Studies Association increasingly began to interrogate the question of Palestine and the entanglements of US imperialism with Israeli settler colonialism, Amy was a supportive ally – to me especially. Amy read, offered criticism on, and always improved everything I ever published about the academic boycott movement. More importantly, I think that Amy implicitly understood how her singular analysis of the cultures of US imperialism logically flowed to an analysis of the role of Israel as a "special friend" to US empire, that confronting the cultures of US imperialism meant confronting Israeli settler colonialism.

Coming to terms with the question of Palestine was not just about Amy's ambivalence as a Jewish American who had been raised in the context of Zionist common sense, but was also about confronting the uncanny similarities between the cultures of US imperialism – a scholarly subject for which she was, in my view, *the* guiding light – and Israeli exceptionalism. Although Amy was keenly aware of America's embrace of itself as "God's chosen Israel" in the making of its national narrative, the events of 9/11, and the US rhetoric of being a nation that is both exceptional and, like Israel, exceptionally vulnerable, clarified the connection between US imperial culture and Israel. If Amy had brilliantly analyzed how Perry Miller "discovered" America while unloading barrels of oil in the Congo, in her essay "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," we might say that Amy "discovered" the American–Israel

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"special relationship" by thinking through the keywords of America's War on Terror.[1]

In her 2003 presidential address to the American Studies Association, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today," Kaplan brilliantly identified how the War on Terror lexicon was rooted to the uncanny legacy of US overseas empire and domestic settler colonialism. In this address and subsequent writing, Amy focussed on keywords such as "ground zero" and "homeland," as well as the legal black hole of Guantánamo Bay.[2] Kaplan argued that the rhetorical practice of the US War on Terror was based in a culture of empire that renarrated US acts of imperial and colonial aggression in order to emphasize the precarity and vulnerability of the United States. The term "ground zero," for example, invokes the US use of the atom bomb in Japan as well as the location of the 9/11 terrorist attack on lower Manhattan. Similarly, the post-9/11 invocation of the term "homeland" invokes legacies of displacement, exile, and refuge at the same time that it invokes "blood and soil" mythmaking about racial territory. Guantánamo Bay's status as a legal black hole mirrors its status as "domestic in a foreign sense" as defined by US colonial insular cases. As Kaplan worked through the etymology of War on Terror mythmaking, she increasingly came to see how American imperial culture was made meaningful via Israel, that imaging what the American "homeland" meant required thinking about Israeli narratives of a homeland for Jews. Protecting the homeland, as in "homeland security," during the War on Terror has increasingly relied on using Israeli counterinsurgency tactics as well as viewing the United States as a homeland, like Israel, that understands itself as both exceptional and exceptionally vulnerable.

In addition to her groundbreaking analysis of War on Terror mythmaking, Amy's embrace of international and transnational American studies opened up an avenue to a different sort of analysis of US empire than the one she initially blazed. Amy was one of the founding board members of the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at the American University of Beirut, a center whose location meant that it could not help but center an analysis of the US–Israel "special relationship" at the core of American studies.[3] CASAR held biannual American studies meetings which were

[1] Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds. *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 1993, 3–21.

[2] Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 17, 2003," *American Quarterly*, 56, 1 (March 2004), 1–18; and Kaplan, "Where Is Guantanamo?", *American Quarterly*, 57, 3 (Sept. 2005), 831–58.

[3] I describe CASAR's history in the context of international American Studies in Alex Lubin, "American Studies, the Middle East, and the Question of Palestine," *American Quarterly*, 68, 1 (March 2016), 1–21.

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some of the most diverse, in terms of countries represented, of any American studies conference in the world. Amy valued the CASAR conferences, she told me, because at no other conference could she hear what students and scholars from MENA, including places like Iran, thought about the United States and American studies as a discipline. At the 2011 international conference, attendees took a field trip to the south of Lebanon, and visited Hezbollah's "resistance" museum and the Khyam Prison, the site of atrocities committed by Israel during its occupation of Lebanon. Experiences such as this were jarring in and of themselves, but also imposed a comparison between Israeli aggression in Lebanon and US aggression during the War on Terror.

International experiences like the CASAR conferences, or conferences she attended in Jerusalem on Herman Melville, contributed to Amy's evolving analysis of imperial culture, settler colonialism, and the US–Israel "special relationship." As she increasingly turned her analytical attention to the US cultural embrace of Israel, she began to write *Our American Israel: The History of an Entangled Relationship*, a book that lies in the trajectory of Kaplan's previous work, "Manifest Domesticity," *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, and *Cultures of United States Imperialism*.[4]

Considering the relationship between the United States and Israel in the context of the global War on Terror became a means for Amy to elaborate intellectual constructions she began in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*. I suspect she began to feel the entanglements between Israel and the United States as uncanny – and here I intentionally invoke the ways Amy brilliantly marshaled Freud's notion of the uncanny to deconstruct War on Terror mythmaking and etymology. *Our American Israel*, Amy's final monograph, is about "the strangeness of an affinity that has come to be seen as self-evident." The book represents a personal and scholarly reckoning with the "absent presence" of settler colonialism in cultures of Israeli and US exceptionalism.[5]

Our American Israel is Amy's brilliant attempt to come to terms with the uncanny location of Israel in America and vice versa. She offers a reading that views "America in the mirror of Israel." Building on analysis developed

[4] Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature*, 70, 3 (Sept. 1998), 581–606; Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2005; and Kaplan, *Our American Israel: The Story of an Entangled Alliance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2018.

[5] Said used the term "absent present" to identify how Palestinians have been erased not only from Israel, via the present absentee law, but also from Western liberalism as a ghostly presence. See Edward Said, "Permission to Narrate," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 13, 3 (1984), 27–48. Kaplan drew inspiration from Said to think about ways that US imperialism was shaped by its own "absent presence," referring to ways settler colonialism and imperialism haunted the making of American culture.

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by Hilton Obenzinger, Melani McAlister, Bassam Raad, Keith Feldman, and others, Amy's argument draws on new sources and brilliant readings to demonstrate that the US–Israel relationship, despite seeming timeless, has undergone significant transformation since Israel's 1948 founding.[6]

The book is a historical overview of changing "entanglements" that have defined the US–Israel relationship since World War II, and of "the cultural alchemy that turned a religious state into an American interest." Kaplan begins her analysis with a focus on the Anglo-American Commission established to study the question of Palestine prior to the declaration of Israeli "independence." She finds within the commission ambivalence on the part of British and American Jewish members about the implications of an Israeli state, as well as attempts by some to Americanize Israel as a means to convince US policymakers to endorse Israeli statehood. Israel's status in American culture as a western frontier in an otherwise "savage" landscape was undermined by Israeli settler colonial aggression during the 1967 war. Following the occupation of Palestine's West Bank and Gaza, American culture presented Israel as a perpetually vulnerable nation in a "bad" neighborhood. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon once again undermined US consensus about Israeli vulnerability, and so the narrative of Israeli nationalism in the US transformed yet again, to one focussed on Israel as a "strategic asset," while groups like the Anti-Defamation League increasingly targeted criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic. By the 1980s, the Holocaust emerged prominently in US popular discourse, and "never-again" imagery, along with increasing evangelical Christian support for Zionism, shaped the US bond with Israel. Following 11 September 2001, the United States launched a War on Terror it regularly understands as a defense of "homeland" similar to Israel's perpetual fight against Arab/Muslim countries.

Amy concludes *Our American Israel* by laying bare the stakes of her constructions.

"Looking beyond romantic reflections of the past," she writes, beyond "promised lands, chosen peoples, frontier pioneers, wars of independence … would enable us to see the darker shadows of shared exceptionalism: the fusion of moral value with military force, the defiance of international law, the rejection of refugees and immigrants in countries that were once known as havens."[7]

[6] There are several pathbreaking analyses of the cultural dimensions of the US–Israel special relationship. See, for example, Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2000; Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2005; and Keith P. Feldman, *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2017.

[7] Kaplan, *Our American Israel*, p. 279

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Drawing on new archives and Amy's singular ability to deconstruct cultural scripts, *Our American Israel* is most generatively read in dialogue with Amy's previous work on US imperial culture and the uncanniness of colonial formations.

Amy taught us much about how to be a scholar and about how to think through the complex meanings of cultural forms; but even more, she modeled what a mentor and teacher can be. Amy was also a rigorous interlocutor and generous colleague whose criticism was serious though it was always delivered with kindness. I will miss her example, as well as her brilliant scholarship and company.

Penn State University ALEX LUBIN

Two particular essays of Amy Kaplan's, both published in the 1990s, are emblematic of the transformative and lasting importance of her work. "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture" appeared in the early 1990s as the opening salvo for *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993),[1] that seminal collection she co-edited with Donald Pease. The other, "Manifest Domesticity," was published in *American Literature* towards the other end of the 1990s,[2] and won the journal's Norman Foerster Prize in 1998. They both have a claim to be called classics, and certainly belong in any account of the game-changing "transnational turn" of that period. But taken together, they also demonstrate the scales of conceptual organization that Kaplan was so deftly and influentially able to fuse: from a worldly reimagining of America's imperial imbrications, back through the imaginaries it was then more commonly organized by – the nation-state, most obviously – to the intimacies of the domestic household and the gendered and racialized bodies that occupied it. From empire to body and back again: each not simply nested within the other, but systemically inextricable from one another.

Much has been said about the paradigm shift that *Cultures of United States Imperialism* inaugurated in the field, yet Kaplan's own introductory essay is right to acknowledge its somewhat belated timing: 1993 was already a long way from the 1950s, and Kaplan cites William Appleman Williams and the historians of the Wisconsin school who had previously called out American

[1] Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 3–21.

[2] Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature*, 70, 3 (1998), 581–606.

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studies' liberalizing complicity in Cold War geopolitics. Kaplan and Pease's book was influential at least in part because its central insistence that US imperialism is integral to the study of American culture (and American culture integral to the study of US imperialism) served to coalesce a point that should have been obvious all along. Which is why "Manifest Domesticity" appeared both as a revelation in its own right and as a critical addendum to these debates, gathering, as it did, questions of the domestic "sphere" and female experience into the broader focus on empire that the earlier book had established. The two essays remain readable and teachable in part because we live in worlds that not only have failed to catch up with the points Kaplan is making, but actually seem to be forgetting things which once seemed learned. Perhaps the fate of great scholarship is that it becomes a kind of poetry: news that stays news.

But another dimension of what these two essays are driving at might open up another thought about the legacy of Kaplan's work – about how we can relate the methods of American studies to its professional ecology. Of the "turns" of the late 1980s and 1990s, it is probably transnationalism that has had the most irreversible effects, and in which Kaplan's own work played such an integral role. As a way of denationalizing the study of American culture, Kaplan set about dismantling a central "structural opposition," one that placed "the domestic in intimate opposition to the foreign."[3] In "Left Alone with America," the same opposition had been figured in more politically materialized terms as she skewered Perry Miller's myth-and-symbol fantasy of national coherence: "America – once cut off from Europe – can be understood as a domestic question, left alone, unique, divorced from the international conflicts … in which national identity takes shape."[4] Reconceiving American studies within and against these terms – reconceiving it, that is, as a field in which the "American" of its "studies" becomes an ideological aftereffect rather than a naturalized precondition – meant that the idea of the nation-as-container could no longer hold. This was the achievement of Kaplan and her "New Americanist" generation, after whom you couldn't any longer invoke "the American character" or "the American spirit" without embarrassing yourself. The shift was in the field's scalar imagination, but also in its intellectual role: while US exceptionalism may have remained a constant of political speech making, the job of American studies was to be – ostensibly at least – an organ of dissensus from nation-making mythologies. So effective was this turn to the imperial and the transnational, in fact, that its assertions stand as the assumed prerequisites for much of American studies today.

The question remains, however, whether the profession itself – as a community of jobs and departments and conferences and journals – has fully absorbed

[3] Ibid., 581.

[4] Kaplan, "'Left Alone," 7.

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it. Has the central idea of Kaplan's work, that the "domestic" and the "foreign" is a false opposition, actually had much effect on how American studies conducts itself? Let me put it another way, and stop the rhetorical evasion: for a field that has spent at least two generations relentlessly decentring the US "nation" as a coherent concept for the organization of its analytical methods, it is surely striking how equally relentless has been the consolidation of the field's intellectual and professional legitimacy within the US academy.

Prizes don't tell us that much, but they do tell us something. The American Studies Association has been awarding the John Hope Franklin Prize for "the most outstanding book published in American studies" since 1987; neatly coinciding, we could say, with the beginning of transnationalism's rise. Since then, it has gone exclusively to individuals who both received their doctoral training and subsequently worked within US academia. The association's Lora Romero Prize for best first book has a shorter history (awarded since 2002), but has again remained within an exclusively US pool. What does it tell us, then, that in the very same period that American studies experienced the rise and establishment of its signal methodology – where the world became its appropriate scale of reading – it was unable to formally recognize a book written by anyone educated or working outside North America? (Two Canadian PhDs make the Lora Romero list.) The distribution of prizes has its contexts and rationalizations, of course – you have to be in it to win it, and the ASA can only choose from what's submitted to them – but looking at the editorial boards of the field's major journals gives us another arresting set of numbers. I betray my own literary biases here, but let's note in passing that of the forty-two people that collectively make up the current editorial boards of three of the field's most influential and important journals – *American Literary History*, *American Literature*, and the *Journal of American History* – only one of them works outside the US – in Canada. *American Quarterly*, the ASA's own flagship journal, has a fairly international roster on its boards of managing and advisory editors by comparison, with six out of its total of twenty-one members working in non-US institutions (and a heavy presence from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa already interestingly decentring its US locus). Let's not get carried away: perhaps prizes and boards only confirm a hunch, and this is a brief, unscientific, and partial survey. But does it at least indicate that the intellectual project of dissolving "America" – refusing to see it, as Kaplan says, as a "domestic question, left alone, unique, divorced from the international conflicts" – has run in contradistinction to the shoring up of the US academy as the field's accrediting authority?

I am not making a new point. For decades, American studies scholars around the world and in the US have noted the various positional and infrastructural pressures that attend non-US-based Americanists, and the ironies

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that have tended to accumulate within an apparently postnational field's institutional exceptionalism.[5] Still, returning to Kaplan's essays in the 1990s reminds us of what revitalizing power her work and that of the transnational turn once had, and still has; and reminds us, too, what generous scholarship can feel like when it recognizes the parochialism of its own conditions of utterance. *No More Separate Spheres!* was the urgent title of the special issue of *American Literature* in 1998 in which Kaplan's "Manifest Domesticity" first appeared. As we look out at the horizons of American studies today, we find, in part because of Kaplan, that the rest of the world is its potential domain of interest – even as we also see that the work of American studies being there finds itself, yet again, left alone with America.

Amy Kaplan leaves us with different ways to think about our field, and, like any generative thinker, with lots more work to do. The obituaries talk of her kindness and openness and humour, of an intellect carried generously and without boundaries. I never met her, and now I never will. But for those of us who connected with her work, its legacy requires not just that the topics she wrote on remain alive, but that the interrogative stance she took towards our basic terms of engagement remains a model of how we do it – all of us, domestic and foreign.

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Critique is an active verb for most graduate students. When in doubt, pass judgment. And there are many things to doubt in graduate school – at least that's how it felt to me. Sitting around the seminar table in 2007, feigning mastery and enacting the authoritative voice, I believed myself the most infallible when I could spot the weakness or falter in what I read. It was, then, hardly surprising, reading Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* in that spring seminar on war and memory in American culture with Amy Kaplan, that someone (maybe it was even me – my memory flickers) proclaimed with all the inherited certainty of suspicious hermeneutics that the text just wasn't that compelling. The argument was, I seem to recall, uneven. We all nodded in desperate agreement. And looked to Amy at the head of the table for a sign that we had critiqued well. Amy did not approve. She didn't even quite look at us. She was, in fact, crying. Not

[5] See, for instance, Milette Shamir, "Foreigners Within and Innocents Abroad: Discourse of the Self in the Internationalization of American Studies," *Journal of American Studies*, 37, 3 (2004), 375–88; and Liam Kennedy, "American Studies without Tears, or What Does America Want?", *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 1, 1 (2009), 1–13.

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heavily and not dramatically, but it shocked us into silence. Finally, still looking down at the text in front of her, tabbed and marked up, she said, "I think she got to the end of a life of such certainty and just didn't know anymore."

I think of that moment often, especially when teaching my own students now. At the time, the experience felt traumatic. A betrayal of what I understood to be the unspoken contract between student and professor, cast in the light of child and parent: "Never relinquish the master position, lest I have to imagine you as fallible, frail, mortal." Amy Kaplan was sure, steady, and so alive. But in the years since, I have returned to the pedagogical and ethical lesson Amy offered on how to be fully open to someone else's thought, even and especially when it appears to threaten our own desire for mastery. Indeed, so many of us who took that class have recalled to one another the power of that moment, how much it continues to teach us about how to be teachers.

And yet, relating this story now also feels uncomfortable, as though I might betray a vision of Amy as infallible; as if the memory of her crying were to diminish her scholarly acumen, her professional eminence; as if this moment of profound humanness wasn't part and parcel of what made Amy a great scholar and mentor. In part, this is because of a category error, misrecognizing her being touched – that is, affected – by Sontag's uncertainty as a display of mawkish sentimentalism. An affective excess that we, clamoring to be rationalist intellectuals, disavow and disdain. Especially in female professors of whom we desire both the most tender of care and the most stoic of persona. And against whom we threaten to hold both.

This moment that I and so many of my cohort remember so vividly wasn't emotionally indulgent; it was radically honest. Amy steadfastly refused sentimentality as a teacher and thinker, arguing in her field-defining 1998 essay "Manifest Domesticity" that sentimentality – particularly female sentimentality – served as a strategic alibi for the civilizationalist and imperialist project of America. Her suspicion that its apparently innate effusion willfully cloaked a host of otherwise disreputable intentions echoes Oscar Wilde writing, "A sentimentalist is simply one who wants to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it … We think we can have our emotions for nothing. We cannot."[1] Simple, the master stroke that elides the labor and cost of feeling, that suggests it neither extracts from us (as is Wilde's concern) nor implicates our profit in the extraction from another (a tenet of Amy's work). Amy's thought was anything but simple. The surety and clarity with which she

[1] Oscar Wilde, "De Profundis," in Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings*, ed. Colm Tóibín (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 95–256, 211.

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wrote, the precision of her prose that bore incisive analysis with deceptive ease, came from her ability to sit with complexity. Her work, from *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988) to *Our American Israel* (2018), is marked by an insistence on peeling away the accumulated veneer of inherited binaries and given conclusions, even and especially when doing so is to face the possibility of being culpable in imperial projects – political and intellectual.

As a teacher, Amy modeled what Eve Sedgwick described as her own late style in her final monograph, *Touching Feeling*, "the art of *loosing*: and not as one art but a cluster of related ones. Ideally life, loves, and ideas might then sit freely, for a while, on the palm of the open hand."[2] Loosed from the tight weft of sure critique, this form of thought makes room for surprise, for risk, and for losing one's own certainty. Its effect – the expansive reading that upends what you think you know but is nonetheless so tightly crafted as to appear effortless – is wondrous. The question of how you learn to think like that is more fraught. It places the familiar practice of pretending to know against the necessary risk of admitting that we cannot know. From that place of shared unknowing, something might emerge. Not just the satisfying finality of prose but also a kind of ethical orientation towards the practice of reading and thinking itself. It happens in the refusal to see uncertainty as liability in that graduate seminar and in the 2003 Presidential Address before the American Studies Association where Amy opened with twinned senses of "urgency and bewilderment."[3] It is the proclamation that neither you nor I know. Now what?

Uncertainty is another name for the capacity for capaciousness, the ability to not constrict thought – yours or another's – into the narrow frames of given analysis. Uncertainty disrupts mastery's ambition. As a teacher, Amy welcomed us into the paradox of what is gained from the broad perspective unknowing offers alongside the peril of losing that which we are trained into believing is the goal of scholarship. She pressed the point of the unknowable, the unsettled, the ellipsis of what we thought was our shared project. Unwilling to let us, or herself, rest in the easy pronouncements of analysis, she held us to account. To her but also to one another, to the possibility of sitting with not just our failures of certainty but also those of each other. The experience is terrifying but made possible by the particular form of unsentimental care that Amy enacted as a teacher.

[2] Eve K. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.

[3] Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 17, 2003," *American Quarterly*, 56, 1 (2004), 1–18, 1.

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Another clear memory, then, that I understand in new ways with growing distance. Nearly a decade before that graduate seminar, I went, petrified, to Amy's office at Mount Holyoke College to have her sign my first-year undergraduate schedule. She'd been arbitrarily assigned as my adviser and I was one of probably a dozen whose entry into the English major she had to direct. The student who was fleeing her office weeping as I came in did little to soothe me; nor did Amy. Instead, she said, "Students come in here, crying; they want me to be their mother, their sister. Do you know what I say?" She tapped the stack of health center referral forms on her desk. It was startling, breaking through the fantasy that emotive pastoral care was good pedagogy. Hardly an easy lesson – in fact one that it took my own time teaching at a small liberal-arts college to begin to understand – Amy insisted on an ethics of contact, refusing the easy and disingenuous mimicry of intimacy ill-suited to the relation at hand. To feign (or even truly feel) sympathy as warranted by the relationship of sister or mother would be a lie to the real relation of care and power between the (young, female) professor and student. Sentimental identification operates here, as Wilde suggests, through a fundamentally cynical economy. But, particularly in the complicatedly intimate impersonal relationship between student and teacher, no emotion is costless.

Costs of sympathy and benefits of uncertainty are things I think a lot about now, teaching in the face of a decimated job market, disciplinary crises, and global pandemic. It would be comforting, to me, to be able to afford them some pat solution to the growing conundrum of what we are supposed to be doing here. Critique, that active verb that smooths over the rough spots and gaps and falters, offers itself as a tantalizing possibility. But I try to keep in mind the necessity of the difficult work of admitting that we cannot know. We prop up critique against the fear of what our uncertainty reveals. But if we *loose* our grip on critique and its asymptotic divebomb towards doubtlessness, we see the possibility of an ethical relation between us, as teachers and students, and towards the difficult questions. It offers no easy answers, does not solve the material crises at hand. But the space held by uncertainty contains a whole world of thought, of critical reason, of stalwartness, of commitment. A world of possibility that Amy Kaplan modeled.

At the end of *Regarding the Pain of Others* (a text in which, when I return it to now, I am unable to locate the uncertainty or unevenness), Sontag writes, "Perhaps too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking. Remembering *is* an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead."[4] We want our teachers

[4] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 115, original emphasis.

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to live forever – not just on this mortal plane, but in our minds, undiminished by the shadow of mortality that we misname doubt. While Amy insisted on the importance of uncertainty as a kind of critical project, she did not shy from its attendant risk of unknowability. Throughout her work, she still made a positive statement about empire, about power, about violence – insisting that a project of ethics and politics demands that we speak. She took on the risk of being wrong; but equally difficult, she took on the risk of being right.

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