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American Studies in Dialogue

Radical Reconstructions between Curriculum and Cultural Critique

North American Studies

campus

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 12

Histories of Curricular Innovation

1. American Studies as Curricular Innovation: Interventions into Narratives of Field Formation 35

   1.1 "A Subject So Familiar and So Simple": American Literature and American Civilization in the College Curriculum 38

   1.2 Money, Jingoism, and Folklore? American Studies after World War II 55

   1.3 Bridging the Schisms of Culture and Method: "Peaux Rouges" and "Mandarins" in Minnesota 75

2. Maturity and Midlife Crises: Radical Teachers, Cultural Turns 86

   2.1 Quantitative Growth and Organizational Structures in the 1960s and 1970s 88

   2.2 Cultural Experts and Literary Amateurs in the Early 1960s 94

   2.3 Radical Teaching Contra Cultural Consensus? 100

   2.4 Collaborators, Computers, Problem-Solvers: Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Davis (Re-)Considered 107

Trajectories of Transformation

3. Multiculturalism as Radical Critique: American Studies Beyond the Nation 131

3.1 Social Movements, European Theory, and the Search for Resistance 134

3.2 Contextualizing Cultural Studies: The Political Work of Cultural Critique 140

3.3 Dialogics Beyond Borders: American Culture Studies 146

3.4 From Coverage to Contact Zones: Curricula of Comparative U.S. Cultures 152

4. American Studies in the Age of Digital Cultures 165

4.1 American Studies and New Media 166

4.2 Culture and Database: George Allen's Curse, Chris Crocker's Cupcake 171

4.3 New Media—New American Studies? 179

Expansions of the Field-Imaginary

5. American Studies and the Learning Paradigm 187

5.1 Understanding Student Learning 193

5.2 Novice, Expert, and Beyond 203

5.3 Does American Studies Have "Signature Pedagogies"? 214

6. From Best Practices to Next Practices....226

6.1 Going Meta: Towards a Scholarship of Teaching in American Studies....227

6.2 Pedagogies and Epistemologies: Notes from the Visible Knowledge Project....234

6.3 Digital Storytelling: Adaptive, Embodied, and Socially Situated....245

Epilogue....266

List of Tables....273

Bibliography....274

Index....292

like the critical essay, that continue to be an integral element of American studies pedagogies and scholarship.

Curricular innovations of the field in the 1930s and 1940s were pedagogically progressive and ideologically problematic, and thus resist monocausal assessments. Newly institutionalized American Civilization programs and "regional courses" were dedicated to the study of specific national (or regional) literatures and cultural traditions that neglected the contributions of women, ethnic minorities, or intercultural perspectives beyond the "European" tradition. At the same time, some of these programs and courses consciously moved beyond disciplinary and national borders, and attempted to create a learning situation that highlighted the interdependencies between literature, culture, and politics. The increasing institutionalization of American Civilization and American studies programs during the 1940s and 1950s is equally difficult to categorize. The influx of grant money contributed to the expansion of American studies programs, and the political and cultural climate during World War II and its Cold War aftermath did validate American nationalism and exceptionalism. However, not all American studies faculty subscribed to nationalist tendencies, and not all students were driven into the open arms of these programs by a heightened crisis consciousness or sense of cultural superiority (cf. Turpie 1979; Gleason 1981, Kerber 1989). In chapter 1.2, my analysis of the nascent American Studies Program at the University of Minnesota in the late 1940s and early 1950s suggest that an emphasis on folklore (especially folk music) and comparative approaches were two pedagogical strategies that mobilized international perspectives on American cultures against the threat of national chauvinism and isolationist understandings of American history.

The development of American studies from the early 1950s until the 1970s is connected to the work of scholars associated with the so-called "myth-and-symbol school," a diverse group of scholars who read American literature and cultural artifacts in the context of larger national myths. However, many American studies practitioners held positions as professors of English, and at the time their home departments were reigned by the formalist New Critics. The New Critics' "obsession" with close reading and focus on the text itself was at least in part a reaction against the neglect of textual analysis in English literature courses of the 1930s and 1940s. In the mythologies of field formation, the scholarly and ideological differences between New Critics and Americanists are in hindsight constructed

as unbridgeable schisms. My case study from the University of Minnesota in chapter 1.3 illustrates how such differences played out in pedagogical practice during the 1950s: students in the American studies program took classes from professors who identified either as New Critics or as "Contextualists" (Americanists). According to Leo Marx, while methodological and ideological differences between the two groups were not resolved, they were problematized with students in the classroom and thus became a productive element of American studies pedagogy at the University of Minnesota (1999, 41). The interdependencies between disciplinary methodological discourses and multidisciplinary pedagogical practice make the example of the American Studies Program at the University of Minnesota a compelling case for the purpose of my inquiry.

"Maturity" and "Midlife Crises"

American studies practitioners of the first and second generation had often insisted that since American studies was introduced to overcome departmental boundaries, the call for American studies departments would be an oxymoron. In the 1960s and 1970s, this resistance to departmentalization seriously hampered curricular reform because American studies programs were often under-resourced and dependent on traditional departments like English or History. In theory, American studies programs built coherence around the culture concept and interdisciplinary methodologies. In practice, even core courses failed to introduce students to culture concepts, and training in American studies was multidisciplinary at best. All programs required their students to select courses from traditional disciplines, and virtually all programs relied heavily on the methodologies of these disciplines. Curricula remained organized around a bipolar literature-history concentration. At the same time, the number of American studies programs doubled during the 1960s, a large number of theoretical essays and edited volumes were published, and funding for faculty development seemed widely available. In chapter two, I position my assessment of American studies in the 1960s and 1970s in this force field between "maturity" and "midlife-crises," between quantitative growth and methodological uncertainties, and illustrate the curricular consequences of these tensions. My comparison of two 1963 visions for American studies curricula (by Hennig Cohen and Richard Sykes, in chapter 2.2) highlights the interdependencies between notions of expertise and curriculum design that

locate methodologies and learning goals somewhere between anthropology, literary criticism, and a more general humanities skills set.

Both Sykes and Cohen worked with holistic culture concepts that described a unique national culture within distinct spatial and temporal boundaries. During the 1960s, the premises of such homogeneous culture concepts were increasingly challenged. Social movements and identity politics fueled a radical critique of the cultural consensus that had informed earlier versions of American studies. These changes reverberated in curricula and led to a radical reconceptualization of American studies pedagogies as political work. Robert Meredith's notion of the "radical as teacher" (1969, 1) illustrates such a redefinition (chapter 2.3). In his influential article on the history of the movement, Gene Wise nominated Meredith's introductory seminar at Miami University "Culture Therapy 202" as the "representative act" for American studies in the late 1960s, and Robert Spiller's 1954 course "American Civilization 900" at the University of Pennsylvania as the "representative act" for the corporate nature of the American studies movement in the 1950s (Wise 1979b, 312). While Spiller's course articulated the dominant culture of the 1950s, Wise claimed, Meredith's course symbolized a position that Pease and Wiegman call a "negative critical project, one that positioned the American studies scholar antagonistically in relation to the field's self-defining object of study" (Pease and Wiegman 2002, 7–8). It is interesting to note that Wise chose instances of teaching practice, and not research projects, to illustrate the particular "paradigms" that govern American studies in the 1950s and 1960s. However, my reading of these "acts" suggests that the "American Civilization 900" seminar at the University of Pennsylvania has more explanatory value as a case of failed interdisciplinary teaching practice in the 1950s (chapter 2.4), whereas the innovative nature of Robert Meredith's pedagogical radicalism surfaces much more clearly (and less "antagonistically") in his contributions to the American Culture Studies curriculum at the University of California, Davis.

In the spring of 1970, Robert Meredith became the program chair of the nascent American Culture Studies program at Davis. Jay Mechling and David Wilson joined Meredith as faculty in the program within the first year, and all three were actively involved in the design of a new curriculum. I conclude the first part of this study with a comparison of programs at the University of Minnesota and the University of Pennsylvania in 1970, and the University of California, Davis, in 1973. While the curriculum at Min-

nesota focused primarily on the analysis of art and literature (in the tradition of the so-called "myth-and-symbol school"), the American Studies Department at the University of Pennsylvania was concerned with the assessment of change in socio-cultural systems, and worked with social science methodologies and a distinctly anthropological culture concept. The American Culture Studies program at Davis evolved around "three basic steps of problem solving" and articulated the transformation of social conditions as an explicit learning goal. Here, different pedagogical strategies were employed to model radical cultural critique for students, and the imitation of expert epistemologies by novice learners became a fundamental rationale behind the curriculum design. The American Culture Studies curriculum at Davis constitutes a powerful illustration of the generative interdependencies between teaching and scholarship in American studies, and the description of the program by Mechling, Meredith, and Wilson is a landmark study for the development of pedagogical markers of the field. All three programs (Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Davis) demonstrate the conceptual diversity of American studies in the late 1960s/early 1970s and call any alleged methodological or pedagogical homogeneity into question.

Trajectories of Transformation

Beginning in the 1960s, political agendas and identity politics of emancipatory social movements and activism increasingly disputed the imaginary "uniformity of values" and cultural consensus of the United States that had characterized the work of many American studies practitioners during the 1950s (see e.g. Huber 1954; Pearce 1957). In the second part of this study, I introduce several trajectories that continue to have a genuinely transformative effect on the field of American studies, and highlight how these trajectories meet and overlap in recent scholarly and pedagogical visions that account for the inherent heterogeneity of American multicultures more adequately. In the 1960s and 1970s, European structuralist and poststructuralist theory "revolutionized" the study of culture (Lipsitz 1990) and informed the debate over the role of culture as an agent of change in the realm of the social (Shank 1997). Poststructuralist theorists sought alliances with "identitarian social movements," and drew attention to the relationship between academic inquiry and social change (Pease 2003). In the 1970s and 1980s in particular, newly institutionalized interdisciplinary programs and sub-fields emerged, among them Women's Studies, Queer