

American Studies Assessment Report (2012-2013)

I: Introduction and Background

Having focused on “Writing in the Major” over the last three assessment reports, the Department of American Studies turns its attention this year to the question of how well our curriculum is meeting the expectations and needs of our students. We are motivated in this decision by the forthcoming retirement of our venerable colleague, Mary Lynn, who has announced that after 45 years of service to the Department she would like to have more time to spend with her grandchild. In most departments, the retirement of a valued senior faculty member is an important moment of transition, but in American Studies at Skidmore the shift feels particularly seismic because we have only four full-time tenure-track lines, so the retirement of a single faculty member results in the loss of nearly 25% of our collective course offerings. Given that we are now in the process of writing a job description for Mary’s replacement, this seems like a particularly propitious moment to reconsider what we do and don’t offer in the curriculum and to reflect on how we might best meet the unmet needs of our students in these curricular areas.

As a department, of course, we have had many discussions about the shape of our curriculum and about how our offerings stack up against those in American Studies programs nationally and internationally, most recently in our 2006 department self-study. Some of these discussions have cut to the philosophical core of what American Studies is and should be as a discipline. On the national level, debates have raged for several decades concerning whether American Studies should be centered in traditional historical and literary studies with related areas of interest radiating outward from that hub or whether it should be redefined as an umbrella discipline subsuming programs in Ethnic Studies, African American Studies, Cultural Studies, Border Studies, Class Studies, and LGBTQ Studies among others. The structural question is a crucial one for what it implies about the ways in which the past is defined and remembered; at times, in fact, it has provoked intense debates about the synthesizing and atomizing tendencies of the discipline. In its discussions, the department often revisits the role that traditional historical studies will play in its curriculum. In interviewing candidates for positions over the last decade or so, we have discovered that fewer and fewer were trained primarily as historians and virtually none had training in pre-Civil War periods. These trends both intrigue and concern us. The danger from the department’s point of view is the potential loss of the historical (which we think is lacking in our students) and the substitution of a too-narrowly focused interest in contemporary culture. We need to consider the curricular and philosophical implications of such a “presentist” approach to the past.

It is comforting to know that we face in microcosm the very issues the discipline is wrestling with at the national level, since some of the answers present themselves in the scholarly literature of the field. We also have concerns unique to our small department, however, that require personalized strategies. We are a small entity, and we face challenges with respect to the coverage of material. We want our students to have a thorough grounding in the basics of American history and literature while being exposed to various theoretical models for interpreting such basics. We also want to continue to support other disciplinary programs that already exist at the College, especially Latin American Studies, Environmental Studies, Religious Studies, Gender Studies and IGR. The issue is how to do these things without straining too drastically the resources we have with which to operate.

Since our last departmental review we have added some exciting new courses to the curriculum, including those on film, foodways, sports, memory studies, diversity, critical whiteness studies, literary and magazine culture, disorderly women, Black feminisms and sex, gender and empire. Our latest tenure-track hire, Beck Krefting, has introduced courses on comedy in the United States as well as on post-apocalyptic film and literature. Mary taught recently a new course, AM 260: Childhood in America, while Greg offered AM 241: Mark Twain's America and AM 103W: The Civil War in American Memory; and Dan has taught a course on global perspectives of the United States. In general we think we have provided students with a richer range than previously of courses in the areas of ethnic and race studies, visual culture and popular culture, while we have been less able to deliver with consistency courses in the pre-Civil War era. Mary, of course, specializes in the colonial period, raising the issue of the degree to which we would like our new hire to cover the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

II: Our Current Assessment Project

What we sought to determine this year was whether students have responded well to the recent curricular trends mentioned above and in which directions they would like to see us head in the future. In order to measure our progress in these areas we developed four assessment tools, each designed to help us get a better sense of student perceptions regarding our curriculum:

- 1) First, we met regularly with American Studies student representatives from Academic Council—this year Veronica Monroe '13 and Sara Vosberg '13—to discuss the kinds of courses they would like to see in our curriculum.
- 2) Second, we used the opportunity of an Exploremore! session in March to ask junior and senior majors and minors to discuss with potential majors in the first-year and second-year classes the shape and direction of our curriculum.

3) Third, we conducted exit interviews in May with our graduating seniors during which we asked them for suggestions about our course offerings.

4) Fourth, we folded into our Methods course an assignment in which students were asked to review Skidmore's curriculum over the last 50 years and to make suggestions about various paradigm shifts evident in curricular offerings over time. Specifically they were required to comment on: What philosophical commitments seem to inform the curriculum at various junctures? What specific schools of thought are evident in the particulars of the course descriptions, and what do alterations in these courses reveal about change over time in American Studies at Skidmore? This led to an important discussion about our current curriculum and the ways in which it does and does not reflect current trends in the field.

We should begin by noting that students seem generally satisfied with the curriculum as it has been developed since our last departmental review in 2006. In the AM 221 curriculum assignment, many students noted that the department seems to be keeping up with national trends, and they expressed satisfaction with the fact that as a department with discreet tenure lines we have more autonomy and flexibility than most programs that are dependent for course offerings on other departments. They also pointed out that students at Skidmore can draw on a large number of courses not taught in the department but with relevance to the major (so-called American subject courses), and they appreciated the willingness of department members to take on independent studies and to supervise internship students looking to create additional intellectual opportunities outside our standard curriculum.

Students did have specific suggestions for future course offerings, and these fell into three general categories: requests for 1) courses we have offered but no longer do so with any frequency; 2) courses like those we offer currently but with modifications; and 3) courses we have never offered. Here is a sampling of suggestions from students with accompanying course descriptions adapted by them from offerings at other institutions.

(1) Courses we have offered but no longer do so

Students have asked for a return of several courses we have lost either because of personnel changes or shifting priorities among current faculty. In particular, they would like to see a return of the following courses: Joanna Zangrando's (now retired) course on American Material Culture, last delivered in 2004; Winston Grady-Willis's (now at Metropolitan State University in Denver) course on Black Feminist Thought, last delivered in 2009; Brian Black's (now of Penn State) course on the Environment in American Culture, last taught in 2001; Wilma Hall's (retired almost a dozen years) AM

376: The City; and Greg Pfitzer's seminar on psychohistory, AM 376: America on the Couch (see descriptions below)

AM 361 - American Material Culture

Introduction to the material aspects of American culture and the variety of ways in which artifacts—three dimensional objects, the built environment, design and architectural styles, technological processes and production, decorative and folk arts—serve as social and cultural documents. The course centers on the cultural attitudes and values embodied in as well as shaped by the production, utilization, and conservation of material objects. Readings, discussions, museum and other field trips, and object-oriented research projects assist students in enhancing their visual literacy and in making connections between material culture and the larger culture.

AM 342 - Black Feminist Thoughts

Examines the development and materialization of Black American feminist thoughts within historical, social, political, and cultural contexts. Interdisciplinary in focus, it surveys feminist politics and theories through films, popular culture, manifestos, literary texts, and theoretical and historical essays. In addition, the course will address how the concepts of black feminism and black womanhood overlap and diverge in accordance with the modes of representation used to articulate them.

AM 376F: The Environment in American Culture

An examination of the importance of nature and the environment in American culture. The course will analyze the role nature has played in American life from the early human settlement in North America to the present. Topics will include the evolution of environmental consciousness in the United States, the development of national parks, the Adirondack Park in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the impact and future role of the contemporary environmental movement.

AM 376B - Topics In American Culture: The City

An examination of the growth and impact of urban life on American culture. Using fiction, film, histories, sociological studies and material culture, the course examines the relation between the perceptions of urban life and the actualities of that experience. By focusing on how varying reactions to the urban experience result from economic, ethnic, or gender differences, the course explores such topics as: the effect of industrialization, the waves of rural migration and overseas immigration, the concentrations of wealth and poverty, the impact of architecture, and the parks and planning movements.

AM 376C - America On The Couch: Psychohistory

A consideration of selected topics in the fields of cultural studies and psycho history. Through interdisciplinary materials, students will explore the rich literature of psycho historical interpretation, attempting to understand personal motivation, emotional character, and abnormal

behavior in both prominent American figures and in the nation at large. Topics include conversion theory in the Salem witchcraft trials, infantilism and paternal authority in the age of Jackson, sentimental regression in the Civil War era, George Custer and the schizophrenic personality, neurasthenia in Victorian America, paranoia in the Nixon years, and narcissism in the “me” decade of the 1970s.

(2) Courses like those we currently offer but with modifications

While students appreciate greatly the courses current members of the American Studies department at Skidmore offer in the areas of race, class, gender and sexuality—they see these as at the heart of the discipline—they would like to see more of the same, especially with respect to IGR (intergroup relationship training) and LGBTQ issues. Students would also like to have more courses with a global perspective on American Studies such as Dan Nathan’s AM 332: Global Perspectives of the United States. The following course descriptions suggest possible elaborations:

a) Queer Theory/Queer Lives

This interdisciplinary seminar investigates queer theory and the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people as addressed in empirical studies, narratives, film and activism. We will explore how gender and sexual identities intersect with race, class, ethnicity, place, age and disability. Our areas of inquiry will include identity, community, embodiment, popular culture, violence and social movements. We will critically analyze which texts have been considered central to queer theory and which have been marginalized.

b) Capitalism, Competition, Conflict in the Global Economy

Unemployed auto workers in Detroit and the wood stoves in New England signal an important change in America’s relation to the world economy. This course characterizes these changes in a number of fields (trade, money, energy, technology), explains them as the result of the political choices of a declining imperial power that differs substantially from the choices of other states (Japan, Germany, Britain, France, the small European states, and Korea), and examines their consequences for America and international politics

c) Human Rights and Global Justice

In this course, we will move between the study of (1) general concepts of justice and human rights: liberty rights; political rights; and social rights (such as the right to education); (2) concrete problems pertaining to the interpretation of international human rights agreements and U.S. constitutional law; and (3) contemporary moral/legal controversies, including the legal vulnerability of the homeless and unauthorized immigrant children, and our moral duties toward them; the legal status of enhanced interrogation techniques, including torture; the normative

debates on multiculturalism, women's rights, and cosmopolitanism; and the moral obligations of citizens in the developed world with respect to the least advantaged in the developing countries.

(3) Courses we've never offered.

A number of students in AM 221 as well as seniors in their exit interviews expressed a desire to have more courses on Social Media, particularly on how new information technologies influence culture, as well as courses on American folk culture. They researched college catalogues and found the following courses that they believed would suit their purposes:

a) History and Theory of New Media

What makes new media "new"? How do new media compare with, transform or incorporate earlier media? Examines the production, circulation, and reception of visual and sonic media, with emphasis on how consumers and artists shape the uses and values of media. Covers key issues raised by new media through close study of critical essays and creative texts. Examples of old and new media include the phonograph, radio, film, turntable, social networks, fantasy sports and gaming, podcast, MP3, AutoTune, hypertext literature and digital poetry.

b) Video Game Nation

Investigates how to critically interpret and analyze video games and the roles they play in visual and popular culture, and how to test the application of these approaches to various issues in gaming and digital media culture more generally. Topics and themes include genre and aesthetics, the game industry, spectatorship, play, narrative, immersion, gender, race, militarism, violence and labor.

c) Television

In this introductory course, participants will study the economic and technological history of the television industry, with a particular emphasis on the changing shape of the medium of television over time and in ever-wider global contexts; the social meanings, political stakes, and ideological effects of the medium; and the major methodological tools and critical concepts used in the interpretation of the medium, including Marxist, feminist, queer, and post-colonial approaches.

d) Inventing an Information Society

Understanding of the complex, mutual relationship between technological changes introduced by engineers and large social changes (e.g. TV, the rise of suburbanization, computerization of society, and the advent of the Information Age). Understanding why and how social groups invent technology and how the use of technology changes society. Awareness of such current issues as the regulation of telecommunications and the Internet.

e) The Birth of Consumer Society in the United States

This course will examine the period beginning in the 1880's until WWI when "modern consumer society" emerged in the US. We will also engage the theoretical debate about the usefulness of the concept of consumerism to a contemporary understanding of the politics of consumption as a modernizing force. Topics will include the turn of the century world's fairs, shopping and the rise of department stores, and the emergence of mass-market catalogues and magazines. We will also examine the way the advertising reflected and constructed ideas about citizenship, gender and race norms, fashion and generational transformation in our period.

f) Poverty and American Culture

Students explore and debate rival theories about the causes and consequences of poverty. Why poverty occurs, why certain people are poor, how poverty influences family and community life, and how the poor respond to their situation and sometimes try to change it.

g) American Folk Revivals.

Study of the folk revivals that marked 20th-century U.S. cultural life. Topics include African and Native-American origins, 19th-century minstrels, Stephen Foster, the Appalachian ballad collections of Cecil Sharp, the legacy of the Lomax and Seeger families, bluegrass and hillbilly music, Woody Guthrie and union songs, the freedom songs of the Civil Rights Movement, the Washington Square scene in Greenwich Village, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Grounded in the study of music and its circulation, examines the impact of these revivals on dance, film, literature and politics

h) Disneyland and American Culture

One of the most visited tourist attractions in the world, subject of thousands of books and articles, adored by millions, yet reviled by many intellectuals, Disneyland has occupied a prominent place in American culture since it opened in 1955. This seminar will examine Disneyland as an expression of middle-class American values, as a locus of corporatism and consumerism, as a postmodern venue, as a utopia, and as an influence upon architecture and urban design. In a broader sense, we will use Disney to explore the ideals, the desires, and the anxieties that have shaped post-World War II American culture.

i) Islam in American Culture

An introduction to the History, Literature, and Sociology of Islam in the United States, 'American Islam' will utilize a variety of disciplinary perspectives to consider important issues centering around Islam and Muslims in America. By rigorous reading, writing, surfing, viewing, listening, and discussing, and through conducting fieldwork in New York City, students will be acquainted with key and central concepts, and will acquire the tools so as to formulate their own research.

III: Conclusions

We recognize that our efforts to assess student expectations and desires for an American Studies curriculum are not quite systematic, but we think they have yielded some interesting suggestions for the curricular directions in which we might head in the months and years ahead. The next stage for us is to consider which of these proposed courses we should prioritize and which among them we can afford from a personnel and intellectual point of view. We have had some preliminary discussions in departmental meetings this spring as well as in casual lunch and hallway conversations, and we are coming to some preliminary agreements about how to incorporate them into our present and future plans.

With respect to courses that students would like to see revived in our curriculum, we think we can provide opportunities for students over the next few years to regain access to them. Megan Williams, a Visiting Assistant Professor on a mutli-year contract, hopes to offer a course on American Material Culture, perhaps as early as the 2013-2014 academic year; Beck would like to do the same for Black Feminist Thoughts. Dan Nathan has spoken of reviving The City course sometime in the future. Greg is less certain he'll be able to find space for America on the Couch in the next few years if ever.

Regarding elaborations of current courses, we think we can fold some of these themes into existing courses (certainly queer theory and global economics), although we recognize that our students might be better served if they were to become independent offerings, since that is what the students intended in making their suggestions in their AM 221 curriculum papers. We may wish to ask current members of the department working in these areas (Beck and Dan especially) to consider separate course offerings in the future, or we could include some of these areas in our job description for Mary's replacement.

In regard to courses we have never taught, we have some opportunities to introduce such courses with faculty currently on staff. Greg is working on a course called Disney's America. Dan has long been interested in Media Studies, and he may wish to formulate a course in this area. Similarly, Beck has background and interest in developing a course on poverty and American culture. The remaining courses, should we decide that they warrant pursuing, could become part of the job description for Mary's replacement as well. On this latter point, we should note that although our assessment results have revealed the curricular preferences of some students, we as faculty members may have different interests that reflect departmental and national concerns within the discipline. Hence, although students in our assessment pools rarely suggested reviving or adding courses with discernible historical components or having anything to do with the United States before World War II, we may wish to create a job description for Mary's replacement that will yield courses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. An alternative would be to have someone currently on staff (Greg may be the most likely candidate) cover these colonial courses, freeing up the new hire to work on contemporary course offerings.

We are now discussing all these suggestions as a department and will implement them over the ensuing months and years as we see fit and as circumstances allow. We

have begun working on a preliminary draft of the advertisement for Mary's position, a hire that will be crucial to our abilities in the future to provide students with the kind of American Studies curriculum they and we want.

Respectfully submitted,

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