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Reconceptualizing American Studies as Digital Practice: From Constructivist Pedagogy to  
Constructionist “Wreaders”

The range of students found in many CUNY classrooms might seem to be particularly challenging or problematic to an instructor with a carefully crafted syllabus that aims to meet certain disciplinary ends – especially, perhaps, for someone working in the humanities or social sciences. How does one teaching American historical materials, for example, speak with and be heard and understood by a group of students that seem both radically global and intensely local, especially when so many materials, primary and secondary, were meant to be received in culturally or historically contextualized ways for distinctly different audiences. This challenge of hyper-diversity in the student body is also a space of opportunity, though, for creating a more thoroughly constructivist and constructionist pedagogical approach that can be enacted through greater modalities of learning and, following Cheryl Ball’s and Ryan Moeller’s formulation, as an exploration of the binary oppositions “between rhetoric and aesthetics, between the scholarly and the creative, between low art culture and high art culture, and between academic texts and popular texts” (2).

In this paper I aim to explore these issues – first through a discussion about my experience teaching an “Introduction to American Studies” course during the recent election, followed by an examination of specific pages on two websites that serve archival and

pedagogical functions: *The Thoreau Reader's* page on "Civil Disobedience," and *The Authentic History Center's* full text of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*. Finally, I would like to reflect on ways that at least one of those websites, and the course itself, might be reconfigured. As Randy Bass asks, I would like to consider how, in an American Studies context, "information technologies [can] play a role in the *engines of inquiry* that drive learning," (1) but before I can discuss specific websites or attempt to address that question, it is important for me to first thoroughly describe the framework of the course with and through some ideas on constructivist pedagogy.

In the fall 2008 semester I was given the opportunity to teach an "Introduction to American Studies" course at Queens College, but it was a subject that I felt quite unprepared for. The class was listed as "Writing Intensive" (three of which are required before graduation), and students consisted of primarily sophomores and juniors. One exceptionally ambitious student was an American Studies major (triple major, rather, who is planning on applying to graduate programs in history and will be studying in Oxford next summer), a handful of other students were in related fields (History, English), while the majority were in other majors (Economics, Speech-Language Pathology, etc.) or undeclared. I also had one student with a learning disability who required additional time for in-class exams. The prospect of teaching a survey course to a class of predominately non-majors was not in itself my primary concern. My sense is that the diversity of the student body typically found in CUNY classrooms – in terms of age, "race," or ethnicity; whether natural born citizen or recent immigrant; whether first-generation college student or returning student, and so on – can often add generatively and synergistically to classroom discussions. In this American Studies course I had students from Egypt, Trinidad, India, Ireland, Jamaica, Ecuador, Hawaii, and suburban Long Island, among other places. Some

students had been in the country for years, while a couple others had arrived more recently and were perhaps struggling with some ESL-related concerns in the classroom, largely manifesting as an aversion to speak in a language or about a subject matter with which they were not necessarily comfortable (or interested, perhaps). What my concern was, then, and something that I hope to explore in this paper, was how to create a learning space in an introductory course, for which the majority of the students were probably enrolled because it met their Writing Intensive requirement and it fit into their schedule, that would potentially allow for and facilitate positive and creative learning opportunities for everyone in this extremely diverse group.

After first summarizing my engagement with the online American Studies Crossroads Project at Georgetown University, I will then briefly mention some of my other concerns about teaching the course; concerns which guided my taking a constructivist approach (without, at that time, having the explicit theoretical knowledge that that was what I was doing). This will be followed by a longer discussion of constructivist theories of education, primarily through John Dewey, vis-à-vis designing a syllabus, my choice of materials, and my pedagogical approach (which did incorporate some use of technology and new media, though minimally in terms of student participation). I would then like to review and assess three websites – two, with a direct bearing on American Studies, focusing respectively on Henry David Thoreau and then Jacob Riis, as well as another website from another field – *HyperNietzsche* – that illustrates some of the potential that the other two websites might consider for incorporating a greater degree of engagement and fostering a sense of community. In conclusion, I would describe some of the successes or failures of the course as it was conceived, reconsider the previously mentioned websites, and, more lengthily, explore some of the ways in which another web 2.0 enhanced version of the course might better meet actively constructivist pedagogical goals through

multiple channels of experience, asynchronous lines of communication, and hands-on interactive experience. I would like to use Alfonso's, Marco's, and Madrid's idea of the "wreading" as a "new integrated competence" (21) – themselves extending Michael R. Allen's term of the "wreader" as a reader of hypertext that is "both the producer and consumer of textual practices" (4) – applied specifically to American Studies, an interdisciplinary field that is especially conducive to digital practices and meta-cognitive thinking about "integrated competence" vis-à-vis the construction of disciplinary knowledge.

The National Research Council's (NRC) 1999 report *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* cites Lee Shulman's statement that "effective teachers need pedagogical content knowledge...rather than only knowledge of a particular subject matter" (155). While I have a sense of the history of the study of English literature as a discipline, primarily from Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* and David R. Shumway's and Craig Dionne's *Disciplining English: Alternative Histories, Critical Perspectives*, I did not have an awareness of the histories, theories, or methods of teaching American Studies as its own distinct field. While there might be some similar approaches in "pedagogical content knowledge," I did not necessarily have extensive knowledge in the overall subject matter. Although some of my previous coursework or reading was through "new historicist" approaches, I had not had a "proper" history course since my sophomore year in high school in 1991. I feared, and I was correct in my suspicion, that some of my students might have a stronger grasp of some aspects of United States history than I did. Despite having had many previous courses in English, with more significant reading in early American literature, some reading in canonical Nineteenth and Twentieth Century texts, and a moderately extensive awareness of American modernism, I knew that unless I crafted a syllabus that was tailored to my own particular

strengths, I was going to be teaching material that I had only read excerpts from or not read at all. My decision to take a learner-centered constructivist approach was arrived at, perhaps for the best, out of practical necessity – I needed to be a co-learner in this enterprise, particularly in some areas of my intended syllabus. Avoiding historical context completely and staying “within the text” with a New Criticism type of approach seemed irresponsible. I was trying to figure out a way to get at the problem John Dewey describes when he asks – “how shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?” (23)

### **Constructivism in an American Studies Syllabus – Collaborative, Collateral, and Distributed Learning**

Before closer consideration of two websites, I would like to discuss the course somewhat further in relation to constructivist theories of pedagogy, and bring several terms – collaborative, distributed, and collateral – into play. Without knowledge of the structure of American Studies (or History) as disciplines, I turned to *The American Studies Crossroads Project* website hosted by Georgetown University. The mission statement on the *Crossroads* site describes the project as “dedicated to international networking and curriculum innovation, especially related to the integration of new technologies as well as electronic literacy and other aspects of faculty development. The *Crossroads* website is a space for collaboration and innovation in American Studies” (*Crossroads*). Prior to writing my syllabus I had been able to find a community of American Studies instructors and I was able to see dozens of syllabi for undergraduate and graduate level American Studies courses. Though most syllabi were for upper level courses or for majors and did not necessarily have the kind of foundational exposure I was aiming for in an introductory survey for predominately non-majors, I did gain a much wider sense of the range of

materials that I could incorporate. This collaborative model of sharing resources was one that I hoped to carry over into my own course. My ultimate pedagogical aims were to provide a wide field of relations and concepts – working circularly; in repetition, or repetitions with difference, of exposure to concepts; and through multiple forms and genres (text and media). Sacrificing broad exposure for more depth would have been better – several fewer Puritans, perhaps – but I also wanted to create a field of opportunity where students at many different levels could make different connections.

Despite my own cross-disciplinary shortcomings, I did have an understanding of American Studies as a widely interdisciplinary field that seemed ready made for a multiplicity of theoretical, critical, and pedagogical approaches. Randy Bass writes that “the culture and history fields have undergone a shift in epistemology, wherein where we look for cultural knowledge is more widely distributed than ever before across fields, texts, objects and populations, [with]...a concomitant shift in pedagogical practice that might be called distributed learning” (3). The notion of distributed learning essentially sounds like the critical turn towards “Culture Studies” in English, Anthropology, and other disciplines, but distributed learning might be extended a step further in an American Studies context wherein questions of disciplinary boundaries between or with other established fields might be foregrounded. If there is collaborative borrowing and sharing of resources, knowledge, and methodologies across disciplines, this might also be a mode of engagement with students. Even if using technology or new media in a limited way, this also seemed like a way to think self-consciously or meta-cognitively about rhetorical modes, “standard” compositional skill sets, disciplinary boundaries and authority, and the construction of knowledge from or through a wider range of possibilities. Reiterating the aforementioned set of binaries suggested by Ball and Moeller, and something I have come to understand further in

hindsight, there is the opportunity in American Studies, especially with the use of web 2.0 platforms, to think even further about the binaries between “high” and “low” culture, between reading and writing, and between popular and academic discourse.

In *Experience & Education*, John Dewey discusses constructivist and experiential pedagogy by opposing “traditional” and “progressive” models of education against one another. Dewey seems to have clearly won the argument when it comes to in-class pedagogy in humanities (and perhaps social sciences) courses in secondary education in the United States, but he is worth continued reading because the now standard model of discussion and reader-response based methodology of engagement with a text through dialogue and writing (on paper) seems decidedly unprogressive, perhaps, when compared to what seems possible when thinking about Dewey’s ideas with or through digital platforms. If the tenets of constructivism include ideas of individual play, of building new knowledge from previously held knowledge and experience, and of learning as a fundamentally social process, it seems logical then to extend those ideas further to those materials and tools that students are by and large using and consuming right now in the media and on the Internet. From that, then, valid and salient connections might be made, primarily from or through individual *and* collective affective responses to material – cultural, political, historical, visual, literary – that students see, know, and consume, and also with that which they do not yet know or have not yet been exposed to. The ultimate aim, I think, is to arrive at Dewey’s notion of “collateral learning” as the “formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes.” Dewey says that “The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning” (48) and by extending the matrix of connections and by generating active interest with some students, even if in divergent directions, other students can see a process modeled that they might also appropriate for themselves. Collateral learning occurs by way of

processes of collaboration and distribution, and technology can facilitate this process in interesting and exciting ways.

My initial plan was to design a syllabus around changing representations – literal, figurative, and imaginative – of American landscape (very broadly, from geographies of space to discourse on urban/suburban place), beginning with evocative descriptions from Spanish explorers and moving on historically through the “closing of the frontier,” tenement life on the Lower East Side, to, more recently, post-modern Las Vegas or Celebration, Florida. I envisioned a multi-disciplinary approach drawing upon literature, geography, anthropology, documentary, the visual arts, and political and social history. Students would develop a working knowledge of aesthetic categories, we would land on certain key American concepts (i.e. Manifest Destiny), and I imagined a constructively-designed syllabus with constructionist-based assignments that explored intersections between creative and academic writing (with assignments in map making or ethnographic work), exposure to critical modes (eco-criticism, for example), and all happening within current debates on climate change and resources. I decided against this because students do not know the theme of the course prior to registration (and, perhaps incorrectly, I thought that ideas of landscape would be a tough sell to a body of urban students), but it also seemed to be ignoring the obvious fact that we were in the midst of an historic presidential election. I decided to follow a model others had created – “Exploring the American Identity” – but to try to foreground or sometimes make explicit a set of sub-topics, themes, concepts, and questions that would circulate recursively and reiteratively during the semester with, through, or against the unfolding election. To a certain extent, I was also waiting to configure the course based on the make-up of the class. That I only had one actual American Studies major largely freed ~~myself-me~~ from the obligation to situate or contextualize American Studies as a discipline



and allowed me to work with a constructivist approach more fully (and, in hindsight, I would have gone much further and dispensed with my perceived need to give “full” exposure to a wide range of canonical American writing).

**Reading Forwards, Backwards, and Rhizomatically – Transference, Multiple Contexts,  
and Metacognitive Awareness of Disciplinary Frames**

The course, “Introduction to American Studies: Exploring the American Identity,” was framed by two sets of questions. The first, broad and thematic, had to do with primary readings: what are the relationships between individual and community; what cultural negotiations, political conflicts, or social changes might be observed between different works or historical periods; and how might attitudes towards land, race, and democracy be thought of in relation to questions of identity? The second question was more present-centered in its political implications: how are some of the values, beliefs, or ideologies portrayed in some of our readings invoked by either presidential candidate or party? I had had no reading at that time in pedagogy and I was essentially trying to model my own memory of at least a couple of undergraduate professors who made explicit connections between literature of the past (whether a few decades past or many hundreds of years old) to present events. I hoped to orchestrate possibilities for some connections I had in mind and also to catch students’ interest and be surprised by connections that they had made for themselves.

This was to occur through distributed channels of engagement with material, to be collaborative by having students make connections with their own disciplines or previous knowledge and experience, and to instill distributed learning (i.e. desire for more learning) through explicit, meta-cognitive connections in writing with their own personal, first-hand knowledge and past experience. I wanted to tap into, use, and encourage positive affective

responses to material, when they had them, for constructivist (as opposed to consumptive) ends. By the end of the term, I wanted more obvious collaborative construction of the very syllabus in terms of deciding what we would collectively read and view in light of where interests were taking students and in relation to where we had previously been. My pedagogical aim was to see applicability, transference, and critical understanding of a set of themes or concepts across readings and historical moments, and especially, I hoped, to our present political context. Further, students would hopefully also become aware and cautious of the kind of ahistoricizing tendency or sometimes superficial surface engagement that sometimes happens, perhaps inevitably, in a broad survey course – this, in fact, was where the input from students in history courses or who were history majors became invaluable. A secondary goal was that as students looked at a variety of materials and rhetorical modes and came to see what ideas were used or rearticulated in similar or different ways over time, they would raise questions about disciplinary boundaries, authority, and the process of constructing knowledge in the public sphere.

To better reveal the cultural rearticulations or political reinvigorations (or regurgitations, as the case may be) of particular “American” (re: to the United States) concepts, I partially upended the usual temporal ordering of a syllabus and tried to encourage reading and following of individual interests backwards, forwards, or rhizomatically. I was helped in this by fortuitous timing – the Democratic and Republican National Conventions were happening during the first three weeks of the semester. After several weeks focusing on 20<sup>th</sup> Century political speeches, I went back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and followed a largely chronological trajectory forwards (with digressions to presidential and vice-presidential debates as they occurred). I would occasionally unmoor linear chronology by presenting groupings of text and video around certain ideas, such as Native American writers, early 20<sup>th</sup> Century immigrant voices, or multiple perspectives on

civil rights – my purpose being to create the context for extended awareness of similarities and differences through cognitive “chunking” of ideas and materials. Some of the key words, concepts, and themes explored included questions of “American identity” vis-à-vis individualism (“rugged individualism” to the “maverick”), community, land (the frontier, ownership), labor, interactions with Native Americans, religion, “City on a Hill,” American exceptionalism, disobedience and resistance, hope, change, the role of government, virtues, political oratory, the “American Dream,” the “common man,” autobiography, “Self-Reliance,” slavery, economy and prosperity, the “Melting Pot,” civil rights (African-American; women’s suffrage), multiculturalism, and so on. Materials included text (fiction, non-fiction essays, political tracts, autobiography, letters, philosophy, and poetry). Media and platforms included the use of television (debates and conventions), documentary (various), YouTube links, a class blog (which primarily served as a repository for links, images, and digital archives related to primary reading), political blogs, newspaper editorials, and video of dramatic reenactments and readings of primary texts. Assignments included frequent informal writing on paper, two papers, and a take-home exam. My pedagogical approach was discussion based, with some classes more structured (or chaotic) than others, and on a couple of occasions, carefully guided movement through certain texts.

Many writers on technology and composition discuss the technological divide between “generation-M” and their instructors (Vie) and, further, that this digital divide necessitates an environment of co-learning; and, borrowing Bass’ discussion of an article on cognitive apprenticeship by Collins, Brown, and Holum (2), different kinds of modeling, scaffolding, fading, and coaching, in multiple directions, are required. Abdicating authority came fairly easily given my own self-perceived knowledge gaps with the material. I tried to create an atmosphere

of co-learning – occasional moments of confusion, chaos, and overlapping conversations occurred, but there were also instances of students drawing upon personal experience relative to the readings (i.e. their perceptions of the United States before and after immigration, for a few students), deployment of different kinds of disciplinary knowledge or connection to personal interests, and, with several other students, the triple-major in particular, moments of co-teaching where students were learning as much or more from his knowledge or his facilitation of class discussion. I suspect that the extent of his knowledge might have intimidated some, but several students also described in individual conversations how much they admired his enthusiasm for learning and found his engagement with the material inspiring.

**Concepts in American Studies: “City on a Hill” (from John Winthrop to Sarah Palin)**

Bass discusses Brent Wilson’s notion of “distributed learning” where “knowledge is ‘built by the learner’” through “problem-based learning” (or, for Bass, “inquiry learning”) and “multicultural pedagogies that emphasize the recognition and critique of ‘situated’ knowledge” (4). Citing Pete Honebein, Bass provides a list of pedagogical goals which include “experience in and knowledge of multiple perspectives,” “embed[ed] learning in realistic and relevant contexts,” the “use of multiple modes of representation,” and “encourag[ing] self-awareness of the knowledge-construction process” (4). I am leaving out certain other goals described by Bass, specifically ones that are more hands-on immersive and collaborative through use of technology, but I would like to relate these ideas to Dewey’s problem of how to make knowledge of the past a “potent agent” for “the living present.” That is, I think Dewey’s question is arrived at through Bass’s previously mentioned ideas. Offering “multiple perspectives” in “realistic and relevant contexts” automatically lends itself towards some recognition, and perhaps critique, of “situated” knowledge. And through the right kinds of work, there is, hopefully, more expansive dialogue

that creates meta-cognitive awareness of different rhetorical modes in different contexts or platforms and also greater use (or misuse, or abuse) of information by others (politicians, for example).

That the nation was on the eve of an historic election with a weekly media maelstrom around issues of race, class, gender, citizenship, and democratic participation, that there was an ongoing war (or two), and that the media was regularly covering ongoing stages of economic meltdown provided the perfect “realistic and relevant” context for much of our material. There wasn’t always congruence between election and primary material, but it was exciting when it occurred – reading the words of Paine, Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams on the relationship between government and secular beliefs (Deism) was directly applicable to current discourse around the nature of Barak Obama’s or Sarah Palin’s religious beliefs and how that may or may not apply to the role of government in public and private life. There were some connections that I deliberately tried to orchestrate and others, sometimes surprising, that students made on their own.

A week after viewing speeches by Ronald Reagan in which he talked about the idea of the United States as a “shining city on a hill” followed by Mario Cuomo’s critique or reinterpretation of that phrase, we carefully walked through John Winthrop’s sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” and I clarified historical context (the Protestant Reformation, the difference between Puritans and Separatists, and so on). This kind of circularity paid off when Rudy Giuliani invoked the term during the RNC and Sarah Palin did as well during a vice-presidential debate, in addition to timely news articles that discussed Palin’s use of the phrase. I am hesitant to ever lecture or explain too much because inevitably a couple students will repeat back parts of what I say almost word for word in papers, but doing so in this case did allow students to

leverage a certain base awareness to better consider recent references to “city on a hill” by politicians or in the media. I wanted to provide “multiple contexts...[with] examples that demonstrate wide application...[which is] more likely to abstract the relevant features of concepts and to develop a flexible representation of knowledge” (*How People Learn* 62).

Students immediately understood distinctions between the ways that John Winthrop was using the term compared to the politically expedient or selective ways that Reagan, Palin, and others used the term. Where this worked best, I think, was with one student’s paper that went beyond the comparison-contrast model to make larger observations or raise broader questions about religion, faith, secularism, Deism, and fundamentalism in American politics through close reading of Franklin, Paine, Winthrop, and Palin. The student made connections, previously worked out in informal responses, from a minimal base comparison of texts and without my explicit guidance in that direction.

### **American Studies “Wreaders” – Novel Connections and Missed Opportunities**

This is after the fact terminology, but my desire to create “wreaders” with “integrated competencies” was progressive in a limited sense. That is, novel pairings or groupings of readings *did* lead to novel connections, but it was a missed opportunity in terms of extending “wreading” to active creative-academic constructions that went beyond the standard format of essays and papers or even widening (requiring, as needed) the space for possible communication and interaction. The class blog primarily served as an archive of materials and links, and was abandoned mid-semester. Though I did have an active email list where I would share relevant articles and videos, the flow of materials ran in one direction. Still, my decision to use, albeit in limited way, particular websites on Thoreau and Riis was done to replicate, slightly differently,

the experience I had had with “city on a hill.” They were meant to work within a field of associations and I hoped to see what, if anything, students did within that space.

I did provide some paper topic questions and suggestions, but they were framed so broadly that the questions allowed for a range of potential approaches. Some students floundered without my explicit and direction indication of what they should respond to. Others, though, made many surprising connections which I could not have anticipated and these went beyond the superficial, even if sometimes lacking in historical contextualization. Education in American culture emerged as a powerful meme for many students through readings by Ben Franklin, Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Mary Antin, Meridel Le Sueur, and others, and this intersected thematically with issues of race, gender, class, and immigration, formally with ideas of American autobiographical construction, and meta-cognitively with students writing reflexively about their own relationship (or self-perceived shortcomings thereof) with opportunity, class, immigration, and education – both positively and negatively.

My attempt at supplementing or re-presenting primary textual material in the form of visual media and performance was successful, but I could have gone further. Whitman, or my presentation of Whitman, did not, unfortunately, win many converts (too much too fast, likely), but showing a section of the PBS documentary *American Experience: Walt Whitman* on the “Drum Taps” poems was powerful and effective for students in the way that it presented dramatic readings of poems with Civil War-era photography of wounded soldiers juxtaposed with images of wounded veterans in the current war in Iraq. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was followed by clips of live readings from Howard Zinn’s *Voices of a People’s History of the United States*, including actor Brian Jones reading Douglass’s “The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro.” I think these moments were more effective than when I would

attempt to situate discourse by reading short passages from several academic texts, and one student observed, after the Whitman excerpt, that it was this kind of visual presentation that will keep material alive and relevant. I realize now that more could have been done by creating the opportunity for students to make digital and visual constructions – creative, critical, academic – through various platforms.

### ***The Thoreau Reader* – “Civil Disobedience” Online**

I will now consider two websites that serve pedagogical and archival functions in the field of American Studies – *The Thoreau Reader*, specifically the website’s page on “Civil Disobedience,” and *The Authentic History Center* pages on Jacob Riis’s 1890 work of photojournalism *How the Other Half Lives*. Other websites might be more overtly pedagogical, such as The University of Virginia’s Civil War website *The Valley of the Shadow*, but I would rather instead focus on two websites that I used in my introductory course. I stumbled upon both sites by happenstance and only incorporated each minimally, but I would like to reconsider both, first for what I think each does well, particularly the pages on Riis’s text, and later, for ways that either might be improved, with greater emphasis on *The Thoreau Reader*. The overall website architecture will not be discussed in full, as both are quite extensive. Focus instead will be placed on the specific pages that were used. I had different pedagogical aims for each site at different points in the semester relative to other readings, so I must also acknowledge that and take that into account because that will determine, at least in part, how I think either site “worked” for my ends and also how each site may or may not work more broadly.

Neither text was originally listed as primary material on the syllabus, but both were addressed briefly within the context of other, related readings or for the purpose of anticipating later connections with readings that would follow. For Thoreau, we read half of *Walden*, but I



wanted to introduce “Civil Disobedience” as a concept in American political thought and provide the full text to serve as contrast to earlier political tracts (Paine, notably) and to make association later in the semester with Martin Luther King, particularly for anyone that wanted to go further in that direction in their writing. With Riis, I wanted to introduce an important piece of American photojournalism that provided images of the Lower East Side tenements that we were reading about in other contexts (Henry James’s *The American Scene* and New York immigrant literature from Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska). These sites, as is, might undoubtedly be used in multiple ways, but I am discussing and evaluating them in terms of the context in which I used them and the way in which I might conceivably want them used by students within an alternatively imagined, web-enhanced version of the course. To do this I will first describe the sites, and then consider ways that they might be reconsidered through the use of different semiotic domains, the extent to which they are “multimodal” or “multigenre,” and their level of non-linear or interactive experience (Alfonso, Marco, & Madrid 20-21). I will also briefly make a comparison to *HyperNietzsche* and describe what that particular site offers for the study of Nietzsche that the others do not offer for Thoreau or Riis.

The online pages for Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” that I used in the course are located on *The Thoreau Reader*, a larger website with an expansive archive of material by or on Thoreau hosted by Iowa State University in cooperation with The Thoreau Society. The front page of *The Thoreau Reader* has a photo of Thoreau, links to primary texts with contextual material (photos of Walden, for example), a list of Thoreau’s essays, links to critical articles, and more links to other online resources. Though minimal in-class time was spent on “Civil Disobedience” – it was primarily added to supplement the required readings in *Walden* and in anticipation of readings by Martin Luther King later in the semester – I directed students to the website for the primary

material and, I hoped, exploration of related articles. The site was doing what I constructed minimally with “city on a hill” – showing connections and revealing a variety of other contexts in which Thoreau’s essay was culturally, politically, or historically relevant.

The main page for “Civil Disobedience” provides the original title to the essay, the date it was written, its original title, Spanish translation, and full-text of the essay in three parts. More importantly, perhaps, was a short 125 word editorial introduction that situated “Civil Disobedience” in relation to Gandhi, King, Danish Resistance in the 1950’s, McCarthyism, South African apartheid, and anti-war demonstrations in the 1970’s. Short excerpts to three critical essays are provided with links to full essays, followed by selected quotes from Gandhi, King, and Walter Harding (on McCarthy) about Thoreau’s political and philosophical influence. Finally, there are nine related links to essays contextualizing, associating, or extending “Civil Disobedience’ further to the “Transcendental Legacy,” the Underground Railroad, philosophy of law, ACT UP, as well as to another site hosting full text of the essay with scholarly hypertext annotations and notes.

The site seems to be designed primarily for undergraduates and instructors, or even a more general audience, and it is effective, I think, in the range of materials it offers. I will save a couple specific suggestions for how the site might be improved until the end of the paper, but for now I will mention several potential limitations in its overall design. The site is easily navigable, well organized, and relatively uncluttered; it also utilizes hypertext links to outside articles. It is all text based and word heavy, though, with a lack of color, limited images that are designed into the pages, and no video. Overall, leaving aside features available on some of the links, there are limited modalities to explore, few semiotic domains to interact with, and little to few graphics or images with minimal interaction between the two when they do exist. The organization of hyper-

text does provide for coherent, manageable reading in an orderly fashion, but it does not necessarily facilitate non-linear exploration or more complex embedding or layering of hyper-textual relationships. There is no search function, nor is there a message board or any kind of platform for asynchronous communication and interaction with others. The uniform presentation is orderly, but does not include any scanned images of primary texts or deviate with any playful, creative, or distinctly idiosyncratic formatting.

### **Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* at *The Authentic History Center***

I found and used the full text of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* on *The Authentic History Center* Website – a site subtitled as “Primary Sources from American Popular Culture” which is “owned and operated by Michael S. Barnes.” Barnes, a high school history teacher and enthusiastic collector of American cultural artifacts, seems to be presenting archival material that he has largely or entirely assembled himself. The mission statement says that this digital archive of “artifacts and sounds from American popular culture [...] was created to teach that the everyday objects in society have authentic historical value and reflect the social consciousness of the era that produced them.” Barnes's stated goal of “presenting an authentic *interpretation* of American history” – “*authentic*” as meaning “conforming to fact, and therefore worthy of trust, reliance, or belief” – might strike many an academic as mildly problematic or strange. There is clearly an editorial hand at work, of course, but it is not necessarily the kind of presentation or contextualization associated with a university hosted digital archives. There are several excellent pages on “The Social Reform Photography of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine” at the University of Virginia Crossroads site, but that site does not include the text; and, unfortunately, a site at Yale University on Riis's text that provides advanced search options by keywords is no longer available. For my purposes, it did not matter. While several of my students might have ventured

into the train of articles and links on “Civil Disobedience,” many others would presumably be more engaged with *The Authentic History Center’s* more engaging design and visual presentation. The intentional presentation of the archive “without comment,” particularly the “speeches and news broadcasts [which] are presented for students to experience a level of historical authenticity distinct from written sources,” lends itself towards constructivist learning through experiential encounters with primary materials through diverse media.

The homepage for *The Authentic History Center* has a collage-like design with a number of visual icons that link to other pages and a small sidebar menu organized by period or decade that links to archival materials. The majority of the archive is from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – from the Civil War and onwards – and includes, among other materials, various mass, popular, or “low” cultural items and ephemera, including cartoons, cards, comics, posters, sheet music, and so on, as well as speeches, news broadcasts, and interviews. I am not sure what the overall frame is for what does or does not get included, but the archive is more expansive from antebellum-era through the 1960’s, and then falls off somewhat. There is a subsection of the site titled “Teaching Diversity with Multimedia” that has groupings of images of artifacts broken up by stereotyped or racist depictions of race, ethnicity, or gender, but there is no direct appeal to educators, scholars, students, or a general audience. While some greater contextualization might be helpful, the site does call for a wider range of reading practices through perusal of different genres and semiotic domains.

The site is not entirely without editorial commentary. The full text of Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* can be found under the “Post Civil War” page. In the introductory remarks, Riis’s book is situated as a “pioneering work” which “influenced future ‘muckraking’ journalism.” The prefatory notes also discuss the role of images, the printing and flash

technology of the time, Riis's categorical or problematic flaws, and his moments of real prejudice (and sympathy). The main menu page for the book features the original cover on the left side of the page and a photo of Riis on the right, with the table of contents below. Site pages do not follow a page by page reproduction of the text, but they do copy the format and layout of text, maps, charts, and photos, with each individual site page representing a chapter from the book. In some ways, it is the direct opposite of *The Thoreau Reader's* page on "Civil Disobedience," which offered links to a variety of critical and contextual material. There is none of that here, although, depending on pedagogical intent, the text might be read with the other post-Civil War materials it is grouped with or in relation to larger stereotyped representations of race on the website. As is, the visual design of the pages on Riis is visually appealing and colorful, if not very interactive.

Any critique of *The Authentic History Center* site should be considered in relation to my pedagogical aims. While Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" was added to the syllabus, Riis was not. Rather, what I hoped to do was provide a site that had the full text online (with the original images) that would bridge or mediate between other readings – between the detached and privileged observations of [William Henry James](#) in *The American Scene* and the voices of poor, Jewish immigrant women writing about the tenements from within. I wanted to show visual material on a digital archive – one which offered different rhetorical modes – and might also inspire collateral learning in terms of further interest and further writing in that direction. In some ways, I much prefer the digital contextualization of "Civil Disobedience," although this site is much more attractively designed, clean, colorful, and engaging. Many of the elements lacking from *The Thoreau Reader* are also absent here – no search capability, no space for

asynchronous communication, and no opportunity for interactivity beyond looking, reading, and listening. It, too, is fairly linear.

In terms of the implications for teaching American Studies through constructionist principles and constructionist (digital) practice, this site may be more effective. It is certainly in line with Bass's observation about the greater distribution of materials for locating "cultural knowledge," and the archive as it is now only presents the tip of the iceberg of possible material that might be included. Riis's text foregrounds the relationships between text and image, and the site not only replicates this, it adds another, super-contextual layer by including additional materials that deal with race, ethnicity, and class through intersections of text and image. The site is presented as a personal archive and, as such, it is an illustration of constructivism at work. It might raise questions about the basis or authority of disciplinary knowledge (another student in class, my resident, self-professed anarchist, had his own archive of "radical" left materials; he got into a momentary debate with the triple-major, graduate--school bound student about the validity of a wider range of voices and the elitism in the critical privileging of academic voices). *The Authentic History Center* site as a personal historical archive complicates the simple distinctions between different rhetorical modes, between high and low culture, between the scholarly and the creative, and between academic and popular material.

### ***HyperNietzsche & The Nietzsche News Center***

In my concluding remarks, I will consider ways that these websites, particularly *The Thoreau Reader*, could be reconfigured, and I will also describe some of the work that might occur in a digitally-enhanced version of the class. To further comparative assessment, I am going to briefly discuss a website, *HyperNietzsche*, from another discipline, and list features offered that other sites might replicate. The new home page, re-titled, for now, as *Nietzsche News*

*Center*, offers many features that are not available on the previously mentioned sites, including, on the top menu, listings for: conferences, seminars, publications, events, press listings, links to associations and other databases, and a search function. The site itself is playful in its design and formatting, modeling the top banner on the design usually associated with news formatting of television or an online magazine. There are multiple links, tabs, and visual icons, but the home page is also relatively clean and minimal. The main space of the home page lists “Top News,” and the menu on the right side lists an interactive option for “posting news about Nietzsche,” as well as listings for “What’s New on HyperNietzsche,” “What is HyperNietzsche,” and a link to the “Nietzsche Circle” philosophical community website.

Ancillary to *Nietzsche News Center*, there is a demo version the *HyperNietzsche* homepage that currently holds limited material, but appears as if it will hold more scanned images of original works, manuscripts, correspondence, and so on. Statements accompanying the original site describe it as “inspired by Open Source philosophy” that aspires to “dynamic contextualization” and for “creating an infrastructure for collective and networked scholarship.” Hypertext will allow for text and manuscript “arrange[ment] chronologically, genetically, or thematically, and...allows for systematic interconnections.” My comparison is somewhat limited, though, for two reasons: first, HyperNietzsche is currently in stages of active transition, and second, the site seems to be primarily for scholars and not for direct pedagogical uses. Still, the options that are incorporated could be applied to a site like *The Thoreau Reader* to facilitate a greater level of interactivity, communication, and non-linear exploration through hypertext links. Leaving aside the features that are professionally oriented (conferences and publications, for example), other features could be adapted to meet pedagogical aims for undergraduates, beginning with a more visually appealing design that includes search capabilities of primary and

secondary texts and the ability to submit relevant material (though this would probably require a level of continuous editorial management).

### **Conclusion – Developing Digital “Writers” in American Studies through Multiple Practices**

I would like to conclude with thoughts on how the course itself might be reconsidered to increase asynchronous communication and incorporate constructivist activities that would further bridge the divide between the creative, personal, and academic. In hindsight, I would limit the amount of reading material and enhance the level of engagement through a wider field of interaction, communication, and collaboration. Technology creates more channels of presentation of concepts – repetitions with difference – and, when it worked, I was able to see cognitive scaffolding that progressed from example to comparison/contrast to abstraction to transference. If I was able to do this with the idea of a “city on a hill” through sermons, speeches, editorials, and images, the possibilities are even greater with web 2.0 platforms. Some students may resist what they see as an intrusion of technology into private or play space (just as some resisted predominately text-based reading), but most of them also realize that this is what makes material live in new or relevant ways.

*The Thoreau Reader* presented “Civil Disobedience” in multiple other cultural, political, and historical contexts, but there is no reason that students could not do some of that work themselves by working with and developing wiki-pages for a field of concepts in American Studies. Students could make a wiki page or blog around a concept with text, articles, citations, images, editorials, or video. This would involve writing and designing in multiple rhetorical modes and draw upon a range of writing process skills. This is making visual a process whereby students “explore, explain, extend, and evaluate their progress” (*How People Learn* 139).



If education emerged in the class as a powerful theme in comparative readings of American autobiographical experience and construction of self vis-à-vis students' own feelings and experiences, there is no reason that that kind of affective response and collateral learning (even if it is not as obvious and linear as tracing lines of influence from Emerson to Thoreau or from Thoreau to King) might be tapped into for interesting and creative collaborative exercises. Chris M. Anson and Susan K. Miller-Cochran mention Peter Honebein's seven constructivist learning goals, but I want to cite just one for the way that it might pertain to collaborative wiki work – it “embed[s] learning in social experience” (4). Randy Bass cites Yasmin Kafai's and Mitchel Resnick's definition of “Constructionism [which] suggests that learners are particularly likely to make new ideas when they are actively engaged in making some type of external artifact...which they can reflect upon and share with others” (4). Generating new ideas as or through a social process is, ultimately, more useful and beneficial than solitary work (if difficult to facilitate or assess). Beyond writing skills sets, wiki work might also be a space to experiment with, use, and present methodological processes from other disciplines – ethnographic fieldwork methodologies, for example – and this would also allow students interested in other majors or are undecided to see other processes – from research methods, “formal” and “informal” writing processes, to final artifact – at work.

Digital technology also generates multiple entry points to a concept rather than a top-down, hierarchically-driven flow of information. This is non-linear and, perhaps, circular or reiterative; this kind of experience on the Internet with hypertext is reflective of how we actually learn. More extensive possibilities for asynchronous communication through blogs, message boards, or listservs can also distribute learning to a wider field. There is a temporal ordering and spatial flow on a train of blog postings, but the process of creating blog posts – with text, images,

video, and links – is a process of creating deictic lines of signification and networks or frames of knowledge (Brooke; Krause). How would a student-generated weblog on “Civil Disobedience” be different from a wiki-page be different from a mash-up be different from a remix? Or, why not have students write about “Civil Disobedience” on another blog, or even write to more prominent bloggers on the Internet? These kinds of interactions would likely be novel, might be empowering, and would quite likely raise the stakes for personal investment in their own writing.

Making the process visual might extend the lines of connection to community, school, or other personal networks (locally and globally). Increasing the level of potential visibility of writing, in whatever ways, would likely encourage some students to think meta-cognitively about their own writing, clarity, voice, and style. There might be some critical meta-thinking about departmental boundaries and different disciplinary approaches to critical work, but, more likely, CUNY students from abroad might, especially if prompted, think more meta-cognitively about ideas of American Studies, nation, citizenship, and identity in transnational ways (and this would reflect current trends in the field – not that that’s the goal). And while I sometimes did prompt them in this direction, some of them wanted to write from or through this perspective much more and I was not entirely encouraging because of a few fixed formal notions that I was holding onto. Why not write about primary American texts by thinking imaginatively, personally, and creatively from multiple temporal and spatial positions (cultural, political, and ideological) which are facilitated through web 2.0 platforms. The authors of the NRC’s report state that “schools need to develop ways to link classroom learning to other aspects of students’ lives (How People Learn 26) and instructors need to try to recognize when “students may have knowledge that is relevant to a learning situation that is not activated” (*How People Learn* 68).

Further possibilities include creative application of core concepts through making remixes or mashups and making or designing representations of American identity through media convergence as a constructivist digital practice. More pragmatically, this is helping students gain digital fluency skills which will help them later. Vie cites Selfe's and Hawisher's proposal of "the term 'literacies of technology' ...as a phrase that can 'connect social practices, people, technology, values, and literate activity, which, in turn, are embedded in a larger cultural ecology'" (14). Barak Obama, the president-to-be, was using technology and social networking in a way that no candidate ever had before (as successfully, anyways), and some discussion, interactive participation, or creation along those lines would have been interesting.

An election is not necessary for this kind of work to occur in the classroom, but it can help. After preliminary reading and work, students might have been encouraged to post on presidential blogs or discussion forums. As Caroline E. Dadas writes, "websites must enable visitors to invent usable knowledge. When users combine what they already know about the issues with the information provided...they arrive at an understanding of the issues...as a springboard to eventually making... 'valuable contributions'"(419). Students move from passive consumption to active, critical, democratic participation. These are the kinds of digital practices that might answer Dewey's articulation of "the problem of discovering the connection which actually exists *within* experience between the achievements of the past and the issues of the present" (23).

Using web 2.0 platforms and tools should happen in concert with an attentiveness to possible relationships between primary and secondary materials and current events and to the kinds of knowledge and experience that students bring to a classroom, but one should scaffold carefully so as not to overwhelm. But when used thoughtfully and creatively, they can enter into

what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly refers to as states of flow, and, as Daniel Anderson discusses, these other literacies “provid[e] individuals with opportunities for action, a sense of competence and control, heightened awareness of personal identity, avenues for creative self-expression, and a sense of agency” (44). If concepts like “city on a hill” or “civil disobedience” are flexible, so too is a student’s understandings of them. It is only a few steps further from thinking about political rhetoric as performance, which they all get, to thinking about their own performances of voice through different platforms. Technology in the classroom should encourage experimentation towards that end and not enforce disciplinary gatekeeping, reinforce hierarchy of knowledge, or simply replicate previous models of academic work.

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