Writing American Studies?

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Abstract

from: Introduction, Writing American Studies. By Simon J. Bronner (Chair and Distinguished Professor of American Studies, Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, and Editor-in-Chief, Encyclopedia of American Studies online): "Having previously featured forums on the teaching and learning of American Studies, I move discussion of the practice of American Studies to its products in the form of articles, books, and essays. Increasingly, publishers use the label “American Studies” to identify the content of publications and that raises the question of whether this label derives from the background of the writer, his or her departmental or institutional affiliation, or a distinctive rhetoric. General readers in addition to students and colleagues might recognize the subjects of American Studies inquiry to be literature, music, film, folklore, or historical events, and legitimately ask, if anything, characterizes the style and approach of writing in this inquiry as American Studies. In this forum, three prominent writers working in, as well as with, American Studies reflect on their productivity and the trends of the [...]"

Reference


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2. Writing American Studies?

By Deborah L. Madsen (Professor of American Studies at the University of Geneva, Switzerland)

The question of this forum leads directly to at least two issues of disciplinary methodology: that of the writing and of the project. What is an American Studies project – distinct from interventions that address “America” but within the domain of a sibling discipline (literary studies, history, media studies, sociology, anthropology, and the like)? And, given the embeddedness of American Studies within the academy, what are the implications of the genre of academic writing for the discipline? These are key questions for us as scholars and teachers. We are judged largely by the quality of our published writings; we inevitably teach clarity of thought and expression while we teach the content of our courses. I will now drop the “royal we” because the thoughts that follow arise from my atypical position as a British-educated Australian expatriate working in American Studies in francophone Switzerland.

The international context in which I work has made me acutely aware of the generic nature of the academic essay in English, as it cuts across cultural lines to instantiate a shared mode of scholarly communication. This style, represented in the most prestigious journals and books published by the A-list presses, is characterized by qualities of originality (the presentation of a “finding”), rationality (internal and disciplinary coherence), impersonality (intellectual impartiality), contextuality (location within an intellectual tradition), and seriousness. Not only the tone but also the structure of the essay is shaped by generic convention that dictates a beginning with the statement of the problem or question, then the thesis statement or argument, and description of scholarly method; the substantive middle of the essay that develops by stages the evidential argumentation; concluding with a return to the thesis statement and review of the evidence that has been presented. This is the Anglo-American protocol, which dominates expectations of the academic essay, but it raises the issue of how convention works in other cultural contexts, e.g. the French dissertation: an extended meditation on an issue, concluding with the primary motivating point or argument. A colleague at Geneva memorably described the dissertation as an academic strip-tease, where all is revealed only at the very end. The Anglo-American assumption that all should be exposed at the outset is quite foreign in this academic culture. This has nothing to do with language competence and everything to do with the discipline of academic writing. I spend a lot of my time “unteaching” the dissertation and I recall a series of memorable discussions with the late American Studies Association president Emory Elliott about teaching thesis-driven academic writing in a range of cultural contexts. Such cultural difference complicates recent efforts to “transnationalize” writing practices within American Studies.

These generic conventions can make an American Studies essay academic but they do not distinguish American Studies as a distinct discipline. An inevitable and important departure from convention is the inherently political nature of American Studies; our subject arises historically from studies of the nation-state and its global impacts. Without this “American” element no writing can be labeled “American Studies.” Further, as an instance of “Area Studies” American Studies is interdisciplinary and distinct from interventions concerning America in disciplines such as History, Political Studies, Literature, each with its own distinctive methodology. For me, American Studies is a paradoxically defined interdisciplinary discipline, where a number of disciplinary practices
converge in the concept of America. At the center of this inter/disciplinary-specific methodology is
the nature of the research question, the problem that motivates and unifies the writing while
demanding exploration from multiple disciplinary perspectives. In my work, that question is: why is
American exceptionalism such an enduring cultural narrative? This leads to the analysis of U.S.
self-representation in many kinds of documents (historical, political, legal) and media (written,
visual, digital) especially those that engage issues of migration, indigeneity, and national self-
fashioning. I cannot escape the requirement of interdisciplinarity when I choose to pose a question
such as this. Unsurprisingly then, it is Richard Slotkin’s writing that for me stands as the stellar
example of American Studies scholarship: for the elegance of his prose, the powerful effectiveness
of his arguments, and the sophistication of his interdisciplinary methodology.