

A Queasy Scholar Considers Cultural Studies in the United States

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According to Ernest Boyer's more broadly defined research categories, I am engaging in scholarship of exploration in this essay, an exploration motivated by the collision of commitments in my personal life with my profession.¹ Therefore, it will of necessity cross borders. I will set up my exploration by providing a series of short vignettes from which I will draw exploratory conclusions that point to the danger that faces Cultural Studies as practiced in the United States.

VIGNETTE NUMBER ONE

The trajectory of this collision became evident approximately eight years ago. While in Washington, D.C., as a teaching assistant in a seminar on Human Rights, we visited the office of our state's congressional representative. Although dealing with the conservative legacy of the Reagan period, this particular congressman was a die-hard liberal. Coming into the conference room at the end of the day, he was visibly tired and frustrated. During our conversation about human rights' issues, our congressional representative indicated that he was very upset that the Seattle Public School system had just created a school for homeless children. I was very surprised at his comment. A school for homeless children seemed like a good thing? (I had not yet read Foucault!) To be brief, his concern was that by institutionalizing a school for homeless children, we were in fact institutionalizing homelessness. By creating institutional and bureaucratic structures to administer it, we were creating a whole new set of relationships, normalizing definitions, responses, and more that would actually perpetuate homelessness. I was puzzled then, but since reading Foucault's work on prisons and mental illness I understand his concern.²

VIGNETTE NUMBER TWO

The year after I accepted my current position, my colleagues and I decided to rename our Foundations program to Cultural Studies in Education. Although I had been educated as a philosopher of education and others were historians and sociologists, we felt that what we shared in common and what would be exciting to teach, were different lenses with which to view the many intersections between education and culture. Additionally, we wanted to shed the modernist connotation that we had "foundational" knowledge. This name and programmatic change led to my teaching our first "Introduction to Cultural Studies" seminar. Being partially acquainted with the body of Cultural Studies literature, I had to catch up. I read the work of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Douglas Kellner, Lawrence Grossberg, and others with great interest.³

In these writings, the origin of Cultural Studies was traced to the Frankfurt School of the 30s-50s, and of course, the British School in the 60s, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS). There was even talk of an American School of thought originating in Chicago with John Dewey that focused on his concern for community and communication. In addition, Angela McRobbie

and other feminist writers were mentioned. The message through all of this was that Cultural Studies is a western phenomenon and is primarily produced by university scholars.

While one of the hallmarks of Cultural Studies is that it is ever-evolving and open-ended, nevertheless, there are some identifiers that help us understand what it is. Broadly speaking, the responsibilities or tasks of Cultural Studies are to identify lines of domination, legitimate the study of popular culture by problematizing this culture, and as Hall describes, "Make visible the processes through which certain forms of culture become dominant."⁴ In so doing, one examines concepts such as ideology, pleasure, desire, audience, resistance, hegemony, and delivery systems, such as the media, government, the schools, churches, and families.

Let me digress before turning to my next vignette in order to expand on Grossberg's notion of Cultural Studies. He indicates that Cultural Studies always involves itself in projects and formations, a formation being a response to a particular political project, paying attention to its historical and social context.⁵ As such, projects are always incomplete, and by extension, Cultural Studies, engaged in such projects and formations, is always incomplete. Briefly, Grossberg identifies other identifying characteristics of the field. He indicates that it is radically contextualized, that it must be forever searching for a new sense of epistemology because while it rejects universalist and totalizing narratives, it is uncomfortable with relying only on the particular. Grossberg further identifies it as anti-reductionist, meaning that it is forever forming and examining alliances, that is, exploring the always changing relationships between things. Cultural Studies is theoretical and political in specific, contextual ways; it is politically driven in that it pays attention to the material conditions of the world. To do so, it values interdisciplinarity and a processual approach. Its method is articulation, some have called it "bricolage" as well.⁶ Grossberg describes this basic process as a "non-linear expansive practice of drawing lines, mapping connections... a theory of how contexts are made, unmade and remade."⁷

Grossberg then makes an important distinction that will get us back on the trail of exploration. Drawing upon Hall's declaration that Cultural Studies is not a discipline but an "anti-discipline," he indicates that Cultural Studies has two aspects that set it apart from other fields.⁸ One aspect is that of production of knowledge (which is the more traditional expectation of scholarly work), and the second aspect is that of distribution.⁹ Hence, as scholars we can produce the knowledge, but then we must distribute it to folks who can do something with it. At a minimum, it is our co-responsibility to interpret our scholarly jargon so that it is accessible to "the people." In another context, Cornel West indicates that Cultural Studies has value *because* it is about "how to keep political work alive in an age of shrinking possibilities."¹⁰ West's comment implies that the more important of the two aspects is the second, which is certainly a topsy-turvy version of scholarly responsibilities. Overall, there must be a focus on performative acts, both in the doing and the studying.

VIGNETTE NUMBER THREE

The graduate student population in many programs of our College of Education is dominantly international. When I taught “Introduction to Cultural Studies,” a Sudanese man, active for years in human rights work in his home nation, challenged the readings’ Western bias and announced that Cultural Studies came from Africa. He questioned all the attention Birmingham was getting. Wanting to promote a respectful and dialogical learning community, I agreed that the themes of Cultural Studies may have permeated many cultural settings and historical times, but that as a defined academic discipline (anti-discipline?), Cultural Studies was identified with the Birmingham Centre and this was its genealogy. Still, he persisted.

I began to look more closely. I saw that some of the founding academic names came to Cultural Studies, not through the university setting, but first with their work in adult education centers, including Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. In this regard, Grossberg states that

All of the founding figures of cultural studies...started their careers, and their intellectual projects, in the field of education, outside the university, in extramural departments and adult working-class courses. It was in such adult education classes that Raymond Williams first started to look at the idea of culture.¹¹

The origin for this kind of work will lead to one of my exploratory questions.

VIGNETTE NUMBER FOUR

I was given an article by Handel Wright, a professor of Cultural Studies and Urban/Multicultural Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee, entitled, “Dare We De-Centre Birmingham?”¹² In this article, Wright critiques the hegemonic notion that Cultural Studies has its origin in Europe. (This is a rather ironic move since Cultural Studies itself aims to challenge hegemony.) His first sentence reads, “It is a little-known fact that cultural studies proper started in Africa in the 1970s.”¹³ (Of course my thoughts returned to my Sudanese student’s question!) Wright continues to provide the history behind his bold beginning sentence. He indicates that cultural studies originated at the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre in Kenya. Again, the word “project” appears and its appearance and context makes me realize that “project” is not just a nice symbolic word, but actually means a project, a *doing* of something. In this case, this cultural studies project centered around a play written by involved parties, including well-known Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o and others. Besides the benefit of the project itself, what is instructive is the official response to it and how that response includes institutionalization bestowed by awarding an academic mantle. Ngugi states,

the authorities changed the name of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Center to Kamiriithu Polytechnic and Adult Literacy Center, while banning all theater activities in the area. At the entrance of the open air theater (now destroyed) there stood a board with the inscriptions *Muci wa muingi* in Gikuyu, and *Mji wa umma* in Kiswahili. Both phrases meant the same thing: A People’s Cultural Center.¹⁴

Wright notes that “the people” resisted by placing signs on this cultural space in their African languages in order to keep it politicized and resistant. This next statement points to the dilemma that I will articulate: “Thus while Birmingham worked to politicize the academy, Kamiriithu struggled in fact to remain non-academic and

non-institutional in the attempt to remain popular and political.”¹⁵ What I find fascinating is that the official governing body invoked the language of institutionalized schooling in an attempt to control. This is when I remembered my experience in Washington, D.C. with institutionalizing homelessness.

As an aside, but an important one that reiterates the project-based nature of cultural studies and the de-centering that is necessary, Wright names other cultural studies movements including Culturology in Russia in the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s in the United States, and Danish Folk Schools. Of course, added to that list would be the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee that was active in the Civil Rights movement and continues today, and the great Freirean popular education literacy projects.¹⁶ Wright describes how Cultural Studies takes place outside of the academy as legitimate Cultural Studies work. He says,

Cultural Studies happens heuristically in the streets, in the theatre, on the dance floor and even in cyberspace. It is not just the study of culture, it is also the observance, heuristic evaluation and the performance of culture. As I have pointed out, some cultural studies theorists point neither to a particular school nor exclusively to a systematic study of culture in the traditional sense but to performative acts as the manifestation of culture.¹⁷

From the above discussion it is clear that Cultural Studies is to be seen as an agent of change and the trajectory of that change should take us towards social justice and equity. Not only does it provide “voice,” but it has been designed to be overtly political and in many cases, liberatory in the face of oppression. On one hand, this is exactly why I am drawn to the “anti-discipline” of Cultural Studies. This is the personal side of the collision. On the other hand, I have a great fear that the way that Cultural Studies is being institutionalized in universities of the United States will no longer evoke social change. Perhaps it will engage in its inquiry and rhetoric, but it will not be a “project.” This makes me a queasy scholar because one of my commitments has been that the personal or private are inextricably linked with the public and professional. Is this collision making me choose sides? Here are two dilemmas that I take away from the background that I have sketched.

DILEMMA NUMBER ONE

Folks in the United States have a penchant for institutionalizing things; even with radical and liberal concerns, we often fall back to neo-modernist notions that we can contain it, understand it, know it, and fix it. This is more than the old-fashioned nation of liberal, centralized, big government. Rather, it implies a fundamental paradigm of how we see the world. In this regard, I am uncomfortable with the conservative call for a “thousand points of light” that would, on their own, somehow take care of the incredibly complex socio-political context of these seemingly unfettered late days’ capitalist agendas expanding into a world market, as well as our local lives (for example, the school voucher movement). Such a view pretends that these institutional contexts do not exist or impact us significantly. All of this is to say that the dilemma to which I am pointing is not one with a political stripe — it cuts both ways.

Add to this tendency to institutionalize or make institutions invisible is that each institution has its own vocabulary. As we know, the critical pedagogy movement has been critiqued for using an estoric language and making its home in the academy,

even as it critiques it and benefits from it. A similar critique has been leveled at Cultural Studies for being elitist. Grossberg himself cautions us “not merely from our assumption that we already know the answers, but, even more, from our assumption that we already know the questions.”¹⁸ At the same time he wonders whether or not “the people” (include in here our teachers, students, and parents) even care about our questions. Why has Cultural Studies moved to the academy? Who benefits? Who loses?

DILEMMA NUMBER TWO

I think that I can intellectually find my way through the concerns expressed above, at least to a certain depth. However, there is something else that bothers me more. I recall my excitement at first reading bell hooks’s statement that “the classroom is a radical space of possibility.”¹⁹ I resonate with the notions of transformative or liberatory pedagogy and attempt to practice it and to become more bold. A number of years ago I heard hooks and West speaking together at a public forum. At the conclusion of their presentations and dialogue, the audience was invited to ask questions. One African American man in the audience challenged hooks and West to “take it to the streets” and implied that they were hiding in the proverbial “ivory tower” and not really involved where social action and social change was made. Having always disliked this criticism, I applauded hooks’s response. She said, in essence, “the work I do in my classroom is social action insofar as it is transformative.” I cheered inside because I believe that as well. Yet in this exploratory journey, I am wondering now, is it enough? Is what I do in my institutionalized university classroom enough to fulfill the distribution aspect of Cultural Studies?

To answer this question, I have to look at constraining factors embedded in the institution of the university. I have identified five, all of which are interlocking.

First, a familiar question for most of us: What is rewarded in the university? Depending upon the kind of university at which one works, certainly the prestige is in the scholarship and research, with some good teaching thrown in. If one works at a teaching university where teaching and working with students is primary, unfortunately, this university probably does not have the same prestige as research universities. What is clear is that service is not highly rewarded. In fact, one most likely will be denied tenure if one’s strength is in service (and I am not talking about sitting on committees, but in projects). Yet, if one’s strength is in research and/or teaching, one is not likely to be denied tenure. At a recent conference a presenter who was doing ethnographic fieldwork among people from his own ethnic background at the same time he lived in a different part of town than they did, referred to himself as a “freeway ethnologist and a hotel presenter” because he drove on the freeway from his community to the community of those he studied, then came to academic conferences to present his findings. Another presenter that day made reference to the closed loop of the academic conference setting, something which I have called “academic incest.”

Second among our constraints is time. Service or projects that truly change things for our young people and our schools take an inordinate amount of time. There

are the necessary tasks of writing grants and time to conceptualize and plan, but most crucial is the time needed to build relationships and coalitions and solve the human problems that come up when we are involved in projects together. Time is a constraint because of the reward system of the university. If I spend too much time on service (cultural studies projects), then I do not have the time to write and publish well, or even to teach in a manner that is rewarding to myself, let alone my students. I shared this dilemma with some of my colleagues and they suggested the following solution: Research it! Turn my social action project into a research project, and better yet, write a grant in order to finance it! Is this the solution? I explained to my colleagues that I am a philosopher. I do philosophic research and that means that I sit and read, think and walk, talk and write, listen, stare into space, and then repeat the process. Out of my research comes writing, publication (hope springs eternal!), and an impact on my teaching. But in addition, my research motivates me to take social action in my field. For example, after spending some research time on gender issues and guest editing a journal on the topic (notice both the research and publication), I was motivated to do something more. I wanted to set up a culture circle dialogue for young women of middle school or high school age. One thing I knew for sure was that *I did not want to research these young women*. No doubt, by engaging in this social action that grew from my research and teaching, I would learn new things that would then inform my future research. Looking puzzled, my colleagues suggested that I could do a joint research project with someone who wanted to do the qualitative ethnographic aspect. But there was no time for just a project.

Third, while this is not a new idea, there is still a concern that I am foisting my own political and personal commitments onto others. This challenges the fabled notions in the academy of objectivity and neutrality. I teach in both an alternative democratic education teacher preparation program and in our general education teacher education program. To date, I have used different texts for the same basic classes. Why? Because I believe I cannot impose my commitment to democratic education on folks who have not chosen it. Just now I am deciding that I should use the same texts for both. We know that those who say they are giving students an objective, neutral overview are just as clearly presenting an ideology. Such an approach demonstrates that this ideology has become so normalized that it is invisible to most.

The fourth constraint is that in most universities, discreet subject disciplines still are the normal mode of organizing education. Here, postmodern and feminist curriculum theorists help challenge this mode. But unless one is teaching at an explicitly interdisciplinary university or college, the institution itself perpetuates the fragmenting, containing, and defining of a discipline. Once in a discipline, one digs in deeper through the books and journals one reads and in which one publishes; we go to conferences with the same disciplined minds and we truly are not very dangerous to anything in the status quo. Wright warns us when he says that the "University left itself open to the possibility that popular culture would in fact be examined under the academic gaze and appropriated for exclusively academic ends rather than taken up in the community in general in an involved, participatory

manner.”²⁰ In other words, the university can co-opt Cultural Studies as it defines how Cultural Studies’ projects and popular distribution be accomplished.

Fifth and last, I respond to hooks with her claim that the “classroom is a radical space of possibility.” This one troubles me the most because it is a belief that I hold deeply. I return to ask myself now, is it enough? Yes, I see the classroom I share with my students as a radical space for possibility, but two things haunt me about remaining satisfied with this notion.

One is that the structure of the university itself does not support transformative change through learning. We have students for too short a time. They generally are not in cohorts where one can build a learning community; we are not connected to the community or the outside-of-school world of the students; we do not co-teach with a group of faculty. These are some of the actual structural constraints that keep the classroom from being a radical space. There are some inroads into this, such as interdisciplinary classes, service-learning as it is truly intended, and expeditionary learning. I have often told my students that I would love to have them with a core group of faculty for an entire year or two, similar to an elementary school classroom. Think of the depth of understanding that could be engendered.²¹

The last aspect that haunts me about hooks’s claim occurs especially in education where we place so much hope for social betterment on the profession. Education tends to be a conservative field. Research has demonstrated that while we like to call upon the rhetoric of social betterment and reconstruction, it has been shown that by and large, education as we know it now, is failing many students and is not leading to better lives.²² Education is operating along the lines of social reproduction that leaves the status quo intact. Therefore, will one class with me or hooks be enough to inspire these young educators to transform their classroom radically? What will happen when they are placed in the culture of schools? It takes great effort to withstand the conforming pressures of that environment with its visible and hidden curriculum.²³

And so my exploration comes to a temporary stopping point. I am not usually a pessimistic person, but at this point, I have to respond to my own concern with which I began this journey, that yes, the American university is dangerous to the intent of Cultural Studies if it continues on its current course. And this makes me queasy. Wright tells us that “despite its continued marginalization, cultural studies is proliferating, reasonably well-funded and is fast acquiring academic legitimacy.”²⁴ We must stop and ask if academic legitimacy will further the vision of Cultural Studies or will fool us into thinking we are doing something that we are not. I add to this conclusion several questions for further exploration. In an effort to prevent the academy from legitimizing cultural studies without co-opting its goals, we should ask, why is it that Cultural Studies started outside of the academy in the first place? Are there specific contextual circumstances that created the work that is expressed through Cultural Studies? What is unique and transforming about popular education movements? In turn, this may lead us to ask two questions: Should and can we transform the academy so that these heretofore non-university Cultural Studies projects can emanate from our work? Or perhaps if we resonate with the express

mission of Cultural Studies, should we step outside of the academy and look for a new job? For me? I do not want to give up on the notion of “teacher as transformative intellectual.”²⁵ I just know that right now, that notion is famished.

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1. Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990).
 2. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).
 3. See these and other books by the same authors for a background in the field: Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Stuart Hall, et al, eds., *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980); Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); and John Storey, *What Is Cultural Studies?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).
 4. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” in *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996).
 5. Lawrence Grossberg, *Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 252.
 6. Jean-François Lyotard, “Defining the Postmodern,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993), 171.
 7. Grossberg, *Bringing It All Back Home*, 261.
 8. Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” 46.
 9. Grossberg, *Bringing It All Back Home*, 269.
 10. Cornel West in *The Production of Personal Life: Class, Gender, and the Psychological in Hawthorne’s Fiction*, ed. Joel Pfister (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).
 11. Grossberg, *Bringing It All Back Home*, 375.
 12. Handel K. Wright, “Dare We De-centre Birmingham?” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (1998): 33-56.
 13. *Ibid.*, 33.
 14. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-colonial Kenya* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1983), 51.
 15. Wright, “Dare We De-centre Birmingham?” 34.
 16. *Ibid.*, 34, 42-44.
 17. *Ibid.*, 44.
 18. Grossberg, *Bringing It All Back Home*, 389.
 19. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
 20. Wright, “Dare We De-centre Birmingham?” 35-36.
 21. Some universities across the United States have created such programs as The Evergreen State College in Washington, and the Audubon Expeditionary Institute in Maine, just to demonstrate that there are effective alternative ways to educate at the college level.
 22. See Jean Anyon, “Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work,” in *Transforming Curriculum for a Culturally Diverse Society*, ed. Etta Hollins (New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1996), and Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991).
 23. See Herbert Kohl, *I Won’t Learn From You and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment* (New York: The New Press, 1994).
 24. Wright, “Dare We De-centre Birmingham?,” 37.
 25. Henry Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1988), 151.