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978-0-521-88345-0 - The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History

Elizabeth Renker

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

How does a topic – any topic – become a school subject? And how does a given subject find its place in the school system? What factors render it appropriate to a particular grade level, kind of school, brand of teacher, or type of student? The answers to these questions vary from one subject and one era to another. Indeed, every subject has its own curricular history. Individual curricular subjects in turn comprise a larger knowledge category that we typically refer to as “the curriculum.” While, in its most rudimentary sense, this term designates a school’s regular course of study, the historical phenomenon of the curriculum is not regular but variable and contingent. Curricula might or might not vary from school to school within and across specific time periods. The changing historical incarnations of the curriculum serve as what Richard Hofstadter and C. DeWitt Hardy call “a barometer by which we may measure the cultural pressures that operate upon the school.”<sup>1</sup> In the pages that follow, I trace the history of one curricular subject in particular. Although still most commonly known as “American literature,” that designation is now on the brink of change.<sup>2</sup> In that sense, this book frames both the beginning and the end of “American literature” in the curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

Although elementary and high school curricula widely offered American literature by the late nineteenth century, colleges and universities typically resisted its encroachment on the curriculum until the mid-twentieth century. Types of resistance varied from total curricular exclusion to various forms of strategic marginalization, for example, restricting American literature to introductory-level survey courses while refusing it space in advanced undergraduate and graduate classes. Howard Mumford Jones, who chronicled the academy’s hostility to American literature, dubbed it in 1936 “the orphan child of the curriculum.”<sup>4</sup> This book recovers and traces the complex historical processes that transformed American literature from a marginalized subject into one deemed worthy of higher study – that is, from a subject that did not count as serious

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advanced knowledge into one that did. It is necessary to begin this tale before the emergence of American literature as such, with two key elements of its prehistory: the massive curricular transformations of the 1870s and the birth of English departments.

The classical curriculum that had largely organized study in the antebellum college toppled after 1870, in response to growing cultural pressures best emblemized by three institutions in particular. First, the new Cornell University opened in 1868 as, in benefactor Ezra Cornell's famous words, "an institution where any person can find instruction in any study." Second, President Charles William Eliot became president of Harvard University in 1869 and inaugurated the elective system there. While Cornell and Harvard differed dramatically in fundamental educational ethos, embodying the distinction between vocational and liberal higher education, these otherwise competing institutions nevertheless united in legitimizing the idea of a broader curriculum. In so doing, they not only challenged but also demolished the curricular criteria of the traditional colleges. Third, The Johns Hopkins University opened in 1876, redefining higher education as a form of advanced scientific expertise wholly independent of collegiate prescriptions. Its educational philosophy functioned as what Frederick Rudolph aptly calls a "successful assault on the undergraduate course of study."<sup>5</sup>

The curricular transformations of the 1870s also created the specific institutional matrix in which American literature would later make its bid for curricular status: the English Department. English, too, was not always a college subject. It emerged and took shape as an area of advanced study in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, along with the other modern languages.<sup>6</sup> At this time, the professor of modern languages became a new job category. As Michael Warner has shown, these new professionals invented literature as a "knowledge subject" that would not only warrant but require the professional methodologies they developed.<sup>7</sup> Yet not all forms of literature became knowledge subjects simultaneously. American literature famously lagged far behind English in its installation as a college subject and field of scholarly expertise. When I interviewed Daniel Aaron and R.W.B. Lewis, prominent early scholars of American literature, I asked both in what year they thought the field had achieved institutional status. Aaron said: the 1930s; Lewis: the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for this widely noted lag, a full half century even by Aaron's more modest estimate, remain a historical puzzle.<sup>9</sup>

Published histories of the field typically cite the late 1920s as the turning point toward professionalization: the foundation of the American

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Literature Group of the Modern Language Association in 1921 was followed by the inauguration of professional journals (*The New England Quarterly* in 1928 and *American Literature* in 1929); in addition, a growing body of published research and an increasing number of dissertations in the field were under way and accumulating momentum by that time.<sup>10</sup> While historically significant, these advances were nevertheless merely an interim stage of historical change. Jones's 1936 "orphan child" label indicates that marginalization persisted despite apparent progress measured in other ways, a point further attested by the oral histories I recorded with Aaron and Lewis. Even its staunchest advocates still typically described American literature as "parochial," as historical but not belletristic in interest, and as inferior in quality to "the work of the world's greatest artists."<sup>11</sup>

Scholarship thus far has focused primarily on the history of published scholarship and on the history of the canon as the historical keys to the professional transformations of the 1920s.<sup>12</sup> These elements are of course intimately related, focused as they are on research scholars as well as the authors and texts they determine to constitute the field's knowledge base. I add to these important studies a third foundational dimension of the field's history that has remained invisible precisely because it has little to do with research, authors, or books. This missing piece is the social identity of American literature in the school system.

My largest thesis is that American literature's entrenched image of aesthetic and historical inferiority was the product of specific kinds of social inferiority that were attached to the place of American literature in the school system. Its curricular identity was associated with non-elite kinds of schools, teachers, and students, forms of social inferiority in turn ascribed to the nominal content of "American literature" as a body of texts. The social inferiors at issue were particular teacher and student populations in actual schools, matters I treat in elaborate historical detail. Various institutions of higher education with different educational aims, the different and shifting groups of teachers employed by these institutions (shifts I conceive both synchronically and diachronically), and the disparate student populations they served all shaped the curricular identity of American literature.<sup>13</sup> The social functions associated with American literature as a curricular product were thus a foundational part of its identity *as* a product, quite apart from the content of its canon.<sup>14</sup> To achieve canonicity in the higher curriculum, American literature had to work itself out of this inferior social identity.

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Like other curricular subjects, American literature thus had (and has) a much broader social identity than that affiliated primarily with either its canon or its experts. The books and authors one might think of as “really” comprising American literature constitute only a fraction of what it signifies in the sphere of social relations. My argument thus significantly adds to and also in some ways reverses the post-1980 debates about the history of the canon, which often focus on either the subversive or conventional content of literary texts as the signifying core of their cultural work.<sup>15</sup> I establish that American literature’s social functions in the educational system were foundational to its curricular identity, quite independent of the content of its canon.

Indeed, the subject called “American literature” has its own history of canonicity apart from any particular imagined list of classic books. It too negotiated the transformation from noncanonical to canonical within the college curriculum in ways that intersect but are not coterminous with the history of the authors and texts construed as canonical at any given time. These are discrete registers of the canonical and must be disentangled if the historical process of canon-formation is to be fully understood. For ease of reference, I will henceforth call the canonicity of American literature as a subject “curricular canonicity” to distinguish it from the canonicity of individual authors and texts.

One emblematic example of the discontinuity between these registers of the canonical would be the reception history of the genteel tradition over the course of the past century. As Paul Lauter has traced, the accelerating demotion of the Fireside Poets (Longfellow, Whittier, Bryant, Holmes, and Lowell) and the culture of sentiment after the 1920s occurred alongside the accelerating professionalization of the field.<sup>16</sup> It would be easy to misconstrue the nature of the causal relationships between the two phenomena. American literature did not achieve its curricular canonicity because it had finally found an inherently canonical group of authors, such as the newly discovered Herman Melville. As John Guillory argues, there is no such thing as an intrinsically canonical text.<sup>17</sup> In the 1920s, new authors were indeed supplanting old favorites and the number of canonical authors was shrinking dramatically.<sup>18</sup> But the fact that “American literature” has reclaimed the sentimental and the genteel in the past two decades as a fresh, exploding, rediscovered, and re-evaluated area of scholarship is a historical marker for the fact that their expulsion in the 1920s was not a necessary but a contingent phenomenon, contingent upon particular social formations.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the curricular canonicity of American literature is not predicated on any

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particular construction of the content of the field. The inherent literary quality of American literature – or lack of it – is, simply put, beside the historical point.

The identity of American literature as a knowledge category during the years of my study fluctuated, at times dramatically, in response to a broad array of competing cultural impulses. Lauter points out that

differing versions of an American canon contested for visibility and power during the decades prior to the First World War. After, an essentially new, academic canon emerged and exerted an increasingly hegemonic force in American culture. A more detailed study of the *institutions* central to canon formation will help clarify these processes.<sup>20</sup>

The following chapters will delineate such contests and fluctuations as they related to the specific institutions of the educational system. There, American literature moved into the curriculum at one type of school, out at another, and sometimes in and then out at the same school. The individual agents involved (including students, teachers, textbook authors, department chairs, university presidents, and so on) did not and could not understand, from their vantage, either the full range of signifying operations in which their action and inaction were embedded or their eventual outcomes. Teleological histories of the field treat the emergence of American literature as if it were the endpoint of a linear process in which its true literary value was finally discovered.<sup>21</sup> But the story of American literature could easily have turned out differently. Nothing about change is inevitable; literature does not stand apart from the historical processes that determine value in any given time and place.<sup>22</sup>

My study follows the case method to recover the actual, local historical processes that are, by definition, lost in studies focused on large-scale national developments. The institutional transitions affecting the status of American literature did not occur in exactly the same terms at exactly the same time across the landscape of higher education. Rather, American literature entered the curricular canon through a historically contingent process of debate that varied from school to school and decade to decade. It emerged as a contested new field by way of a process of erratic gains, losses, and shifts. I thus linger on failures and setbacks as much as on professional advancements. These clashes within the larger domain of American literature's history as a form of knowledge reveal cultural stakes extending well beyond the covers of books. The tumult of the tale bears clear, although certainly not simply analogical, relevance to the current moment in higher education, in which we still uneasily attempt to adjudicate the value and place of "new" fields.

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In keeping with the particularity of my local method, I work with an entirely different archive than many histories of the field. I do not focus on the secondary archive of published research about American literature by its early scholars. Instead, I center my analysis in the primary archive of bureaucracy: course catalogues, hiring records, administrative bulletins, presidents' reports, minutes of department meetings, curriculum development materials, and so on. Here, I agree with Lauter, W.B. Carnochan, and David R. Shumway that the vast archive of institutional records is crucial to understanding the genealogy of the curriculum we have inherited.<sup>23</sup> Universities are not Platonic ivory towers preserving and teaching timeless ideas: they are material settings through which ideas are transmitted, understood, and afforded social function.<sup>24</sup> Carnochan points out that transhistorical myths about the curriculum have impeded our understanding of the actual history of universities, with the result that the repetitive crisis-mongering about the curriculum is often an "airless" debate unaware of its own genealogy.<sup>25</sup>

I place my case studies within the larger social history of professional expertise, one of the most dramatic social developments of the post-Civil War period.<sup>26</sup> A rampant spirit of specialization suffused everything from spectator sports (which began to organize itself in professional teams and leagues) to leisure activities (bicyclists, for example, could subscribe to more than half a dozen specialized journals on cycling) to the organization of work life (in which people increasingly identified themselves by their occupations or professions). A flurry of professional organizations reoriented the relation not only between individuals and their work but also between the general populace and the now-credentialed experts whose professional assistance they sought. The formation of organizations such as the American Ophthalmological Society (1864), the American Chemical Society (1876), the American Bar Association (1878), the American Surgical Association (1880), the American Forestry Association (1882), the American Institute of Electrical Engineers (1885), the American Pediatric Society (1888), and the National Statistical Association (1888) became a reflex of the era.<sup>27</sup>

The university was an integral part of this knowledge system, and it was within the broader context of specialization that the American Ph.D. was born to certify the new profession of scholar-professor. Prior to the founding of Johns Hopkins, the small number of Americans in search of doctorates had typically gone to Germany.<sup>28</sup> Hopkins invented the phenomenon of the American Ph.D., thereby utterly transforming the doctorate in the United States. For the first time, the Ph.D. became a

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degree with both a social meaning and a professional function. The Hopkins model rapidly spread nationwide and, through its influence, the Ph.D. increasingly became a required credential for college and university teaching. As this new Ph.D. model with its foundational notion of scholarly expertise came to dominate American higher education after 1876, the lives of students and teachers, well beyond the particulars of graduate programs, also changed dramatically. For example, it was not until the 1890s that college study was systematically organized into subject areas called “departments,” which is now so standard as to seem inevitable. This specialized conception of knowledge developed in tandem with the emergent job class of the knowledge expert.

I treat four institutions of higher education, which I present as roughly emblematic of disparate educational models: Hopkins, which represented the revolutionary ascent of the research model; Mount Holyoke College (which opened as Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1837), emblematic of the old-style female seminary; Wilberforce University (which opened as The Ohio African University in 1856), whose institutional contours had to respond, however uneasily, to competing models of “Negro” education; and The Ohio State University (which opened as The Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1873), founded on and committed to the land-grant model of education for the “industrial classes,” as directed by the Morrill Act of 1862.<sup>29</sup> These institutions varied in educational aim, region, faculty composition, and student body. They managed, often struggled, to serve their own local needs alongside external pressures exerted by national developments in higher education and American culture more broadly.

Since the eventual emergence of American literature at any given school was antedated by years, sometimes decades, of institutional phenomena that shaped when and how it later arose, each chapter begins by assessing developments that preceded the appearance of American literature *per se*. These phenomena were nevertheless integral to later developments and should be understood as such. Thus each chapter traces the founding ideology and early history of the institution in question, examining the nature of the faculty and student body and the school’s educational goals. Since American literature was typically housed in English Departments, I also attend to the founding conceptions of English that would later shape the kind of space afforded to American literature. When I turn to the ways in which American literature began to carve out a curricular place within these local institutional conditions, I focus on particular curricular turning points, especially the point at which



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American literature achieved curricular stability in the English Department. What that stability meant, as well as when and how it occurred, varied from one institution to another; consequently, not all chapters cover an identical time period in the same way or at the same length.

I stress rather than elide local distinctions. Indeed, I argue that differences from one case to another are essential to understanding the competing conceptions of value at work in this historical process. As Mary Poovey argues in her history of New York University, scrupulous attention to local conditions acts as a corrective to large general claims about how universities and curricula actually operate. Laurence R. Veysey too, in his magisterial history of American universities, notes that broad schema are of only limited usefulness, since most actual institutions diverge from large-scale generalizations.<sup>30</sup> My local archives foreground the ragged edges that have been trimmed, hence lost, from other accounts of the history of the field, rendering visible the marginal, disparate, and losing forces that the large-scale narrative has expunged.<sup>31</sup>

Chapter 1 focuses on the birth of the American Ph.D. degree at The Johns Hopkins University and on the vast institutional repercussions of this development. Hopkins reinvented American higher education as the province of professional scholar-experts. It also forcefully promulgated “English” as a new professional field that was the domain of expert “scientists.” The ideology of English as a knowledge subject at Hopkins defined American literature there as inferior: I show in programmatic and curricular detail how the new Hopkins ideology of “research” defined American literature as inappropriate to the rhetorically and practically masculine world of the professional research scholar. Far from being a merely theoretical objection, this ideology generated specific curricular and programmatic decisions that marginalized American literature classes, relegating them to the university’s most female division, the College for Teachers.

In the institutional turbulence of the late nineteenth century in which the Johns Hopkins model was ascendant, other longer standing educational models met their demise. One of these was the female seminary, a common nineteenth-century form of the school. Chapter 2 traces Mount Holyoke Female Seminary’s institutional history in the avant-garde of female education, as well as its historically early American literature curriculum. I then show how this old-style seminary redefined itself as Mount Holyoke College in 1893 in response to new external pressures generated by the changing climate of American higher education. Part of this redefinition included expunging American literature from the



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curriculum. American literature's associations with lower schools and the women who taught in them marked the field as anti-professional in the new university culture of the Ph.D.

Chapter 3 turns to Wilberforce University, one of the first institutions founded for the higher education of "Negroes." I show how ideologies of education for African-Americans in the postbellum period illuminate the place of American literature at Wilberforce, where it entered the curriculum by way of the normal school rather than in the "College Division," which was committed to liberal arts training. One of the few professions open to educated African Americans was that of teaching black students. American literature functioned as an appropriate subject for African Americans because it would suit their social and occupational limits. Subjects defined as "liberal arts," on the other hand, functioned ideologically during this period as "equal" to white education. To these white subjects African-American students had restricted access. The installation of American literature at Wilberforce enacted social programs meant to limit curricula, jobs, and status for black people.

Chapter 4 considers the radical innovation of the land-grant movement and its ethos of practical education. Turning to the case of The Ohio State University, I explore how the ideology of practicality affected the liberal arts in general, as well as English and American literature in particular. I trace the early, inherent suspicions toward the liberal arts in the land-grant movement because of their cultural elitism. At Ohio, the curricular status of American literature underwent a steady process of downgrading in the English Department after its emergence in 1890; nevertheless, the consolidating ethos of the English profession that gradually devalued American literature at this time eventually came into stark conflict with the extramural forces of nationalism during World War II. American literature would finally receive an enthusiastic curricular embrace at Ohio State at this time. Ironically, because of the practical services it could render in the cause of nationalism, it even outpaced the status of the field of English that had consistently marginalized it. This case presents a powerful example of the competing and chaotic pressures that often drive institutional change – pressures that institutional rhetoric neither understands nor acknowledges.

I have chosen not to write studies of the schools often construed as American literature's most significant institutional pioneers, such as Duke University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Columbia University. My premise in fact contests the assumption that those are the stories that most require telling. The intellectual point cannot be overstated that, by

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definition, every college and university in the United States that was in operation during the period in question engaged the macro-level social and institutional formations that are my subject. In that sense, this book could be expanded thousands-fold and each new case would aid our fuller comprehension, whether the school in question is Duke University and its founding of the flagship journal in the field or the impoverished Wilberforce University teaching American literature to post-emancipation blacks. Two of my four case studies focus on institutions of higher education for African Americans and women, schools that were not, in the terms of their day, elite institutions establishing the major graduate programs and journals or hiring the most prestigious scholars. These are marginal and as-yet untold stories of the field's history that add substantially to what we know about American literature's diverse social and institutional functions. Schools where American literature pedagogy functioned to train students with socially circumscribed opportunities are as important to our understanding of the social functions of the curriculum as the history of Ph.D. programs placing their graduates on the most influential faculties. Even schools that did not teach American literature in any substantial way are as important to a full understanding of the cultural phenomenon of American literature in the higher curriculum as those that taught it aggressively. As I show in the case of Johns Hopkins, for example, the omission of the subject from the curriculum there was as motivated and significant as its inclusion elsewhere.

Just as I have not focused on the institutions typically thought of as leaders in American literature studies, I have also not focused on the major secondary studies or the leading scholars around whom a knowledge community began to converge, especially after 1920. While such subjects come up in passing where instrumental, they are not my focus. As I noted earlier, these topics have been the nearly exclusive focus of work on the history of the field because of the linked phenomena of professionalization and published scholarship, and have already been ably covered at length by others.<sup>32</sup> By the time of the professional turning point in the late 1920s, American literature had already had decades of institutional life that existing studies have not yet assessed. The fact that its institutional life was mostly on the outskirts of English departments who kept it there does not alter the fact that this was a form of institutional life nonetheless. Failures, setbacks, false starts, progress followed by regress, and irregularities from one institution to another across the landscape of higher education are characteristic of American literature's