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Richard Slotkin Oral History Interview, Mar. 19, 2014

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Professor Richard Slotkin  
Second Interview; 19 March 2014  
Recorded at the Wasch Center  

NANCY SMITH: After our first interview, you mentioned that you would like to expand on the original development and later expansions of the American Studies program while you were directing it.

RICHARD SLOTKIN: Indeed. When I was hired, the people who interviewed me expressed interest in my starting an American Studies Program. After I’d been here for most of the first year, I actually sat down with some people and put together a model for what that program should be. They had never had a program here that was really a curriculum, so the idea was to put together something that would be a curriculum, a group of courses that would mutually reinforce each other.

So I did that. I had written out a model that was based on the program I took at Brown. We had an introductory lecture course in Intellectual History for a year, and then seminars that focussed on different aspects of interdisciplinary work. It really got a lot of cooperation from people in other departments. Dick Buel in History, later Don Meyer, Dave Swift in Religion, and the first seminar we put together was done as a colloquium, and I think I had maybe a dozen faculty come in in the course of the semester to do presentations for the course. It was really very cooperative and very supportive, and when they hired Don Meyer to direct the program, we had a senior person who was in charge, and it really developed from there.

The basic components were originally History and Literature in various forms and combinations. Then, starting in I think it was 1969, I got a semester in the Center for Humanities, which had just been changed to provide fellowships for faculty. So I created a seminar that Jeanine Basinger helped me plan, in which we did American popular culture, mainly literature, popular literature, but we also had a film series in conjunction with it, and there was a General Custer film series. Just films on the theme of General Custer.

That was really the start, first of all, of my working with Jeanine on film, learning about film from her. She’s just the most knowledgable human being in the field, although at the time time she was not a tenure-track faculty member, she was an
adjunct. So I started working with her and with Joe Reed on films for American Studies. It was at that point that Joe, because of his interest in Film, came into American Studies, although Joe’s field was English Literature and he’d done Faulkner as well, but he started working with us on this new program. So we had, initially, this notion of Film in connection with American Studies.

As you reminded me last time, John Frazer had been teaching Film within the Art Department, and Jeanine was also offering courses that way. But what was different was that we were using film in a non-film setting. We were using film for Cultural History, and that really opened the field up.

And opened American Studies up to different kinds of approaches. Through that route, over the years, Film became a larger and larger element of what we were doing. Jeanine came in initially with—I wouldn’t call it a joint appointment, but an appointment in which her role in American Studies was specified. So film became a very important component of us, and we—Joe Reed and I—became an important component of what was being taught in Film. Augmenting what had been just John Frazer, originally.

We realized along in there that one of the advantages of American Studies was that, at a time when all of the disciplines were changing, people who wanted to work beyond the boundaries of their discipline and try something new—and try it out in a classroom, perhaps before they did it as scholars, but maybe at the same time, could do it within American Studies. It was really very simple. All they had to do was say they wanted to cooperate, cross-list a course, and sit down with us and talk, so that all throughout the 1970s and into the ‘80s, American Studies became a kind of clearing house for all kinds of new things that were going on.

Colin Campbell gave us a grant to assess future directions in American Studies. What we did was to use the grant to bring in outside evaluators and speakers to talk about what was new in various fields that we had actually selected ourselves, and explain to the campus at large, as well as to us, what was interesting about this and how one would go about bringing it into the curriculum.

Smith: Outside speakers from other universities?

Slotkin: Other universities, yes. So we had Robert Sklar on Film, Ted Hershberger on Social History, an important person at that point, and Alvin Kibell on Literary Theory. It
was fabulous. We did for a while integrate what was called then the “new Social History” with the study of American Studies. That was really interesting, because the new Social History emphasized quantitative methods rather than interpretive and textual studies. But we managed to merge the two, and Film--Sklar’s advice on Film was to now be a formal part of it, and that also helped Film to get greater levels of support from the University.

Literature we had a pretty good grip on anyway, and that was really very interesting. We also had brought in Herbert Guttman, another person to talk about Labor History and the way in which the new Labor History would fit in with what we were doing. Guttman was a specialist not only on Labor, but also on Slavery. So that his discussions led partly to developing courses that were consonent with African American Studies--which was always a separate entity.

Also, there was a really weird thing with Labor History. Mark Slobin from Ethnomusicology came to lunch and basically asked Guttman “of what use is Musicology to the study of Labor History?” Well--Workers sing all the time! And ethnic groups that were part of the working class had their own musical cultures, and Guttman said: “I can’t think of a more valuable addition to understanding the culture of Labor than to study an ethnomusicological angle on it.” So Mark developed his courses on Yiddish Theater Music and Popular Music and that whole stream. At that time his speciality was the music of Afghanistan, and he developed his interest in American ethnic music in part out of these conversations.

Smith: So you were doing some amazing cross-pollinating.

Slotkin: Yes. And Film, having begun this expansion in partnership with American Studies, eventually becomes a separate Department. Same thing with Women’s Studies. When Women’s Studies was first started with course work by Sheila Tobias, sometime in the ‘70s, Don Meyer was actually a leading figure at that point in Women’s History. He was just completing his big book on the subject, Sex and Power, which was a very important book, so he was interested in that area. We sponsored Sheila Tobias’s course within American Studies. Eventually that spun off into a separate program, leaving behind the interest in Women’s Studies as a component of what we covered.
So you’ve got this core faculty and other people passing through, developmentalists from other fields passing through, teaching us stuff, which then gets played into the American Studies Core Curriculum, and transforms that as well. It was really a very exciting and interesting time to be working in the program.

Also, Art History and the History of Material Culture, which Lilly Milroy developed, was something that we pushed for. We negotiated with the Art Department for an appointment in American Art History that led to Lilly’s appointment, and she brought the Material Culture aspect to it.

So I kept directing the Program, with a few breaks for Sabbaticals, when either Joe or Clarence Walker took over. Clarence brought the African American stream well within our Program. Relations with African American Studies were very uneven, because African American Studies was very uneven all through this period. Sometimes it had almost no curriculum, sometimes it had a very clear curriculum. Bob O’Meally really pulled that Program together, but that was fairly late in the cycle that we’re talking about: that was the ‘80s. But we always had a strong African American component within American Studies.

I kept directing the Program until 1995-96, about twenty years. And then I decided it was about time for somebody else. Basically, what Wesleyan said was, “If you’ve got some new ideas, here’s a program to work on. See what you can do with it.” So I essentially turned the program over to Tricia Hill and Ann Wightman. They developed the Americas Initiative, which linked American Studies with Latin American Studies--and we were the first program in the country to make that connection in a formal kind of way. That’s still going.

Smith: What directions, or what other turns, might the program take?

Slotkin: Well, it’s already incorporated Ethnic Studies and Sexuality Studies in various ways. Which is what’s most current in the field at the moment. The institutional status has changed: It is now a Department. One of the problems we had over the years was that we had no faculty of our own. Except English had, I think, set up two positions which they agreed would be half in American Studies. It was hard to find people who cold teach non cross-listed American Studies courses, until we became a Department.
We were always able to negotiate it, but it was time-consuming and difficult and bureaucratic to get that put together.

Smith: So you always had to work with the dean?

Slotkin: Well, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, and later the Divisional Dean. And negotiate with individuals and departments, really, in order to get the people that would be able to teach courses for us.

Smith: My sense just in listening to you is that you didn’t have to fight for this; you had to work for it, but I’m assuming you had the sympathy of the Administration.

Slotkin: No, there was a certain amount of fighting that had to be done, because there were times in this long period when faculty resources were very scarce. The History Department that might in a given period be short of Americanists, might say we can’t afford to let one of our people teach a course that isn’t cross-listed with History. So if we needed the course, we’d have to make various kinds of arrangements for that.

Over the years, basically, though it was work, there was some degree of fighting, but we were very successful. At the time I left, we were the largest interdisciplinary major in the University, and I think we are the second largest major in the University. Things have changed since then. But that’s where we were then.

Smith: Do you still do anything with it, return to visit?

Slotkin: No, when I was here, I really was here. I worked very intensely on my teaching and the other University political things that had to be done, and then when I retired, I decided I really wanted to make a break with all of that, and focus on my writing and my family and other kinds of things. It’s partly my personality; with me, it’s all or nothing, so either I’m one hundred percent working on a thing or--let somebody else do it.

Smith: You never felt a wrench?
Slotkin: No, no wrench at all. I felt I had done the job. I had done the job well, and it was finished and it was time to move on to something new.

Smith: Good. It would have been sad if you’d been standing outside, peering hopefully back in through the windows.

Slotkin: Well, Wesleyan makes it easy to do that if you want to. I’ve been asked to come back and teach a course at the Wasch Center, but it’s just not what I want to do at this point.

To continue with the history a little bit. At a certain point, and I’m trying to get the chronology right, it’s got to be around 1990 or so, the interest in Film was clearly sufficiently great so that Film needed the kind of resources--begged, borrowed, or stolen--that American Studies had. But essentially, all we had was Jeanine and John Frazer--who at that time was reducing his commitment to Film--and all of the resources for Film had to be filtered through the Art Department. It was unsustainable on that basis. Having got American Studies up and running and prospering, Joe, Jeanine and I started working on getting Film the same kind of independent curriculum building strength that American Studies had.

It took years. We first made Film an interdisciplinary program, which it was, specially at that point with Jeanine, Joe, and me doing it, and Leo Lensing as well, and Akos Ostor from Anthropology. So it really was interdisciplinary, and we had to work through the Advisory Committee and the Educational Policy Committee, and go through all kinds of inspections and outside evaluations and so on, to become an interdisciplinary program. And then since programs don’t have tenure track positions--they can’t hire--we eventually had to move to being a Department. So that was really a period of intense work, a lot of paper work, a lot of meetings, a lot of back and forth, a certain amount of yelling and screaming, for Film to then become a Program.

And Jeanine’s strength on that was clearly preeminent; but Joe and I in American Studies were supporting it all along the way. And the precedent of American Studies was useful in getting them that authority.

Smith: My own impression from that time on campus was that Colin Campbell was very sympathetic to the Film Program.
Slotkin: Yes, but there is a tremendous amount of cultural inertia built into the Wesleyan system. A rigidity about what a “program” is and what a “department” is and what a “discipline” is. It made no sense anymore to say that Departments represented disciplines. They hardly ever did here; and the fields were changing to such an extent that it was absurd to speak of them in that way. In many fields, not all obviously. Religion is not a discipline; they are not theologians over there. They’re interdisciplinary scholars of world religions. The College of Letters has tenure-track appointments like a Department, but it isn’t a single discipline. It’s an interdisciplinary endeavor. But the bureaucratic mind, not just of the Administration, of the faculty: “You can’t do it,” “You can’t change it,” “You can’t change the rules,” “You have to play by the rules,” “You can’t give a program hiring authority.” Well, what that means is, if you want hiring authority you have to change a program into a Department. It was silly and time wasting, but it had to be gone through.

There’s a joke which is appropriate to this: A Priest and a Rabbi argue for years, with the Priest trying to convert the Rabbi, and the Rabbi doesn’t want to hear it. Finally the Rabbi says, “OK I’ll convert.” So they go through the ceremony, and at the end of it the Priest takes the baptismal water and sprinkles it on the Rabbi and says, “There, now you’re a Catholic.” This is when fish had to be eaten on Friday, so the Rabbi invites the Priest over for Friday dinner--and he’s serving turkey. The Priest invites the Priest over for Friday dinner--and he’s serving turkey. The Priest invites the Priest over for Friday dinner--and he’s serving turkey. The Priest objects: “This is how you start out being a Catholic?” he asks. The Rabbis says, “No problem!” He takes some water and sprinkles it over the slices of turkey and says, “You’re a fish; you’re a fish; you’re a fish.” And that’s changing a program into a Department: “You’re a department; you’re a department; you’re a department.”

Same people, same courses, same project.

Smith: Do you think any of the pressure came from administrators or Admissions wanting to keep departments looking and sounding distinct and different? Keeping the image clear for outsiders?

Slotkin: I don’t think it had anything to do with Admissions. It had a lot to do with the ideology and the special interests of the Departments. They had a certain way of doing things; they had a certain privilege, and not extending that privilege to a competitor.
History, for example, at one time saw American Studies as competition, and didn’t want us to be able to compete.

Smith: But Brown was looser. My son was there, and my sense was that the composition of majors there was very fluid.

Slotkin: But majors were very fluid here. What was crazy is the students could do practically any combination of things. And the University would let faculty put together any combination of courses, but having put the curriculum together, they wouldn’t give you the authority to staff the curriculum. It makes no sense: If you’re a major, you’re a field; if you’re a field, you need faculty; if you need faculty, you should have a right to hire the faculty—which we eventually did have, the right to have a share of appointments within particular fields.

Smith: And you did.

Slotkin: And we eventually got it, but not without, as I said, whining and screaming and carrying on.

Smith: I wish I’d been a student here.

Slotkin: It’s always fun being a student here. That was for me a very good time.

Smith: Is there anything we’ve left out?

Slotkin: One thing I neglected to mention before was that, doing all this work with American Studies in that period when we were acting as a clearing house for other fields, it really changed my scholarship.

When I wrote Fatal Environment—which was my second book, published in 1985—what I was doing in that book was incorporating the new Social History with the study of myth and popular culture that I had started with Regeneration Through Violence. That book was really literature and history, but with a literary-critical base, and the new Social History really opened things up so that I was able to take cultural studies and link it to
the material base—that was: changes in the way business was done, changes in the population, changes in the actual shape of the country—the things that the mythology is adjusting to. Because before that, the model was really more a kind of psychologically based reading of the way in which certain stories reflect certain states of mind.

This allowed me to put that in a social context that I hadn’t really developed before. So the book was very long, in part because the first quarter of it was a revision of *Regeneration Through Violence*, so it was a major, major re-ordering of my scholarship, and of the way that I thought about things.

And then the film work that I did was integrated into the third book in the series, *Gunfighter Nation*, which came out in ’92—though the work for that was really basically done in the 1980s. I had actually written *Fatal Environment* and *Gunfighter Nation* as one humongous text and then systematically broke it up into two distinct projects.

It was a fifteen year project to produce that, and there was constant feedback between the material I was developing for courses and the material that was working through the scholarship.

And to me, that was the unique thing about working at Wesleyan. It allowed the harmony that could develop between scholarly work and work in the classroom. That feedback wasn’t really a detraction, in the long term, from the scholarship. Although actually, while you’re teaching, it is hard to find time to do other stuff. But intellectually, it was very reinforcing.

(Interview concluded.)