

Presidential Address, SEA Convention, 2005

Zabelle Stodola
SEA Presidential Remarks
Alexandria, March 2005

The Accidental Colonialist: Notes on Academic Choice and Identity

Back in November thirty of you received a rather unorthodox message from me announcing the subject of this talk and requesting information. Rather grandly, I said that I wanted to provide some notes towards a current ethnography of early Americanists drawing from different academic generations. Then I mentioned that in his presidential address at SEA 2001, memorably titled “Aching in the Archive,” David Shields discussed the thrill of discovery. But what interested me, I stated, was what got us to that particular archive, not so much what happened there. So I asked this sample of early Americanists what originally attracted them to the field and why they were drawn to specific research topics. My 30% return rate was rather better than the standard 2% for surveys, though I must say that it was mostly the self-identified literature specialists that responded. I mention this not so much to criticize the rest as to explain why the reflective comments that I incorporate into my talk may seem predominantly literary.

Not everyone came to the field exactly by accident. So before proceeding any further, let me examine the term “accident” more closely. Remember *The Accidental Tourist*, that quirky book by Anne Tyler about chance, risk, identity, and fulfillment? Emotionally paralyzed by his son’s death, Macon Leary retreats into safety and predictability. But a chance encounter with the funky dog trainer Muriel propels him into an initially risky but ultimately vibrant and fulfilling relationship with her. Albert Bandura, one of the twentieth century’s most influential psychologists and the father of Social Cognitive Theory, says that “Under certain conditions . . . fortuitous events set in motion constellations of influences that alter the course of lives” (“Exploration” 95). Bandura first published a famous article on the subject in 1982 titled “The Psychology of Chance Encounters and Life Paths” then reviewed and revised his theories in 1998 in another essay, “Exploration of Fortuitous Determinants of Life Paths.” He defines a chance event as “an unintended meeting of persons unfamiliar with each other,” and continues, “Although the separate chains of events in a chance encounter have their own causal determinants, their intersection occurs fortuitously rather than by design” (“Exploration” 95).

So I was particularly interested that most of my respondents recognized some unpredictability regarding their choice of early American studies or of particular research areas. And many further indicated that their first unexpected exposure to the field was tied to an individual mentor. This is not surprising, for as Bandura states, “Fortuitous events can take impersonal forms, but the interpersonal varieties are the common ones that carry the greatest potential impact” (“Exploration” 95). For example, in his introduction to

Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment: Essays Honoring A. Owen Aldridge, Leo Lemay admits that he was unsure about entering graduate school, so he tested himself by registering “for what I then considered to be the two most dreadful-sounding courses that the University of Maryland’s English Department offered. . . . Bibliography and Methods and Colonial American Literature. To my surprise, I enjoyed them both enormously; and in the latter course, Owen Aldridge made me a colonialist” (iii). Lorraine Carroll “sort of backed into early American Studies” after taking a seminar with Larzer Ziff and writing an essay on Hannah Dustan. Michele Tarter received crucial encouragement from mentor Mary Klages. While Dan Williams, originally interested in creative writing and contemporary narrative theory, found himself moving all the way back to the eighteenth century to understand personal narratives. “Discovering these texts,” he muses, “changed the course of my studies and, as it turns out, my career.”

As for me, I was originally interested in twentieth-century American literature when I arrived at Penn State. I had decided to go there because it offered the best financial aid, even though I was still living in London when I accepted it and had no idea where State College was. Once there, however, I encountered the formidable Harrison T. Meserole who—not coincidentally at that time—was both a bibliographer and a colonialist like Owen Aldridge. So I joined Harry’s early American groupie graduate students and read Mary Rowlandson. I am still moved (as I was then) when I read her viscerally powerful prose reflecting on her captivity’s residual emotional effects, “I have seen the extreme vanity of this World: one hour I have been in health, and wealth, wanting nothing: but the next hour in sickness, and wounds, and death, having nothing but sorrow and affliction” (*Rowlandson*, ed. Derounian-Stodola 40).

Several respondents acknowledged the importance of mentors after graduate school. Let me quote Sharon Harris on this point: “I have found the men and women scholars in early American studies to be particularly generous in their encouragement of young scholars, in their support of one another, and especially in their enthusiasm for the rapid growth of ideas in the field.” Singling out Pattie Cowell and Carla Mulford in her own case, Sharon adds that their encouragement when she was new to the profession “made a significant difference in my interest as well.” Lisa Logan echoes the same sentiment, “I was very lucky in my mentors after graduate school, and I believe that is because it is possible for us to know one another’s work in a smaller field.”

But with or without a charismatic mentor to initiate or consolidate bonding among scholar, field, and text, the process by which we focus on subjects of inquiry often remains hazy. Bandura acknowledges that ambiguity so infuses the psychology of chance encounters that fortuity remains challenging to theorize and test (“Exploration” 98-99). For Bill Scheick, too, the most profound explanations for interest in a field “remain beyond the horizon of consciousness” (his words) to suggest “the manifest fruitfulness of mystery within the complex of human motives.” Bill, Lisa Logan, and Michele Tarter, among others, felt as if their fields had chosen them. Some colleagues even spoke of an almost spiritual connection

to their research areas, like Michele, who experienced in her very first graduate course on early American literature “a piercing moment of clarity” that “this was my field.” When the class read Elizabeth Ashbridge’s spiritual autobiography, Michele decided to work on Quaker women and found the archival work involved “utterly life-transforming.” Indeed, the lure of early materials and particularly of the archive is so strong that scholars’ reflections sometimes employ the rhetoric of addiction. Dan Williams: “I was hooked before I knew I was hooked”; Pattie Cowell: “And of course, once the archives hook you, there’s no getting unstuck. Even when I do work outside early American studies, I can’t seem to kick the archive addiction.”

But more seriously, many of us decide on certain specialties for political and ideological reasons. As academics, we are particularly fortunate in being able to combat through our research (as well as our teaching) what Anthony Giddens terms the “personal meaninglessness” of contemporary life (9). If we want to, of course. In *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Giddens states, “Each of us not only ‘has,’ but lives a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life” (14). A number of respondents tied their research interests to the rise of feminism and feminist studies, for instance. Pattie Cowell began a graduate paper for Everett Emerson on why early American women didn’t write poetry and, as she says, “got the surprise of a professional lifetime. There they were—dozens of women poets.” Sharon Harris too has explored feminist theory and the recovery of women’s texts, most notably in her book *American Women Writers to 1800*. Lisa Logan, increasingly committed to “a more activist approach” to early American women writers explains, “There is something that these women can teach us if we’d only listen—about our country, about social justice, about living in a world.” While Lorraine Carroll observes, “I have to say that the combination of feminist methodologies and queries and the ‘antiquarianist’ predilections I acquired in the dissertation research have stayed with me. . . . I am committed politically to looking at the ways that early American materials have been used [and, she infers, abused] ideologically.”

Some ideological issues also find expression through an overt interest in aesthetics as related to texts and genres. So Bill Scheick initially determined to move beyond “intellectual history to reveal aesthetic patterns” at a time when early American literature pretty much meant Puritan texts and stylistic analysis meant “the plain style.” Dan Williams has committed himself to analyzing “the textual imposture of scoundrels and rogues . . . marginal figures who had the audacity to publish narratives of their lives” and also to looking at ecocritical issues and strategies in early texts. And Lisa Gordis finds herself particularly drawn to rhetorical sites in Puritan and Quaker texts concerning theology, literary theory, and language.

Such commitments to knowledge, ideology, and aesthetics are ways in which we define ourselves personally and professionally. Ideology reinforces sense of self, and sense of self reinforces ideology. Anthony Giddens explains, “Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or

even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography” (53). What he terms “the reflexive project of the self” is, and I quote, “the process whereby self-identity is constituted by the reflexive ordering of self-narratives” (244). A coherent sense of identity reaching back to the past and into the future positions us for the greatest fulfillment individually and collectively, for negotiating and engaging with what he terms “life politics,” namely, “the politics of self-actualisation, in the context of the dialectic of the local and global and the emergence of the internally referential systems of modernity” (243). Indeed, although it sounds contradictory, fortuity and fatalism sometimes collide.

Self-identity. Life politics. Reflexivity. How do we combine our own life narratives with those the world tells about us? Apart from Harry Meserole, one of my other teachers at Penn State was Philip Young, a Hemingway scholar who used to mock his institutional designation there as “Our Hemingway Man” (Young ix). Sometimes I wonder if I haven’t become “Our Captivity Narrative Woman” at my own university and beyond. I continue to be drawn to captivity narratives, I believe, because my own ethnic background is so very mixed (Armenian, German Jewish, Irish, English) and because the texts enact culture clashes, culture-crossing, cultural confusion, and cultural exchange. These narrative patterns are both familiar and familial to me. My father used to tell the haunting story of a distant Armenian relative whom he remembered from the 1920s only as “Mariam.” During the deportations of Armenians from Turkey before the First World War, twelve-year-old Mariam was driven into a column of women and children on a forced march. En route, Kurdish villagers sometimes carried women into concubinage or took children to act as servants or to replace lost family members. Initially, a Kurdish family abducted Mariam to be a servant, but later she became the common-law wife of one of the family’s sons. Although she was tattooed on her face according to Kurdish custom and bore a child, she clung to her Armenian identity—encompassing a different language, religion, and culture—and eventually escaped her captivity about four years later, willingly abandoning her Muslim spouse and child. Mariam not only readapted to her culture of origin—Christian Armenian society—she had never really lost it.

Other colleagues too acknowledge the power of family background in their own life narratives and research choices. Lisa Gordis indicates, “When I started reading Puritan texts, the patterns of biblical language circulating in them seemed familiar and aesthetically accessible to me, somehow parallel to the midrashic patterns of traditional Jewish literature and culture. In my family, even jokes often turned on biblical quotations.” And as a child, Michele Tarter attended a Quaker school and so, as an adult, felt an ongoing connection to Quakerism in her professional activities. In summary, Lisa Logan asserts, “I do think it’s important that we think about ourselves in relation to the work we do. That is, the questions we ask are shaped by who we are, and it’s crucial that we look at that.”

But of course early Americanists can be scholarly pragmatists too. Like any other group of

academics, they recognize that intellectual commitment plus a publishing opportunity forges a powerful combination. In opting to study the early period, Dan Williams says it seemed to him “that the field was wide open. . . . I was amazed at the lack of attention early American texts were given. I still am amazed today.” And Jim Levernier, my friend and colleague at UALR, seized the opportunity to work on the then neglected topic of captivity narratives when he wrote his dissertation and published the anthology *The Indians and Their Captives* with Hennig Cohen, his mentor. Even today, early American studies concerns itself with textual identification and recovery perhaps more than some other areas, especially as the burgeoning interest in transatlantic studies and comparative methodologies demands an ever-increasing range of material for research and pedagogy. Or as Sharon Harris puts it, “ ‘Early American Studies’ is today nothing like the field in which I was trained—and I mean that as its greatest strength.” To accommodate and analyze these areas, early American studies employs theoretical boldness, vitality, and sophistication.

Beyond the role of the mentor, the individual, and the field in furthering a sense of identity and enabling life choices, professional societies like the SEA can provide a site for displaying and performing knowledge, for professional and personal networking, and for collaboration. As founding president Carla Mulford says in her letter on how the SEA came into being (which you can read on the SEA website), “The collective efforts of individuals made the Society possible and collective efforts of individuals continue to sustain its endeavors.” Some of my respondents too—including recently trained ones—thanked the SEA for helping to support them when their own departments or colleagues tried to marginalize them. One person, whom I will not identify for reasons that will be obvious in a minute but who got her PhD within the last decade or so and who teaches at a prestigious university, said, “I was so mystified to find American literature itself, and not only colonial stuff, so marginal in my department. . . . When the SEA Newsletter arrived every few months, it reassured me that I was not completely insane to be working on these texts. . . . I felt very sustained by the organization in those years, even when I had not yet met most of the people in the newsletter, and I’m very grateful for this.”

As I step down after six years of office with the SEA, I believe that this spirit of collegiality will continue as the organization and the field continue to evolve. Congratulations to Dennis Moore and Tom Krise on becoming President and Vice President respectively, and a particular welcome to Susan Imbarrato on being elected as Executive Coordinator. I look forward to seeing many of you at the sessions and social events here in Alexandria and at future SEA conferences.

Thank you.

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