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Abstract

In 2020, a global pandemic and egregious evidence of systemic injustice have catapulted the U.S. into turmoil. Carolyn Dinshaw identifies these disruptions as signs that change is needed for all institutions, including higher education. In her meditation about these needed transformations she notes that substantial experimentation is integral to successful and beneficial change. Inspired by the educational approach advocated by the Muscatine Report—whose eponymous author is familiar to Chaucerians—Dinshaw urges that we once again embrace experimentation. Our changes need to be bold and we need to be ready to fail. Like Charles Muscatine and others who designed the experimental Strawberry Creek College at the University of California at Berkeley, educators must seek structural change in order to make the university truly a place for higher learning.

When Lisa Lampert-Weissig first invited me to contribute to this new online journal, asking for some institutionally inflected thoughts on teaching Chaucer, it was summer of 2019. I accepted readily, imagining that I would take a gentle look at my transition from young Assistant Professor to seasoned Professor and now Dean for the Humanities. I'd touch on changes in technology, pedagogy, curriculum, the field of medieval studies, the Humanities, and higher education. It would be fun.

Then came early spring 2020. COVID-19. As I logged into Zoom meetings for hours every day, in the back of my mind was the deadline for that article. Between calls I thought about how I would frame the piece. I had recently had occasion to look back at my archive of lecture notes for the first class I taught as an Assistant Professor, "Major British Writers," in the fall of 1982 at Berkeley. On yellow ruled notepaper, aiming to demonstrate relevance, I had written that there were some similarities between England in the fourteenth century and the US at the current moment: among them was the fact that both were societies that were dealing with plague. For the Middle Ages, it was bubonic; for 1982, it was AIDS. So my teaching career could be bookended by plague, AIDS and COVID-19. Perfect for the article! I'd focus on radical transformations of higher education wreaked by the viruses.

But then came May 25, 2020. A police officer in Minneapolis ruthlessly squeezed the life out of George Floyd. All the brutal injustice of Black life in the US came to the fore. Protests filled the streets despite the virus – and the virus itself had already laid bare starkly racialized inequities in US society and culture. HIV in the 80s and 90s had clearly shown who mattered to "mainstream America" and who did not, yet it had worked in slow motion in comparison to this novel coronavirus. The movement for Black justice was exploding. I set aside the elegant frame of my article. Too pat for this moment.

We are in the midst of a profound upheaval in the US. All aspects of life – all major institutions – *must change*, because everything is at stake. For help in thinking about higher education, my particular remit in this article, I cast my mind back to historical inflection points. I was seven years old when the Free Speech Movement [FSM] erupted at Berkeley, its demands and its style influenced by the civil rights organizing of the era; it was aimed at the University's very structure, organization, and governance, its most basic priorities. We certainly got news of it in San Jose, my home 50 miles to the south, but I was too young and too busy with my first crush (Samantha on *Bewitched*) to care. Yet it was less than two decades later that I joined the Berkeley faculty, and the afterlife of the FSM was still powerful.

Charles Muscatine was my most direct contact with the institutional legacy of the FSM – Charles Muscatine, Chaucerian extraordinaire, whose brilliant *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (1957) set the standard for analyses of style and literary tradition. As a beginning Assistant Professor in the McCarthy era, Muscatine had refused to sign the loyalty oath required of all professors at Berkeley; he and other non-signers had been fired, they sued, and they were reinstated after the California Supreme Court struck down the oath. That was just the beginning of Muscatine's institutional activism on campus, though, and only now do I fully appreciate the profundity of the transformations he envisioned in his two great educational projects, the **Muscatine Report** of 1964-65 that paved the way for that beautiful

experiment, **Strawberry Creek College**. I want to focus on these in the rest of this short piece in order to draw inspiration for action in our current tumultuous times.[1]

I use the phrase "beautiful experiment" in explicit echo of Saidiya Hartman's recent book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, an award-winning study of "Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals."[2] For what I want to emphasize in my remarks here is an experimental approach – to learning, which is after all life. Experiments in education are experiments in learning how to live. Hartman shows there is much to learn from Black girls running wild – much to learn from their improvised lives, as they tried to be free when so many possibilities were foreclosed. "Experiment was everywhere," she writes of the early twentieth century in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. "There was nothing precious or unusual about seeking, venturing, testing, trying, speculating, discovering, exploring new avenues, breaking with traditions, defying law, and making it, except that hardly anyone imagined that young black women might be involved in this project too" (60). In its challenge to a racist archive, Hartman's work demands that we see "young black women as innovators and radical thinkers" (60). The category of experiment is critical to this revisionary project. And it is the deep stream of experiment – resourceful, imaginative, original, inventive, responsive, yet uncertain, tentative, and prone to failure – that I want to follow here through Muscatine's institutional work.

Muscatine valued teaching and learning as linked activities that engaged the whole student, each student in their beautiful complexity. The power of the Muscatine Report, officially known as *Education at Berkeley*, lies in its emphasis on the student experience in an era in which there was little to no flexibility in the curriculum, let alone any acknowledgment of students' rights to freedom of speech and academic freedom. In March 1965, in the midst of an academic year roiled by student protests, shutdowns, and the resignation of the Chancellor, the Emergency Executive Committee of the Academic Senate proposed to establish a Select Committee on Education to discover ways that "traditions of humane learning and scientific inquiry can best be advanced under the challenging conditions of size and scale" at Berkeley, and to "examine the various changes in educational programs currently under consideration" in various units and disseminate information about them to the wider campus community. The resolution having passed, a committee was appointed with Muscatine as chair. A model of institutional vigor and focus, the committee completed its report in less than a year, and it was so widely read that it went into a second printing two years later.

There is much to commend in this visionary document. It emerged at a time of historical crisis ("almost all the major elements that compose a university—the teachers, the students, knowledge itself, and their social setting—all are in an unprecedented state of change" [3]) and urged its community to accept, even embrace, change. What strikes me most is the emphasis, from the very outset, on experimentation. Experiment is the key to policy, says the report:

> [M]any of our concrete recommendations are for substantial experiments, not for untested wholesale changes. In this spirit, we have avoided wherever possible the temptation to frame legislation for "all" students and "every" department. We are

[1] For the Muscatine Report, officially titled *Education at Berkeley*, see Online Archive of California. On Strawberry Creek College, I have used chapter 2 of Muscatine's last book, *Fixing College Education.*

[2] Thanks to Gayatri Gopinath for reminding me of Hartman's book in a conversation about this essay.

> confident that honest trial will determine where and when a given change should be permanently adopted; and we are convinced that large administrative and curricular policies should not (indeed, cannot) be imposed on our faculties from without. Changes are most likely to succeed if they remain optional, offered along with the means for their implementation or experimental trial, then left to the judgment of those for whose benefit they are intended. (Muscatine 4)

Experiment is the key to individual students' education: "Our ideal for the student is that he [yep – and there were no women on the committee, either] be provided with rich opportunities, generous guidance, and plenty of room for experiment, and that he be enabled to make for himself as many of the important decisions about his own education as possible" (4). A fierce spirit of experimentation inspires the philosophy of this report, with its emphasis on flexibility and pluralism: "The campus should have built into it the capacity for continuous adaptation and change; it should have built into it a continuous tradition of trial and experiment" (7). The report calls for a "faculty-wide experiment with the use of student comments" (6) and commends experiments in tutorial instruction (46), small classes (49), major advising (87), grading (94, 98-100, 102), introductory and "breadth" courses (126), and integrated curricula (132); it supports experiments in interdisciplinary graduate courses (165) and graduate student teaching (179-182); it advocates for a Board of Educational Development dedicated to experiment (114), calls for "an atmosphere of continuing experiment and change" (123), maintains that the search for quality mass higher education is still in its "experimental" stage (193), and, most generally, suggests that experimentation is and should be the very nature of change itself: "changes must be experimental rather than permanent" (110).

Other words are used: "innovation" is sprinkled throughout, and there's one reference to faculty "entrepreneurs." But "experiment" resounds from beginning to end. I want to believe that Muscatine's being a medievalist (alongside Peter Dale Scott, committee member and Anglo-Latinist) might have had something to do with the de-emphasis on novelty in the report's vocabulary. That's probably my own fantasy; his work on medieval literature surely informed his views on breadth requirements and general education, but what's more generally clear is that the report does not value the new for newness' sake. Neither does it evidence any pressure or influence from the marketplace; that's how I read the almost complete lack of reference to entrepreneurialism. This is not to say that there were no market forces operating at UC Berkeley then (how could there not be, with its participation in the "military-industrial complex" that Eisenhower had named in 1961?), but it is to say that experimentation is antithetical to the bottom-line-driven world of business and the marketplace. Experiments can *fail*. This is their defining characteristic: they present a constant possibility of failure. Epic failure.

Strawberry Creek College, whose official name was the Collegiate Seminar Program, was a small, intense, seminar-driven general education program for lower-division students that was housed in a temporary, two-story wooden former Army barracks on Strawberry Creek, running through the middle of campus. It had grown out of the philosophy and energy expressed in the Muscatine Report and was indeed begun (after the administration did not take up the report's recommendations) by Muscatine in addition to another Report committee member and one other faculty member. Envisioned initially as a comprehensive, coherent academic experience for undergraduates in their first two years, it featured many of what have become hallmarks of liberal arts education now:

problem-oriented, interdisciplinary, team-taught small classes, with faculty acting not only as instructors but also advisors to the students, and graduate students doing some of the teaching side-by-side with faculty. The courses carried twice the usual credits; they required a lot of writing and they were built to train students in original research. The curriculum was intended to capture student interest in key problems of the times and encourage faculty to teach new materials in a new way.

The program debuted in fall of 1974 and soon shifted (in response to smaller than expected enrollments and students' inability to commit, given the demands of established majors) to focus on delivering seminars to students who might take only one class rather than two years' worth of classes. The curriculum was exciting and challenging, and the pedagogy highly interactive, developing students' skills in facilitating discussion and taking responsibility for what happened in the classroom; it emphasized community and democracy. But Strawberry Creek College did not last more than six years: it was negatively reviewed by a faculty committee, to them lacking intellectual coherence and failing to function as an actual college, even though they acknowledged it had offered valuable topical seminars that could be organized programmatically and taught by graduate students.

Experiments can fail. Institutionally this one did: it was discontinued in 1980, and by the time I met him two years later, Muscatine sounded disillusioned. "Nothing is happening at Berkeley," he remarked to me coolly at a dinner party during my first years there. There was a continued awareness on campus of the FSM but it was getting absorbed into a generalized nostalgia for "Berkeley in the 60s"; student and faculty activism for world peace and social justice had cooled; despite having created some major new programs and departments (critically important programs to come out of the era included African American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and Peace and Conflict Studies), the institution had yielded to the "settled educational conservatism" of its research faculty (Muscatine 34). That last phrase is adapted from Muscatine's writing about the fate of Strawberry Creek College. I saw him rarely during my years at Berkeley, though at his retirement he handed down to me his run of *Speculum*, meticulously annotated. I tried not to over-interpret this gracious act of collegiality, but, at least as I recall, his series of back issues began in the year of my birth.

That gesture of scholarly reproduction notwithstanding, there are so many differences between US institutions of higher learning in the 1960s and in 2020 that it seems almost pointless to compare them. The 60s were marked by great optimism in US higher education, highlighted by robust public funding and the dazzling expansion of the University of California system. Private institutions, too, enjoyed the high confidence of the US populace; even as late as 2003, 89% of college students' parents believed in the value of a college education.[3] But in our current moment, soaring tuition costs and consequent student indebtedness, vast expansion of administration, the academic "star" system, growth of STEM in collaborations with industry and business, focus on majors that putatively lead to employability, the casualization of academic labor, the erosion of faculty governance – all those ills one reads about week in, week out, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* – have reached heretofore unseen levels after decades of corporatization of the academic enterprise. As of 2019, only half of US adults view higher education positively, and these opinions are highly partisan, according to a Pew survey (Kreighbaum). Just this month, a New America survey found more enthusiasm for postsecondary education, but "Black and Latino respondents, as well as younger people, are less likely than those

[3] Muscatine quotes this survey by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on page 1 of his *Fixing College Education*.

from other racial groups to have faith that going to college will let them get ahead or that it is worth the money" (Murakami). And so here we are, desperately in need of structural change.

How do we, as members of these institutions – faculty, students, administrators – seize as an opportunity this post-George Floyd moment of upheaval? Some of us have more decision-making power at this moment than others, but all, I hazard, feel tightly constrained by unalterable realities and inconvenient truths. This, then, is the time for experimentation. Potential failure. How can we find more meaningful measures, dramatically expand timelines, even re-value failure itself?[4] One very tricky transition point for any experimental project is the point at which an experiment's institutional time is over. In their report for their second (and, it turned out, final) three-year review, Strawberry Creek faculty declared proudly that it was no longer an experiment, and the reviewers agreed, suggesting (more darkly, perhaps) that its time for proving its worth was up. But that experiment does in fact continue: Strawberry Creek is no longer operant at Berkeley, but its educational and pedagogical values (initially articulated in the Muscatine Report) can be seen expressed in other, more recent, bold institutional endeavors.

I think of the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, which I had a hand in creating at NYU about 15 years ago. Sharing curricular and research interests as well as institutional impediments to growth, a group of faculty from freestanding, interdisciplinary programs gathered together to form a department. We were prompted, too, by the administration, no doubt seeking to manage a proliferation of tiny units. What we developed was a departmental federation of interdisciplinary programs spanning the Humanities and Social Sciences – Africana Studies, American Studies, Asian/Pacific/American Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Latino [sic] Studies, Metropolitan Studies – with an integrated curriculum and a commitment to intersectional analysis. We envisioned a post-identity, post-area studies space for new paradigms. We wanted to develop the analytics of race, ethnicity, nation, region, gender, and economic class. We would focus on problem-oriented teaching that would encourage original research. We wanted a space where student communities could be fostered and sheltered; indeed, in addition to 7 major programs of study, the department has developed and provided a home for NYU's Prison Education Program and currently houses The Latinx Project as well. Though our ambitions were much more modest, the progressive energies of experiments in liberal arts education that had come before—like Strawberry Creek College—were in the air still, and were crucial to our ability to experiment, in turn.

Maybe some experiments never end. This might be the burden of Hartman's "chorus" of riotous girls (345-49).

What experiments in structural change might we embark on at the present moment, when students and faculty of color rightfully demand more representation and more support, when COVID-19 upends traditional pedagogy and existentially threatens budgets? How might we create institutional strength when the institution itself is so flawed and so vulnerable? Those of us in traditional colleges might think beyond the concept of departments, perhaps developing supra-departmental intellectual communities oriented around shared interests and values. (NYU's Faculty of Arts and Science has just

[4] Jack Halberstam, in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), "dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live. Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2 – 3).

debuted "Virtual Communities" along these lines.) How might these gatherings be structured to provide real support for faculty and students, particularly those in minoritized fields? Maybe we need to re-think the traditional divisions of scholarly investigation – Humanities, Social Sciences, and Sciences – as the Muscatine Report indeed suggested (151). I have always valued medieval studies as one of the first interdisciplinary fields; it includes everything from anthropology (which itself spans the three divisions), archaeology, art history, data science, economics, history, linguistics, literature, musicology, philosophy, political science, theology, and so on. How might this great intellectual range point us toward more productive and useful organizational structures than the conventional tripartite division of knowledge? To that end, how might medieval histories and genealogies help us understand the originary racialization of those divisions? How do recent exploitations of medieval "history" by white supremacists, in addition to prompting us to broaden and deepen our own analyses of medieval worlds, help focus our efforts at outreach and public education? How might medieval studies' amateur practitioners point us toward more inclusive, public-facing work? How might we integrate medieval studies' relationship to divinity schools, which are, after all, professional schools? How might the example of this multifarious field of medieval studies help us fashion a concept of applied arts and science, insisting on the public relevance of specialist knowledge?

At this turbulent, uncertain point it seems I have only questions. But I am fully ready to experiment. To fail. And when we can view "losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, [and] not knowing" (Halberstam 2) as paths toward higher learning, we will be able to find in either success or failure deep and meaningful change.[5]

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[5] The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation issued a new mission statement on June 30, 2020, and also announced that its Higher Education and Scholarship in the Humanities program has been renamed Higher Learning.