“Mapping Modernism Across the Great Divide: Art History and Literature, New York and Paris” [TITLE SLIDE]

I’d like to begin by thanking both Perrin Kearns and Meg Roland for organizing this panel, and the Society for Textual Scholarship for hosting us here today. I have a new title for my talk which better describes what I’m after: “Mapping Modernism Across the Great Divide: Art History and Literature, New York and Paris.” On your program, you’ll also see that I was meant to co-present with my colleague in Art and Art History at Dickinson [SLIDE 2], Elizabeth Lee, but unfortunately she was unable to make the trip to Seattle. Elizabeth is a scholar of modern American art and my primary fields are American literary modernism and graphic narrative, so the topic of this panel is one that already motivates our teaching and scholarship a great deal. We are also very fortunate to work at a place that encourages us to collaborate across disciplinary lines, and the project I’m going to describe today is every bit a collaboration between the two of us—an intensive, two-course experiential learning unit that seeks to introduce students to transdisciplinary work in art historical, literary scholarly, and cultural studies approaches to transatlantic American modernism. Even though I’ll use the first person through much of this talk, all of the ideas here, and many of the words, are Elizabeth’s, and it is her training and sensibility as an art historian that has helped to shape the visual studies and pedagogical approaches proposed here today.

So on the surface of things, my strategy for incorporating visual studies into the English major is ruthlessly transparent: make certain you co-teach with an art historian. Elizabeth and I have long been interlocutors, and this project began with the desire to bring entire classes into conversation with one another in a more sustained way. This is a particularly
salient goal in the modernist period where whatever conventional distinctions between literary and artistic media existed were willfully rejected or elided altogether. To take the single example of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas’s atelier at 27 Rue de Flerus [SLIDE 3]—not only for its profusion of modernist canvases and artistic networks, but also for Stein’s literary portraits composed there, the simultaneous influence of the literature on the art and vice versa—the modernist site serves as a metonymy for, or an image of, the disciplinary intersections we hope to embody in our pedagogy. Indeed, the primary pedagogical advantage I see in such co-taught, transdisciplinary work, particularly for the target audience of undergraduates we teach at a small, liberal-arts setting, is the chance to model the complexity and scope of the artistic and cultural period we are studying. Concomitantly, our goal of a transnational, multicultural, and cross-disciplinary method mirrors contemporary critical and theoretical trends as well, opening up exciting possibilities to introduce our students to cutting-edge criticism in our respective fields that might not be accessible in a conventional, upper-level English or Art History survey for undergraduates.

[3:00]

So, to now take a step back and describe what we’re doing more generally. Elizabeth and I have taken the model for our classes from a college-wide initiative at Dickinson’s Community Studies Center known as the Mosaic Projects [SLIDE 4]. Mosaics are, in the words of Community Studies “intensive, interdisciplinary, semester-long research programs designed around ethnographic fieldwork and immersion in domestic and global communities. Their objective is to encourage students to think reflexively about the diverse world in which they live as they engage in collaborative work with local,
transnational, and international communities.”¹ Past Mosaics at Dickinson have focused on Black liberation movements in the global South, the geologic, economic, and cultural consequences of volcanic activity in Montserrat, and the anthropology of the Rust Belt in the region surrounding our Pennsylvania campus. The chosen topic for our Mosaic, which is still being designed and is scheduled to be taught in the spring semester of 2013, is “Mapping American Modernism Across the Great Divide: New York and Paris,” focusing on this especially turbulent period in literary, cultural, and artistic history at a moment when national boundaries became increasingly permeable. Nowhere was this more visible than across the Atlantic Ocean with America abandoning its isolationist stance and the European continent responding with renewed interest to the dynamism of the New World. Artists and writers, ideas and capital, flowed in increasingly transatlantic channels and in both directions, coalescing in two of the most important cities in the modern world: Paris and New York. By taking classes in multicultural literature and modern art simultaneously, students will begin to appreciate the role these two cities played in these transformative years, and the ways in which they influenced one another. To engage these ideas most directly, we will also take students to the cities that made these narratives possible, engaging in experiential learning about the modern period and studying the lasting aftereffects of modernism on both cities in the twenty-first century.

To do this, we will offer two upper-level co-requisite courses to fifteen students, one in American literary modernism and one in American artistic modernism, giving preference to students who have taken or are concurrently taking the gateway courses in either discipline. These seminars will be punctuated by three Mosaic excursions throughout the

¹ http://www2.dickinson.edu/departments/commstud/PDF_files/WhatisaMosaic.pdf
course of the semester: a faculty-led weekend at the beginning of the semester to sites critical to the history of modernist New York, a weeklong trip to Paris over spring break that will allow students to both conduct and begin to assemble some of their preliminary research, and a concluding student-led trip to New York for students to present their research to one another at semester’s end. And where we expect to challenge our students to do collaborative work in their research and on the ground, Elizabeth and I also hope to schedule our weeks in such a way that we are collaborating within our two classes, inviting outside speakers who can speak to both syllabi simultaneously, giving over increased time to specific units in each class when that attention is warranted, co-teaching whenever possible, and designing shared or complementary assignments throughout.

Presently we imagine units on, among other topics, Stein’s salon, gender and sexuality on the Left Bank and in the Village, the role of the primitive in modern art and literature, cultural representations of the Anglo-Francophone diaspora, and the role of international exhibitions in both cities—themes that would cut across and cross-pollinate between our two disciplines.

[7:00]

As we are already beginning to realize, however, this is proving to be an expansive topic, one which threatens to overrun the banks of time and energy we have to give to it in a single semester. While we have the advantages of the materiality of the site visits, and of teaching contiguously to both of our areas of expertise—neither Elizabeth’s nor my current research could be described as transnational in a determined and intentional manner, although I suspect that may well change for both of us once we have completed this Mosaic—we are especially keen to intellectually reinforce our students’ experiences
in tangible ways. This has been a pedagogical goal of mine in the last several years in particular—too often I find myself concerned on a narrower level with the narrative trajectory between the weeks of my syllabi or the turns of argument I hope students to engage in when they read a text together. These important local concerns can come with the risk of failing to make more lasting and impactful claims on students’ often divided attentions; if my own undergraduate experience is any measure, very few classes that I took in those four years stand out with any distinctness to me now, engaged though I was at the time in my coursework. It is this pedagogy of memorability that I’m particularly interested in accounting for in this Mosaic, looking for ways to arrest and map developments in my students’ intellectual lives and to have the impact of that intellectual experience resonate beyond what one may or may not study for a cumulative exam.

One way we hope to accomplish this both pedagogically and in line with the Mosaic’s subject matter more directly, is to have students design and collaborate on a map of these two cities as the primary research they conduct over the course of the semester [SLIDE 5]. It is this map of our semester together, drawing on the GIS technologies and spatial humanities innovations that will also, no doubt, play into Ryan’s paper following this one, that we hope to perform the intellectual agenda of the Mosaic as a whole. Rather than writing conventional research papers, students will be asked to plot web-based waypoints, geographically coded sites into a shared, collaborative map of the cities they are studying. What I have here is a crude version of what this will look like on the course website, which is essentially a Google Map plug-in grafted onto a Wordpress blog. I’ve used Wordpress and a fun little program called Comic Life [SLIDE 6] together in the
past in order to get students to learn about the architecture of graphic narrative, asking them to tell stories and write literary criticism using the comics medium. Struggling to contain their own ideas on a single page, for example, alerts my graphic narrative students to the arts of compression and condensation in the comics medium in a way my lecturing about these formal qualities simply wouldn’t accomplish.

[10:00]

[SLIDE 7] Our hope with this admittedly iconoclastic foray into the spatial humanities is for students to have a record both of their own travels and a sense of the historical, cultural, and archaeological layers of the streets they’re walking, to recognize how these shifts in the modern period have shaped the cities they will visit by pacing the streets and neighborhoods that serve as the settings of modernist American poetry and prose, and entering the studios and exhibition spaces that incubated American modernist art.

Scholars such as David Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor Harris have argued that the spatial humanities offer the possibility to explore “the dense coil of memory, artifact, and experience that exists in a particular space, as well as in the coincidence and movement of people, goods, and ideas that have occurred over time in spaces large and small.”² The way you see these cities, and the connections and networks that appear within and between them, affects how you experience them; an insight available to any urban resident regardless of their familiarity with the Benjaminian arcade. What we hope these student-built research maps will accomplish, however, is to chart an inductive map of intellectual discovery in these cities, moving in staged assignments from professor-chosen sites, to student-selected inquiry, and finally toward student-designed connections.

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between waypoints or even tours through the streets of modernist New York and Paris, and across an ocean that struggled to divide them. Modernism itself might then be considered as just such a map or arcade, where my use of “map” here is literal as much as it is metaphorical.

So, to give a single example of the two waypoints that Elizabeth and I have completed and the possibilities they entail: we’ve charted a physical adjacency between two centers of modernist cultural production in the Village that are rarely if ever thought of in any kind of meaningful proximity—[SLIDE 8] John Sloan’s apartment on Washington Square, and the Ashcan school and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney’s studio/salon on 8 West 8th Street more generally, and the gay and lesbian enclave of MacDougal Street, [SLIDE 9] where Eve Adams circulated her self-published lesbian fiction and ran the notorious nightclub where “men are admitted but not welcome”—both literally right around the corner from one another. In and of themselves, these waypoints could serve as intellectual rabbit holes—on a lark I went hunting for one of the unpublished copies of Eve Adams’s volume of short stories, “Lesbian Love,” and was only able to turn up one surviving volume marked missing at the Beinecke Library. She remains largely a literary mystery. Elizabeth’s initial research into Sloan turned up a fascinating image of him and Marcel Duchamp, [SLIDE 10] two figures no self-respecting art historian would ever talk about in the same breath, climbing to the top of Washington Square Arch, where they recited poems, fired cap pistols, and proclaimed Greenwich Village a “Free and Independent Republic.”

[13:00]
Upper-level courses in English and Art History wouldn’t necessarily be able to make room for such narratives. Studying these waypoints together offers students and professors alike a chance to experience firsthand what historian and spatial humanities scholar Edward Ayers has called “deep contingency,” rapid, transformative arcs of historical change predicated on the syncretic multiplicity of individual moments of shared cultural and intellectual emergence. What relationship, if any, exists between the cultural enclaves of artistic schools, literary coteries, and gay and lesbian salons in the Village? Both Eve Adams and John Sloan worked for the socialist magazine The Masses [SLIDE 11] as well as being neighbors; what might these otherwise unseen forms of connection entail and how might they shift our understanding of the modernist Village? What then happens when we broaden our scope to Midtown and Harlem, Montparnasse and Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and both the visible and tacit connections between them? If we stick to our current plan of having students complete 6 waypoints for each class, we’ll have a map that’s populated with 180 research nodes, each with the possibility for these forms of discovery, itself a kind of modernist Arcades Project for our students to build and analyze.

Needless to say, all of this is much more work than your usual survey or senior seminar, none of it possible without structural and staff support from the Dean of the College down to talented and patient Informational Technology staff [SLIDE 13] committed to making Mosaic programs successful. But the rewards of this intellectual labor have the potential to be extraordinary. There are still a number of hurdles to overcome: our various responsibilities in our host departments, the potentially competing expectations of the

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3 Edward Ayers, “Turning toward Place, Space, and Time” in The Spatial Humanities, 6.
Community Studies Center and the Academic Program and Standards Committee, and the need to coordinate faculty schedules and student aid, among a number of other considerations I probably haven’t even begun to consider fully. We’re especially keen to avoid the pitfalls of authenticity narratives—“I’m sitting in Jackson Pollock’s seat at the Cedar Tavern!”—or a glorified Let’s Go itinerary—“I’m at Shakespeare and Co. with my professors!”—and to instead foster new forms of knowledge production for everyone involved. Our hope is nothing less than to change the ways our students see the modernist era, and the map of the cities in which it was given birth—an ambitious, but hopefully also transformative approach to visual studies in the English classroom.