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Introduction

Engaging Contradictions: Teaching and Pedagogy in American Studies

Julie Sze

American studies exists in multiple institutional, and occasionally contradictory, contexts. At some institutions, American studies functions as the intellectual location in which ethnic studies and gender/sexuality studies are taught. Sometimes, American studies is where popular or material culture, food, or “fun classes” are highlighted. Because the field is so broad and inclusive, American studies scholars often hold simultaneous institutional or disciplinary/ interdisciplinary affiliations. The capaciousness of American studies is one of the strengths of the field. Another is our commitment to teaching and pedagogy. Scholars affiliated with American studies are innovating inside traditional university classrooms and outside—in prisons and through community–campus collaborations. While not suggesting that American studies is the privileged site for such forays, this forum describes, contextualizes, and analyzes American studies pedagogical efforts. It does so by foregrounding these projects and how American studies scholars “engage contradictions” within them, building on Charles Hale’s 2008 collection on the theory, practice, and methods of activist scholarship and knowledge production.¹

Although our field is a self-reflexive conversation about expansive edges of American studies, far less well discussed is how the state of our field shapes our pedagogy—and vice versa. While American studies has redefined its borders within a transnational frame, what is less well understood is how that shift and the field’s capaciousness—for example, its interdisciplinarity and commitment to social justice—are also key features of American studies teaching and pedagogy. Pedagogy is defined here broadly, from higher education classrooms, K–12 sites, and through collaborative campus–community projects. American studies pedagogy is intimately related to projects of critical and Freirian radical pedagogy, through a mutual focus on social movements, critical theory, and social transformation in response to racial, social, and other injustices. Radical

pedagogy moves from the level of the individual (i.e., teacher and student), the political nature and content of the curriculum, and social-structural/historical analysis of communities and nations, in the contexts of continuing legacies of violence and subjugation.

Much research in American studies has focused on social movements and in expanding the boundaries of knowledge production. There is a particular intellectual genealogy and praxis-oriented tradition that we draw on. Our field, with many others, has long understood that intellectual work is often generated by community members, and in coproduction with academic scholars (and the field is populated by many scholar-activists). American studies has a vibrant tradition of K–12 collaboration, and many of our undergraduate majors continue professionally in secondary education, the nonprofit sector, or in the public humanities. Thus our teaching praxis has potential impacts that extend beyond our students and majors.

This forum fills several gaps. There is deep innovation and a pressing need to share key questions that shape pedagogical “successes” or “failures.” We need to continue developing the conversation on what innovative teaching and pedagogy in American studies looks like. We embark here not in a spirit of demonstration, or prescription, but in the spirit of humility and to learn from our own attempts to make sense of our ever-evolving role as teachers and learners in what constitutes a large part of our professional lives. The projects in the forum do not necessarily advocate a particular methodological approach, unifying framework, or analytic. Even when focused on the same topic, authors emphasize varying themes and questions in their pedagogical efforts.

Initially, the forum was focused on the institutional challenges to teaching American studies at the university, specifically related to teaching the Introduction to American Studies, Methods in American Studies, and in addressing growing numbers of international students from critical perspectives. These questions came out of my vantage point both in teaching and in administration (such as how to address the challenge of directing a small interdepartmental program during a budget crisis). These questions are indeed important, but it became quite clear that they were also narrow, without understanding the broader classroom and ideological contexts. The *AQ* managing board and editor were instrumental in pushing the forum to address pedagogy more broadly—both geographically and politically.

Our work as American studies teachers and administrators is deeply connected to the intellectual work in our curriculum and our classrooms and in engaging the contradictions embedded within them. Drawing out the material,

ideological, and historical contexts in the topics of teaching became a focal point of analysis of teaching as a critical political project (i.e., teaching in the context of US foreign policy imperatives and militarization). Understanding pedagogy and making arguments about how the field's research questions are related to teaching is also pragmatic necessity. Learning how to assess my program's efficacy during neoliberal times demanded a greater understanding about what and how we taught, and how it matters.

For this forum, teacher-scholars wrote around three themes: public humanities and interdisciplinarity, transnationalism, and collaborative praxis. These themes illuminate core concerns of our field, alongside new challenges and innovations. In all three areas, American studies is not unique, but our contributions as American studies scholars in these areas need better articulation, given one of our central realities: American studies in the context of neoliberalism.

As in a range of fields, American studies scholars have thought deeply about debt and neoliberalism. What we have talked about less openly (at least in our flagship research journals) is what this means in our professional lives. Graduate school and what happens post-PhD depends on a whole set of institutional, structural, and personal factors. The financial crisis and the explosion of debt have hit the humanities hard and, arguably, the interdisciplinary humanities the hardest. The fortunate few continue on to tenure-track jobs. Many more labor in a combination of visiting assistant professor, lecturer, and adjunct positions, as professional staff, or in the nonprofit or private sectors. These trends shape many things: who teaches, as well as who populates our classrooms, declining major enrollments, budget models that reward higher numbers of majors, and the pedagogical (and ethical) issues related to the question of who benefits from our teaching and research. Who can be transformed by American studies as an intellectual and political project—in a context where undergraduates and graduate students are burdened by thousands of dollars of student loan debt? How do we engage these contradictions in the classroom?

In the first cluster, Michael Mark Cohen and Grace Wang share their successes and struggles in teaching the Introduction to American Studies class, Joanne Pope Melish discusses American studies and public history, Rebecca Hill examines the perils and the pleasures of methodological interdisciplinarity, and Tanya Erzen analyzes an innovative prison teaching and public memory course. A central contradiction implicit in this section is the changing content and context of American studies, the politics of knowledge production and reception, and the reflection of the varied and scaffolded contexts of how materials are taught and received. Thus, the question of “what is taught” in

American studies is a central question, as is understanding who is being taught, where, and how. The contributions in this section address the traditional undergraduate classroom (even where there is no presumed “traditional” student in attendance), the public nature of our field in classrooms and archives, and an innovative prison-teaching program that centralizes the question of knowledge and freedom in the context of incarceration.

The transnationalism section continues this engagement with the neoliberal context of American studies pedagogy. Christina Owens and Abigail Boggs discuss how to teach international students subversive American studies in the United States within broader trends toward the internationalization and marketization of US higher education. Min-Jung Kim and Chih-ming Wang discuss teaching American studies in South Korea and Taiwan, respectively, in the context of US foreign policy, and how they shape the students they encounter. Taken collectively, this section foregrounds how transnational American studies, in Asia and in the United States, engages important questions around militarization, racialization/assimilation, and English-language hegemony. Focusing on the history of American studies in Korea, Kim articulates the possibilities of a critical articulation of the field in a context of US–Korean relations. Wang considers what is at stake in developing American studies as a critical pedagogy in Taiwan and East Asia in the context of area studies and critical humanities (in disciplinary formations) as well as military bases (in sociopolitical terms). Together, these contributions are calling for what Wang identifies as “a deeper understanding of the spaces of American studies as locally grounded with a transpacific orientation.”

These first two sections on public humanities and interdisciplinarity and transnationalism show how particular scholars-teachers engage the contradictions in some of the contexts in which we operate. The last section builds on this theme by following another set of scholar-teachers on their innovative forays into community contexts. American studies historically has been an intellectual and institutional home for scholars interested in campus–community collaborations. Boundary crossing between disciplines potentially lends itself to crossing lines between campus and community. Thus, for the last section on collaborative praxis, I drew on the ASA-funded Community Partnership Grants. Specifically, I invited the funded projects from 2012–14 to write about their projects, analyze their successes, and consider lessons learned from the standpoint of American studies pedagogy. This arbitrary cut offers an embarrassment of riches—projects on land and black liberation, prison teaching, budget analyses of higher education and its relationship to criminal

justice, environmental justice—community engagements, Asian American oral histories, and graduate student service learning.

Without falling into a trap of American studies methodological exceptionalism, scholars associated with these projects were asked to reflect on their projects with these questions in mind: How do community members and American studies scholars bring their expertise to campus—community collaborative projects? What do communities expect from American studies collaborative projects and what do they gain—and vice versa? Picking any given year in this important grant program shows the importance of American studies in contributing to pedagogical projects that matter, as well as showing the deep well of expertise and interest that American studies scholars have on issues of social justice, collaboration, and praxis. Move just one year earlier or later, and there are projects that address undocumented students, urban food justice, and Indigenous media. These projects are impressive, rarely recognized by our peers outside the humanities, and reflect a high level of engagement, labor, and commitment, often over long periods of time (and for a relatively small dollar amount). If you have not already, take a look at these funded projects at www.theasa.net/prizes_and_grants/cpp/cpp_existing_projects/. Incorporating them into your classrooms might be another way to inject different stories, themes, and topics into your syllabus.

This forum, then, is a starting point. It aims to excite and provoke debate and reflection and hopes to contribute to an ever-evolving discussion about the relationship between research, pedagogy, and praxis. The forum asks us to “engage the contradictions” of teaching and pedagogy in American studies in our current political and institutional moment. This forum seeks to spur an active and engaged conversation, to share stories, and to learn from others, as well as to reflect more deeply on the pedagogical role that shapes a large part of our professional lives and, oftentimes, our political commitments.

Note

1. Charles Hale, ed., *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).