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# Teaching the Introduction to American Studies Course: A Dialogue

*Michael Mark Cohen and Grace Wang*

For education among all kinds of men [and women] always has had and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent.

—W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

**T**he Introduction to American Studies undergraduate survey course remains the public face of our field. Wherever it is taught, even in the most traditional of university settings, such a course is always a challenge. The Intro is a challenge to the students who must complete the requirements; to the professor who designs, delivers, and performs the class; to the disciplinary boundaries of the university; and, if you are doing it right, to common sense understandings about race, nation, class, gender, and sexuality in the United States of America. These challenges are only compounded by the ongoing crisis of neoliberal austerity, the decline of the humanities, and the debt-fueled anxieties of undergraduates who are pressed to see their education as an “investment” in future employment.

How can we reflect on these challenges to revitalize how we teach American studies now? How do we draw from the evolving demands of the present to continually ask and re-ask, what is at stake in teaching the Intro to American Studies course? How do we draw on the radical legacy of the field to engage students in productive debates around racism, sexism, and social justice in an era of renewed activism and anxiety on campus?

This challenge imposes a considerable burden on the American studies professor, because unlike traditional academic disciplines, there is no textbook, template, or even ideal approach to teaching the Intro to American Studies course. Not confined to teaching literature, history, politics, art, or pop culture, our interdisciplinarity opens up the widest horizons, where almost any material that touches on some aspect of the United States is fair game for such a class. There might not even be consensus on what exactly we are introducing students to—a mode of inquiry, a set of critical thinking and reading skills, a series of intersecting themes, or historical narratives.

The differences in our approaches reflect the challenges of teaching an open-ended course that is often at cross-purposes with what students want, namely, a “fun” class that allows them to watch movies, “learn about America,” and fulfill university requirements. The Intro course therefore attracts the greatest possible range of skills and attention in our students. The challenge, then, is how to make the field accessible to a wide swath of students in ways that encourage critical interrogation but do not overwhelm their abilities or political sensibilities. In our institutional contexts, this diversity includes (but is not limited to) community college transfer students, nontraditional students, multilingual learners, international students, low-income students, first-generation college students, underrepresented minorities, the formerly incarcerated, student parents, student veterans, student athletes, as well as large numbers of traditional students who are prepared to succeed in the college classroom.<sup>1</sup>

Every approach to teaching the Intro course is unique in its own way. Here, we offer a small part of our running dialogue on the pains and pleasures of teaching the Intro to American Studies class.

**Michael Mark Cohen:** Every version of the Intro taught at Berkeley takes an interdisciplinary approach to a different topic. We offer Intro to American Studies courses on food, the frontier, Hollywood, consumerism, California, education, memory, and more. I teach (or co-teach) versions on race and one on work. But the one I want to talk about here is called *Culture Wars*.

I take the term *Culture Wars* as metaphor to consider the history of cultural conflict since the Civil War. We begin by reading a selection of theoretical excerpts from Raymond Williams, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Matthew Arnold, and Antonio Gramsci.<sup>2</sup> Once we have discussed their ideas about culture, difference, power, and hegemony, we watch the “Singin’ in the Rain” number and subject it to interrogative readings from all four thinkers. Despite the fact that Gene Kelly’s solo dance presents itself as an innocent and pleasurable number, we quickly uncover all three layers of William’s definition of culture (a process of cultivation, an anthropological way of life, an exemplary work of art); through Marx we see the capitalist mode of production of the Classical Hollywood Style; we pause to consider the importance of criticism (wherein British Film Institute ranks *Singin’ in the Rain* as the tenth greatest movie of all time),<sup>3</sup> all before a baton-twirling cop on the beat appears to silence the music and chase away the dancing fool.

After opening with our theoretical toolbox, my next lectures are about the Haymarket bombing, gender and Jim Crow, Emma Goldman, and so on up to Muhammad Ali, the birth of hip-hop, and Pat Buchanan. Each lecture provides

the needed historical background for the longer readings while offering a different model each day of how to do cultural criticism. Typically, we start with an event or a text—such as Claude McKay’s sonnet “If We Must Die” from the Red Summer of 1919 or the postmodern pop performance “Life during Wartime” by the Talking Heads from 1984, for example—which leads us back into the historical struggles that shaped this conjuncture. So when I return to the starting point, some three-quarters of the way through the lecture, we can press through to the end of the story with a fully realized understanding of what was at stake in this skirmish of the culture wars.

Any interdisciplinary course has to be tech-savvy and multimedia in its presentation. And every slide performs the same work as the lecture overall. Each provides a historical illustration of a particular narrative point that can, as needed, become an object of interrogation in its own right. By applying this method to the traditional historical survey structure, we encounter 150 years of textual analysis, from the paintings of Charles Sheeler and lynching photography, prison architecture and census maps, Hollywood musical numbers and charts of economic data. At semester’s end, we even analyze my own syllabus as a text, critical of the myriad choices and ideological assumptions that went into its construction. The lesson is simple: everything is open to political interpretation and nothing should escape our intellectual scrutiny.

**Grace Wang:** At UC Davis, we have cycled through several different models of teaching the Intro. We moved toward a model engaging a more thematic approach, rooted in critical keywords in American studies. Some colleagues structure the course as an interdisciplinary exploration built on a historical chronology. I organize my Intro around a set of themes revisited throughout the quarter: conquest and empire, citizenship and belonging, and globalization. I start the class by interrogating the idea of “America” and discuss how the analytic frameworks we use to understand the nation—whether conquest, settler colonialism, slavery, and empire, among others—fundamentally affect the kinds of knowledge produced about it.

If there’s a message I keep repeating to students, it is that the stories we tell changes depending on whose perspective, values, and logics we place at its center. So in the unit on citizenship and belonging, we read Ian Haney-Lopez’s *White by Law* to understand how legal constructions of whiteness buttress racial logics about who embodies the ideal citizen subject. From there we move to Gish Jen’s novel *Typical American*, which satirizes narratives about being “self-made” to reveal the racial and gendered bias that prevents certain racialized identities from being understood as fully belonging in the nation.

Rather than have students read Williams and Gramsci (which I fully applaud you for doing), I lecture on such concepts as culture, ideology, and hegemony. But like you, I want students to have a theoretical toolbox that they can apply to their analysis of cultural texts and their understanding of moments when culture and politics intersect. We do a study of cultural resistance beginning with a documentary on the Zoot Suit Riots to understand why the zoot suit came to be such a fraught racial signifier during World War II. I add scholarly works by Robin Kelley and Eric Lott to show how these writers use hegemony to provide multiple interpretations of resistance that demonstrate how fashion and music represent politics by other means. I find the academic readings useful in providing a model for how scholars in the humanities make an argument and use evidence to support their claims.

While I want the Intro to expose students to different modes of understanding the nation, I also see the course as a chance to practice certain skills. So I take time in lecture to do “nuts and bolts” exercises like differentiating between facts, opinions, and arguments or unpacking the ideologies circulating in whatever our object of analysis, whether a *Schoolhouse Rock!* video or a Gil Scott-Heron song. As much as possible, I want lecture to be a space for active student engagement. Obviously you cannot lead a 150-person lecture course as a discussion (and students have sections with their TAs for that), but breaking up lecture to problem solve, invite comments, and work in smaller groups helps students see the knowledge as contestable, as taking place through dialogue. In terms of applying concepts to test learning, I require class blogs (managed by sections) that give students an opportunity to pick a concrete object or cultural text from their everyday lives and analyze it vis-à-vis class topics. Although they can vary in quality, the very best examples can yield fascinating connections and unexpected gems.

**MMC:** For my part, I keep the scholarship to myself to use in lectures. I want the students to encounter American studies as a set of questions posed by artists and activists and not as a field of academic work (I save that stuff for a senior seminar). For Culture Wars, I give my students only original sources to read, which for this class includes James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (a fast-paced and seemingly encyclopedic survey of black life along and across the color line); *The Birth of a Nation* (in which we screen only part 2); *Red Emma Speaks* (a stirring collection of radical feminist writings by Emma Goldman); *Red Harvest*, by Dashiell Hammett (Gangsters! Wobblies! Hardboiled detectives!); Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (still funny despite deindustrialization); Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* (which, in its City Lights edition,

gives us both Beat sexuality and a book of poetry once put on trial by the state); *The Fire Next Time* (because James Baldwin); as well as *Blade Runner* and *Kindred*, by Octavia Butler (both versions of the neo-slave narrative). The one place I cheat is Susan Douglas's *Where the Girls Are*, which is a pitch-perfect blend of American studies methodology and baby-boomer personal memoir.

I think the greatest crime we can commit in teaching American studies—in a field so lacking in hardened disciplinary or genre prejudices—is to be boring and, worse still, to assign boring reading. I believe that American studies should be fun. But I also think that it must remain somewhat dangerous, to which end I use the DuBois line quoted above as a kind of “trigger warning.”

**GW:** I don't think I assign my students boring readings, but they may disagree. And while I assign a variety of primary, popular, and scholarly texts, there is value in having students struggle with the structure and complexity of academic arguments. I want to expose students to an array of sources that will help them make connections between culture, politics, history, and their everyday lives. The importance of teaching American Studies at UC Davis really hit home when I started teaching about what we call “Pepper Spray U”—that moment in 2011 when media coverage and Internet memes thrust UC Davis into the national and global spotlight.<sup>4</sup> I teach this at the end of a broader unit on globalization, so by then we have spent time discussing cultural and economic dimensions of global capitalism.

While many students know that the “pepper-spray incident” occurred, it is for them, by now, an artifact of the past. I use it as a self-reflexive exercise to historicize the present moment, to make tangible issues about privatization, flexible labor, surveillance, and beliefs about the “public good.” I challenge students to come up their own meanings about the event, to reflect on their own understanding of the role of higher education and public universities, and to make their own connections, whether about rising tuition rates or the increased use of contract laborers and adjuncts to teach their courses. American studies offers tools to help students understand the contexts that have led them to this university and to the broader debates—about public education, militarization, privatization, and student debt—that affects their everyday lives.

Contextualizing being a student within an understanding of global neo-liberalism, austerity, and the financial crisis has, in part, been in response to changes in the field, an attention to transnationalism that calls for decentering the United States and situating the nation within the global flows that produce it. But, perhaps most important, by teaching the controversy sparked by student activism, we can see concretely how it is that we are all affected by this

crisis and engaged in the contested global project of creating our own history. Teaching the Intro shows us how the choices that we make in the world matter.

**MMC:** I agree absolutely. I want to assert my belief that teaching—and teaching the Intro course in particular—may well be the most politically relevant thing we do as academics. This is due partly to the fact that teaching is itself an interdisciplinary practice that requires the adoption of four fundamental roles: the *Curator*, the *Scholar*, the *Performer*, and the *Public Intellectual*.

Writing a syllabus is a curatorial project, selecting works, topics, and stories, and arranging them across the academic year like a gallery. Most of our students will not remember much of what we say in class after they graduate. But they will remember reading *Kindred*, or learning about the Astor Place Riots, or watching *The Birth of a Nation*. Those choices, to show a student something brilliant (or awful) to read or watch, are the foundational work of how we create lifelong learners. Furthermore, as curators, we are active participants in the ongoing canon wars that have been central to American studies since its founding.

As scholars, we accept the role of what Gramsci calls the traditional intellectual, the credentialed intellectual worker employed by colleges, universities, high schools, or online diploma mills. The role of the teaching scholar means that we are expected to be the master of facts and interpretations, to take our work with the utmost seriousness, and to be always up-to-date with the latest research. Consequently, no Intro course can ever be taught the same way twice. If, for example, you are still using the OJ Simpson trial to introduce issues of race and not Black Lives Matter or “Ask a Slave” in your lectures,<sup>5</sup> then the material will feel less immediate and relevant, the significance of race needlessly relegated to the past.

The art of teaching is therefore a living practice, especially if you are lecturing to hundreds of students at a time (as we both do). Lecture halls are unambiguously built to look like theaters, with a stage, dramatic lighting, and rows of seats bolted to the floor. Sure, you can read your lectures off yellowing pages, or you can adopt the role of what Mel Brooks called “the Stand Up Philosopher.” Abundant energy, a clear voice, and a quick joke go a long way, especially in a lecture about Ford factories or the New Right. If we love American studies, it is our emotional and professional responsibility to express that joy to our students. After all, most of what student evaluations really measure is not learning outcomes or pedagogical design but the enthusiasm of the performer onstage.

Lastly, in doing the Intro course, we fulfill a critical role as public intellectuals. A few years ago, before Berkeley shut down this avenue of public access, I

put my entire Culture Wars course on YouTube and iTunesU for free.<sup>6</sup> While I got lots of hate in the comments (don't read the comments), I also got e-mails from eager autodidacts from Alabama to Iran. Publishing popular (and unpaid) articles online or having thousands of Twitter followers is great, and I have had some surprising successes working in this arena myself,<sup>7</sup> but teaching a room full of young people (along with large numbers of not-quite-as-young community college transfer students) who are brimming with potential can be so much more. Perhaps this is easier to recognize for those of us who work at large, diverse public universities, but teaching American history and culture from the vantage point of American studies is inescapably a form of public intellectual activism. The classroom is where we face the public, explore unpopular ideas, and set out the origins of the present crisis. Teaching is where we expand the intellectual universe of generations, one lecture, one course at a time.

**GW:** As teachers, most of us strive to reproduce in the classroom our own most formative pedagogical experiences. I'm the product of a small liberal arts college, so I was most thrilled by the engagement and interactivity of a tightly run seminar, the professor less as performer than skillful guide. That continues to influence my approach to teaching, even in large lecture courses. It may be that the traditional lecture format is best suited for reaching those students already primed to succeed in the classroom. And broadly speaking, I wonder, too, whether the charismatic "sage on the stage" is not necessarily a role that students confer as readily to women and people of color.<sup>8</sup> Teaching the Intro well should, ideally, provoke some cognitive dissonance in our students, whether in received knowledge or common sense. So much of what we teach highlights structures of violence and inequity foundational to the nation. This can be challenging for some students, who may find it easier to displace some of that discomfort onto the instructor. And public intellectual activism can sometimes translate as ideological doctrine, a "personal gripe," "too negative," or "hatred of America," particularly when the instructor's authority is more easily dismissed because of race, gender, and other categories of identity (although it is a variation of a student comment that I suspect most of us who teach the Intro have received).

That said, it is hard to dispute that passion, enthusiasm, and humor go a long way in the classroom and that teaching the Intro can feel like a constant project of revision. There are always new perspectives, readings, examples, and technologies that can be added. I sometimes experience teaching this course as a process of always coming up a bit short because there are inevitably questions and experiences that remain unaddressed in a ten-week quarter. But I also take



heart that for some students, the Intro opens up modes of asking questions, thinking critically, and using evidence—skills they can continue to develop, whatever their path in life.

## Notes

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1. "California's Upward-Mobility Machine," *New York Times*, September 16, 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/upshot/californias-university-system-an-upward-mobility-machine.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/upshot/californias-university-system-an-upward-mobility-machine.html?_r=0).
2. Selections from *The Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (New York: Verso, 2002).
3. Conducted every ten years since 1952, the British Film Institute's *Sight & Sound* Greatest Film Poll of world film critics from 2002 put *Singin' in the Rain* at number 10. By the 2012 poll it had dropped, sadly, to number 20. See [explore.bfi.org.uk/sightandsoundpolls/2012/critics](http://explore.bfi.org.uk/sightandsoundpolls/2012/critics).
4. Sunaina Maira and Julie Sze, "Dispatches from Pepper-Spray University: Privatization, Repression, and Revolt," *American Quarterly* 64.2 (2012): 315–30.
5. "Ask a Slave" is a webseries performed by Azie Mira Dungey based on her experiences working as Lizzie Mae, housemaid to George and Martha Washington, at the living history museum at George Washington's Mount Vernon. See [www.askslave.com](http://www.askslave.com).
6. Introduction to American Studies 10AC, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vF5WKQvhgeA&list=PL50288191D495B3EE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vF5WKQvhgeA&list=PL50288191D495B3EE).
7. In October 2014 I published an article on Medium.com that grew directly out of my teaching on race. The essay got picked up by Gawker.com (who still hasn't paid me for it) and instantly seemed to "go viral." The essay, "Douchebag: The White Racial Slur We've All Been Waiting For," got well over a million hits in less than three days, leading to more than a million posts on Facebook (followed by a string of unfriendings), instant sub-Reddits, a claim in the *Guardian* that I had definitively redefined the term, and my first e-mail death threat (accompanied by my picture appearing on [stormfront.org](http://stormfront.org)), all of which are various measures of public intellectual success. But it did lead me to think that American studies scholars should try to translate more of their teaching work into popular, even humorous writing. See [human.parts/douchebag-the-white-racial-slur-weve-all-been-waiting-for-a2323002f85d;gawker.com/douchebag-the-white-racial-slur-we-ve-all-been-waiti-1647954231?trending\\_test\\_d&utm\\_expid=66866090-62.\\_DVNDEZYQh2S4K00ZSnKcw.4&utm\\_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](http://human.parts/douchebag-the-white-racial-slur-weve-all-been-waiting-for-a2323002f85d;gawker.com/douchebag-the-white-racial-slur-we-ve-all-been-waiti-1647954231?trending_test_d&utm_expid=66866090-62._DVNDEZYQh2S4K00ZSnKcw.4&utm_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F).
8. A recent *New York Times* opinion piece by Anne Murphy Paul asks, "Are college lectures unfair?" (September 12, 2015). In it, she cites studies conducted by scholars at the University of Washington and the University of Texas at Austin that suggest that the lecture format puts women, minorities, low-income, and first-generation college students at a disadvantage. Specifically, she asks if lectures "biased against undergraduates who are not white, male and affluent?" See also Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez, and Angela P. Harris, eds., *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2012). For an annotated bibliography of gender and its impact on student evaluations, see [www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource\\_files/gsebibliography.pdf](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/gsebibliography.pdf).