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# The Global American Studies Classroom: International Students and Critical Pedagogy

*Christina Owens and Abigail Boggs*

In 2012 the UC Davis American studies program began collaborating with the Extension program and its Center for International Education on the Global Study Program (GSP). As advanced graduate students, we were invited to design and implement American studies courses for students visiting UC Davis from abroad. This collaboration resulted in courses such as Occupy (and) the University of California, Davis; The Cultural Politics of the 2012 Presidential Election; Consumption and American Popular Culture; and Images of America(ns) in Popular Culture. While the initial classes restricted enrollment to students participating in GSP's short-term exchange program, later courses experimented with intentionally mixed classrooms. During our two years of participation in this effort, we designed courses that were tailored to introduce GSP students to the foundational ideas of American studies with the aim of conceptualizing alternatives to prevalent models of teaching international students that tend toward assimilation and "Americanization."

One of the central challenges of introductory American studies (AMS) courses is bringing students into critical conversation about how the historical production and contemporary effects of "American" nationalism, culture, and politics manifest both domestically and transnationally. We were committed to both valuing international students' perspectives and retaining a complex and rigorous frame for thinking about the United States and the idea of America. Our pedagogy was shaped by our own scholarly work in transnational American studies, where Boggs focuses on representations of international students and their impact on the politics of race, gender, sexuality, and knowledge production on US campuses, and Owens focuses on the imperial subjectivity of US migrant English teachers in contemporary Japan. Because our work collectively builds on the insights of transnational feminist cultural studies and critical ethnic studies, we centered these perspectives in our classrooms. Here, we reflect on the increasing presence of international students on our

campuses and in American studies classrooms and how this change affects our approach to teaching, and then provide practical strategies that were especially successful in this context and for anyone wanting to get students to position themselves within a critical American studies framework.

### **Political and Institutional Contexts and Consequences**

Targeted efforts to serve the needs of the increasingly large international student populations on US campuses are part of much broader neoliberal trends toward the internationalization and marketization of US higher education. An increasing number of universities dedicate substantial resources to recruiting international students because they contribute to the diversity and intellectual prestige of the campus and, in many cases, because international students frequently pay nearly twice the amount of tuition and fees as in-state students at public universities. For instance, according to a recent *New York Times* article, 18 percent of the University of Washington's freshman class was from overseas and half of that group was from China.<sup>1</sup> The article reports that UW came to rely on "full-freight Chinese students to balance the budget." While this shift was a boon for the coffers, some Chinese students complained that if they wanted to attend a university with all Chinese students they wouldn't have left China: "I paid to study abroad, and it was almost like I was studying in China." This trend shows no signs of abating—recent data show that in 2014–15, international students increased 10 percent over the prior year, the highest rate of growth since 1978–79.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, many universities fail to provide adequate courses or services for the international students whom they eagerly recruit and then profit from. Since the implementation of new federal policies for the management and surveillance of international students in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the workload of dedicated international student advisers has been overwhelmed by new data-driven security efforts required by the Student Exchange Visitor Information System.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, some campuses, such as UC Berkeley, the University of Georgia, and the University of Southern California, have experimented with "America 101" courses to help international students acclimate to life in the United States.<sup>4</sup> While there may be a place for workshops that teach international students about US body language norms and social faux pas, if they fail to incorporate a critical perspective, these courses can easily become essentialist/assimilation projects.

The collaboration at UC Davis departs from these other efforts in several significant ways because of the unique institutional standings of the Extension

program and the American studies program. Over the last decade, the University of California system has aggressively recruited international students. At UC Davis, this effort was articulated most recently in the Chancellor's 2020 Campus Initiative, announced in 2013, which aims to increase the number of international students over a five-year period and provide hands-on support for these students when they enroll in large lecture hall courses.<sup>5</sup> These figures do not necessarily include students enrolled in the UC Davis Extension programs, which serve nonmatriculated students, such as those on short-term study abroad through GSP (while matriculated international students are at the university for two to four years, Extension recruits new batches of students each year or even each quarter). Per its website, flexibility is a key part of its marketing strategy.<sup>6</sup> Tensions between the profit-driven education model and the public education mandate of the UC system were being hotly debated as the GSP/AMS collaboration was taking shape. UC-wide budget cuts in the wake of the 2008 recession rendered interdisciplinary programs especially vulnerable.<sup>7</sup> These administrative and funding structures reflect the broader lack of transparency around funding, and the contested politics of the UC budget and the UC system's public mandate. Our pedagogical choices were made both within and against this financial and political context, which simultaneously interpellated us as complicitous neoliberal workers and educators committed to inclusive and critically minded pedagogy.

The collaborative courses represented a way for Extension to set the UC Davis study-abroad experience apart from competitors, distinguishing itself within a niche market. Most of our international students were short-term visitors from China and Korea (with a smaller number of students from Brazil, Germany, and Japan). Their expectations and needs within our courses were conditioned by a discursive framework of "international exchange." Many of our GSP students wanted to interact more with non-Extension students and were unhappy with how few "American friends" they made during their time on campus. As such, our courses increasingly used a mixed-enrollment system that provided structured opportunities for the kinds of interaction many international students feel is missing from their study-abroad experience. The non-GSP students reflected the demographics of the UC Davis campus more broadly, which has many first-generation college students and students of color, as well as student athletes. At the same time that mixed enrollment catered to international students' desires for "cross-cultural interaction," it also allowed us to design courses that highlighted a diversity of perspectives on what "America" means.

Owens's research on US migrants teaching English in contemporary Japan informed our skepticism about international exchange frameworks. Especially within the transpacific context, desires for exchange are shaped by histories of US imperialism and can become a vector for mutually supportive, exclusionary versions of US *and* Asian nationalisms. Because the majority of GSP students were from East Asia, their desires for cross-cultural interaction often bore echoes of the East–West binary, with “America” and “Americans” easily envisioned as the locus of outgoing individualism and uncomplicated, multicultural diversity and acceptance. On the obverse of this celebratory image of the United States lay simplistic visions of China, Korea, and Japan as ethnically and culturally homogeneous nations. Students' often tacit acceptances of these generalizing binaries echo the terms of US imperial influence abroad, which often represents allied Asian countries as having culturally distinct, national characters, with their “particular cultural differences supplement[ing] the universal” signifier of America.<sup>8</sup>

While our mixed-enrollment classrooms opened up space for us to steer away from, and at times trouble, assimilationist pedagogy (i.e., America 101), they were also haunted by homogenizing assumptions about “culturally discrete” populations, celebratory images of US diversity, and exclusionary visions of national belonging in students' home countries. To provisionally work against these simplifications, we prioritized transnational perspectives that emphasized how students from the United States and abroad are linked by powerful concepts and discourses that span national borders.

### **Practical Strategies for the Syllabi and Classrooms**

Given the unique composition of the courses we taught, we developed several strategies for designing syllabi and assignments that were particularly effective. In 2013 we were commissioned by AMS and GSP to chronicle some of these strategies in a best practices manual titled “Pedagogical Issues in a Global AMS Classroom.” This document was subsequently circulated across university units that were adjusting to the influx of international students after the announcement of the Chancellor's 2020 Campus Initiative. Below are some of those key insights as they relate to pedagogical concerns with American studies.

First, while almost all introductory courses benefit from an opening unit of reading and discussion that works to establish a shared vocabulary, we found this strategy to be essential for grounding the broad critical frames of our courses. To this end, the first weeks of our classes were dedicated to defining terms that both domestic and international students would otherwise use in-

terchangeably, such as nation, state, and country, and terms that have shifting meanings across time and place, such as race, ethnicity, and citizenship. These discussions were based on canonical readings, such as selections from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, and more recent keyword definitions, such as Kirsten Silva Gruesz's "America" from *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. At the risk of stating the obvious, critical thinking is enabled through a shared understanding of the terms being used. By clearly defining terms and complicating their meanings and implications, we also began the process of denaturalizing frameworks that students took for granted. This set the stage for later work in the class to contextualize students' own nationalist investments.

Defining these terms from the beginning can help when unpacking ideological constructions of America (as the Land of Freedom, the American Dream, or Manifest Destiny, etc.). While much American studies pedagogy in the United States aims to *defamiliarize* nationalist myths, international students have not necessarily been subjectified in the same ways. Precisely because of their international perspective and their ability to draw parallels to how nationalism works in their home countries, exchange students may find it easier to identify or analyze US nationalist ideologies than some domestic students. At the same time, some forms of US exceptionalism gain more traction across borders (e.g., the American Dream) than others (e.g., Manifest Destiny), and discussing these discrepancies can also productively highlight how international students themselves have internalized these discourses.

On a practical level, when teaching against Manifest Destiny in these courses, we found that we had to use a three-part approach: *teach the discourse*, *demonstrate its pervasiveness*, and then *teach the critique*. Concretely, this meant we showed clips such as the *Schoolhouse Rock!* music video "Elbow Room" multiple times, first asking questions about comprehension (What do you see? What does the idiom "elbow room" mean? What are the historical facts here?), and then moving to analysis in subsequent viewings (What are the politics of these images? Whose perspectives are prioritized? What gets left out?). By routing this conversation through a 1976 cartoon, clearly created for children, that overarticulates the tenets of Manifest Destiny, the students were set at ease, amused, and then able to critically work through the concept and its implications. When showing videos, it is also important to display either embedded captions or the written lyrics / transcripts on the side of the screen, so that students can read as they listen. Because there were multiple *de/familiarization* projects at work in these classrooms (linguistic, cultural, and historical), working with one text for an extended period of time offered both

matriculated and exchange students the opportunity to more fully grapple with differences in their perspectives.

Many of our assignments also asked students to interrogate their own visions of America. For example, one assignment required that students take a picture of something in their everyday lives that represented “America” to them. We then built class discussions and, in Owens’s *Images of America(ns) in Popular Culture* course, creative writing and blogging activities on top of these very personalized images. These assignments created opportunities for talking across differences in ways that simultaneously spoke to desires for cultural exchange *and* served as a jumping-off point for critical analysis. Whether we were discussing a picture of clothing dryers as an example of indulgent lifestyles or a photo of people studying on the campus quad as an example of the “spaciousness” of America, there were surprises for everyone. Again, because many of their chosen images reflected how they themselves were implicated in US or home-state nationalisms, these activities encouraged students to personalize the critical perspectives presented in course readings.

In Boggs’s *Images of America(ns) in Popular Culture*, she brought her research interest in the recruitment of international students into the classroom. Making the most of American studies’ interdisciplinary methodology, she assigned a variety of texts, such as Teresa Brawner Bevis and Christopher J. Lucas’s *International Students in American Colleges and Universities* and archival pieces such as *New York Times* and *Newsweek* articles from the 1960s and 1970s, as well as literary representations such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche’s *Americanah* and pop cultural representations of “American college life” in movies such as *Monster’s University* and *Accepted*. Students were intrigued when presented with the archival texts that encouraged them to reflect on the history of how US racial politics and immigration policy contributed to the history of US higher education that made their classroom possible. But they were particularly excited to have the opportunity to analyze both university promotional materials and pop cultural representations, since many of the students had encountered these texts uncritically prior to the class and were thus able to recognize how much their capacity for critically analyzing “America” and their own experience had grown.

## Conclusion

At the moment there is good reason to believe that the number of international students attending US universities will continue to increase, especially at the

undergraduate level. Given this trend, universities will continue to engage in the development of curricula to serve this population. This development can occur in one of two directions. It can either be off-loaded to the rapidly expanding nonacademic “student life” sectors of campus, or American studies scholars, attuned to the necessity for a critical and reflective approach to the study of the United States, can proactively intervene. These are politically, intellectually, and financially complicated spaces for universities, departments, instructors, and, though they are not always aware of it, students. But these spaces also have the potential to be especially productive for rethinking what transnational American studies can do in the classroom.

#### Notes

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6. “Program Summary,” UC Davis Global Study Program, 2011, [globalstudy.ucdavis.edu/program.asp](http://globalstudy.ucdavis.edu/program.asp) (accessed October 30, 2015).
7. Tovin Lapan, *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, January 7, 2011, [www.santacruzsentinel.com/general-news/20110107/ucsc-moves-to-suspend-american-studies-program](http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/general-news/20110107/ucsc-moves-to-suspend-american-studies-program). At the time, the closure of this American Studies program was invoked as part of OccupyUC’s critiques of the defunding of the humanities. In 2014 UC Santa Cruz did begin offering a new major in critical race and ethnic studies.
8. Lisa Yoneyama, “Habits of Knowing Cultural Difference: *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* in the U.S. Liberal Multiculturalism,” *Topoi* 18 (1999): 75.