

Teaching the United States 20.21: A Foreword

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This foreword takes stock of the history and current state of the field of American Studies and its contributions to an educational mission in the past, present, and in the future. Besides its interdisciplinarity, American Studies is characterized by its combination of scholarship and activism. The articles collected in this issue take us from the global protests against systemic racism and state violence in the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd to the violent attack on the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters on January 6, 2021. Focusing on the repercussions of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, two contributions present innovative digital teaching solutions. Further articles deal with presidential elections in the social media age, migration and immigrant histories, civil disobedience, conspiracy theories, theater about climate change and the American family, and the popular TV series The Americans. Finally, individual contributions assess transition processes, the implementation of a remedial summer school, and the role of self-efficacy beliefs in teaching in inclusive settings.

Dieses Vorwort zieht eine Bilanz der Geschichte und des gegenwärtigen Standes der Amerikanistik und widmet sich ihrer Bedeutung für den damaligen, heutigen und zukünftigen Bildungsauftrag. Neben ihrer Interdisziplinarität zeichnet sich die Amerikanistik durch die Verbindung von Forschung und politischem Engagement aus. Die Artikel dieser Ausgabe spannen den Bogen von den weltweiten Protesten gegen systemischen Rassismus und staatlicher Gewalt nach dem Mord an George Floyd im Sommer 2020 zum gewaltsamen Angriff von Trump Anhängern auf das US-Kapitol am 6. Januar 2021. Zwei Beiträge zu Auswirkungen von #MeToo und #BlackLivesMatter stellen innovative digitale Unterrichtslösungen vor. Weitere Artikel befassen sich mit den Präsidentschaftswahlen im Zeitalter der sozialen Medien, dem Thema Migration und Einwanderungserfahrung, zivilem Ungehorsam, Verschwörungstheorien, Theater über die amerikanische Familie und den Klimawandel sowie mit der bekannten Fernsehserie The Americans. Abschließend wird in drei Einzelbeiträgen vom Übergang von elementarpädagogischen Einrichtungen zur Grundschule, von der Organisation und Konzeption der Sommerschule

2020 und über die Rolle von Selbstwirksamkeitsüberzeugungen beim Unterrichten in integrativen Settings berichtet.

Introduction

Learners of English as a foreign language and students of American Studies are interested and increasingly well-informed about the United States. This tendency has been reinforced by an intensive global media reporting in the wake of the 2020 U.S. elections, protests against systemic racism and police violence after the killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and many others under police custody, as well as the (mis)handling of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Yet, how much do our students really know about the United States as they glean their information from an increasingly diversified media landscape? More importantly, how can we – as their teachers – answer their questions, fill historical gaps, and teach them about the future visions of the oldest continually existing democracy? How are we teaching challenging issues; how are we addressing our students' often emotional responses to these topics and materials? How do we teach the controversial issues of social and political injustice that are intricately intertwined with American settler colonialist and contemporary U.S. American history since the American Revolution?

The forum on "Teaching the United States: Past, Present and Future Visions" in this issue of *F&E Edition* connects Foreign Language Education, History and Political Education with American Studies scholarship. Within the forum section of the present issue, readers are given valuable recommendations about how to introduce the United States into the secondary and tertiary level classroom.

The Beginnings of American Studies in the United States and Europe

Since the 1990s American Studies has been a trailblazer in the advancement of multicultural education, and it seems worthwhile to revisit the field's

politically motivated beginnings. The beginning of the discipline was marked by seminars offered at Yale, Harvard, and the University of Pennsylvania in the 1930s. The goal of these seminars was to bring together literary studies and history, which led to more interdisciplinary courses and programs. Studying the cultural history of texts enabled scholars to go beyond the perceived restrictions of literary studies and historiography and contributed to a wide-ranging spirit of experimentation and innovation. By 1945, 60 colleges and universities in the United States had begun to offer degree programs in American Studies.

After the end of World War II, cultural re-education programs lead to the birth of American Studies in Europe. In 1947, the first ever Salzburg Seminar was held at Schloss Leopoldskron. It was meant as an introduction to American Studies and included workshops on literature, art, cultural history, politics, sociology, anthropology, and economics. U.S. intellectuals and scholars like cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead instructed fellows (see fig. 1). During the months of July and August, the seminar brought together twenty Americanists and over ninety participants from eighteen Euro-

pean countries. Later, the first Salzburg Seminar was hailed by many as the beginning of American Studies in Europe.

Besides Mead, American Studies scholar F.O. Matthiessen, and literary critic Alfred Kazin were key players in establishing American Studies in postwar Austria. In 1953, the European Association for American Studies was founded at Schloss Leopoldskron; the Amerika-Institut in Innsbruck followed in 1956, and the Austrian Association for American Studies (AAAS) was established in 1974.

From the late 1940s through the 1960s, the first theoretical paradigm of American Studies evolved. Henry Nash Smith, whose book *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) became the basis of the History of American Civilization course at Harvard University, propagated comprehensive, contextual, collective representations of 'America.' He was interested in ideals, values, images, and the characteristics of an American national identity; in other words, how the United States might be distinguished from other nations. In this sense, Nash did not support a new critical intrinsic analysis of literary style – popularized by



Figure 1: Margaret Mead at the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies (1947), Salzburg Global Seminar CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

John Crowe Ransom and his students Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren – but advocated an extrinsic analysis of the culture that produced a particular literary work.

With his book and his essay “Can American Studies Develop a Method?” (1957), Smith advocated influential objectives and methodological views for American Studies as a field. Smith provided the basis for the ‘Myth and Symbol School’ because what he called “collective representations” were intellectual constructs that were not limited to a specific author or work but representations that expressed and merged “concept[s] and emotion[s]” shared and recognized by many within American culture (Smith, 1950, p. v). His, and other Americanists’ goal was, as Leo Marx formulated it, to understand the “meaning of America” and the “American experience” (Marx, 1964, pp. 3–4).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s criticism of the Myth and Symbol School was brought forward. Opponents argued that it did not recognize or include the more empirical social sciences properly. Myth and Symbol-scholars were too interpretative, too qualitative and too subjective. Sometimes naive links between images and politics were established, and critics questioned that a causality existed. Most alarmingly, they argued, it only reiterated the message of “American exceptionalism.”

Proponents of “American exceptionalism” presume that America’s values, political system, and history are unique and worthy of universal admiration, like John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” (1630). American exceptionalism also implies that the United States is both destined and entitled to play a distinct and positive role on the world stage. Critics against the Myth and Symbol school and its implicit propagation of American exceptionalism decried the lack of room for multiple and diverse readings, neglecting opposition and dissent and seeking consensus.

The new focus on American Culture Studies in the context of the 1960s and 1970s came out of the social protest and ethnic empowerment movements. New theoretical views on “culture” emerged.

But the new inclusiveness did not mean consensus or looking for the smallest common denominator, but rather comprehensiveness regarding the multiplicity of perspectives. All in all, the tendency towards a more critical analysis of American ideologies was at the center. The historian Robert Sklar demanded “a whole cultural history of the U.S.” (Sklar, 1970, p. 601) which not only claims to be comprehensive, but which *is* comprehensive. The central concerns and questions now were:

- How can we interpret the individual ways in which meaning is constituted and understanding is constructed?
- Which ideologies are at the basis of each individual field of study, perspective, and approach?

In other words, total objectivity was dismantled as a myth. Instead, an awareness of diverse experiences in order to assess and understand specific phenomena was needed.

Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, Joseph Entin, and Rebecca Hill summarize the development of the discipline since the 1990s in the following way: “In the 1990s, at the time of the last wave of the academic culture wars, American Studies announced itself as a champion of multicultural education and called for American Studies curricula to cast off American exceptionalism, become transnational, explicitly connect academic and community-based work, and consider the relationship between the field’s history and US imperialism” (Duclos-Orsello et al., 2021, p. 2).

Teaching American Studies in Vorarlberg

What makes American Studies so special for me are the seemingly endless ways of approaching and teaching this field. Working in an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field that explores context and culture on a local and global level opens up new perspectives on everyday life. Americanists attempt to identify and decipher connections between cultural systems and texts. A text contains much more than the written word and ranges from cave drawings to buildings and machines to videos and hypertext.

I understand American Studies also as a way of thinking, a “cognitive style” as Jay Mechling calls it (2011, p. 1), or a certain “habit of mind,” as Adam Golub refers to it (2012, p. n.p.). At PH Vorarlberg, I am not only interested in teaching what American Studies is and what its aims are, its topics and contents, but also how to think like an Americanist.

Applying my scholarship, practice, and teaching to confront anti-BIPOC racism, and addressing and actively engaging in issues of environmental, social, racial and gender justice has become more urgent than ever. As scholars, we need to critically assess what and how we are teaching, to transfer the knowledge produced in the “ivory tower” to our immediate environment, and to support social, cultural, and political change, especially during challenging times. I believe that in this era of “post-truth” and “alternative facts,” the role of a critical, future-oriented pedagogy for the preservation of democracy is paramount.

The original goal of this forum collection was to provide a few concrete resources for those teaching American Studies in the broadest sense, from their function as teachers of English as a foreign language in the secondary school classroom to those educating future teachers of English, History, Religion, Art History, Geography, Economics, and the Political Sciences at universities and other tertiary institutions. What I did not expect was the quantity and quality of responses that emerged from a simple call for papers. The articles that emerged from these responses now lie in your hands, if you are reading a print copy, or they are at your fingertips, if you are perusing the online edition of *F&E* “Teaching the United States.”

Past, Present, and Future Visions

The global protests around racism and state violence in the summer of 2020 prove the importance and power of an interdisciplinary approach in teaching the United States. Education and protest have led to the removal of Confederate statues, which Erika Doss takes as a starting point of her

article. Taking up the call for papers’ cue to consider past, present and future visions in American thought, as well as our teaching of it, Doss examines how and why many Americans today take historical accountability, such as for the history of slavery, and mix it with immediate social concerns (inequality and unaddressed institutional racism) as a trigger to practice a form of ‘cultural vandalism’ by damaging and removing public art in pursuit of a future vision that includes alternative forms of social and political purpose and identity. The richly illustrated article invites teachers and their students to research and then discuss possible and feasible ways to deal with problematic and historically charged public art. The exploration could range from controversial local monuments, such as the history of and possible future scenarios for the Lueger monument and Lueger-Platz in Vienna’s 1st district to American memorials or vice versa (see, for example, *Marble. Bronze. Responsibility.*, 2021, p. n.p.).

In their contribution, Luisa Alfes and Katharina von Elbwart use historical and contemporary visions of American art as means to foster visual literacy of and critical thinking about the United States past and present. Beginning in the late nineteenth century with *John Gast’s American Progress* (1872) and continuing in the 1930s with Frida Kahlo’s *Self-Portrait Along the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States* (1932) the authors’ overview concludes with the famous yellow and blue mural depicting George Floyd at the murder site in Minneapolis. The area soon known as George Floyd Memorial Square and its surroundings became the site of public protests and amassed an extensive collection of protest art. People continued to come to the memorial site for town meetings, food drives, open-air piano concerts, and neighborhood movie nights. During the winter months, an ice-skating rink was operated, and volunteers removed trash and took care of the various artworks and left mementos. Elsewhere, Erika Doss has aptly pointed out, that temporary memorials “remind us of our social responsibility” (2010, p. 71), something that is truly the case at the corner of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis.

After the U.S. Capitol insurrection, the violent attack on January 6, 2021, by Trump supporters that raised global concerns about the future of American democracy, a snapshot of a man storming the Capitol and wearing a sweater ostensibly propagating Third Reich ideology went viral. Klara Stephanie Szlezák weaves her article around this and other pictures to show that anti-Semitism in the United States is, in fact, an issue of the present as much as the past. She thus convincingly argues for the inclusion of anti-Semitism education in the EFL and American Studies classroom.

While Szlezák with the Capitol insurrection touches upon Trump's violent move to stay in power, Magdalena Paulus in her article also traces his rise to power that is ultimately connected to the accelerated evolution of the Religious Right since the 1970s. Paulus describes the development of White American Evangelicalism to Christian Nationalism, from its early roots in the nineteenth century awakenings, the fundamentalism of the early twentieth century, to its conflation of values and lifestyles of different groups in the course of the twentieth and first decades of the twenty-first century.

Especially in the context of the modularized and constantly evolving study programs, and the digital Covid-19 semesters, self-directed digital learning by students is becoming increasingly important. In fact, the key to successful secondary and tertiary education lies in a double perspective of clearly structured, motivating, and interactive knowledge transfer on the one hand and the promotion of independent learning processes on the other, for example through research- and problem-oriented learning techniques (Pfaff, 1996; Price, 2005) and task-based language teaching (Ellis, 2003). Two articles focus on these recent challenges and offer intriguing solutions. Building on the successful integration of distance teaching as a mandatory element in foreign language teacher training, Sandra Stadler-Heer's contribution introduces a set of online lessons created by pre-service teachers that explore the complex topic of structural racism. The article by Regina Holze and Florian Zitzelsberger reads recent examples of hashtag activism (#MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter etc.) as collaborative storytell-

ing practices and as digital political communication. By carefully walking readers through their innovative interdisciplinary project that combines big data analytical tools with cultural studies scholarship, Holze and Zitzelsberger enable teachers to promote information and media literacy (IML) in the EFL classroom.

The articles by Brian Trenaman and Florian Bassa revolve around U.S. presidential elections. While both focus on the election cycle that saw Donald Trump elected as the 45th President, Bassa begins with an overview of the system of a presidential democracy to compare it with the parliamentary system in Austria. In his article, Bassa not only provides instructors with a teaching concept but provides helpful charts and informative text boxes to further explorative learning. His contribution includes an article about the special affordances and questionable practices (e.g., supported by Cambridge Analytica) of campaigning in the digital and social media age. Trenaman's contribution may serve as a companion piece to Bassa's for teaching a unit on U.S. American elections.

Migration and immigrant histories and experiences are only a few of the curricular foci that can be found in the articles. Nils Jaekel and Elizabeth Fincher revisit the positive perceptions of early waves of immigration and provocatively ask whether the 'melting pot' myth still reflects the cultural diversity of Americans as well as the current climate of political denigration of some minorities. The authors offer counternarratives and discussion questions to be used in the classroom to further empathy and strengthen skills of critical cultural awareness. The case of a specific group of immigrants is taken up by Klaus-Dieter Gross. He calls German and Austrian immigrants of the early twentieth century who introduced the Naturfreunde/Nature Friends movement to the United States "socioecological pioneers." In his article, Gross traces their bumpy history using the examples of two major clubhouses from their foundation in 1910 and 1912 until today. The contribution may function as a springboard for teachers to discuss diverse issues ranging from immigration, the labor movement,

and the McCarthy era to environmental sustainability and the introduction of a Green New Deal in the United States.

Other key issues of the EFL and American Studies classroom as represented in this forum include teaching the origins of civil disobedience, the handling of conspiracy theories, and a media approach to the Cold War. Stefan Hiebler presents a lesson sequence in which he introduces students to the fundamentals of civil disobedience in texts such as the Declaration of Independence and Henry David Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" (1848). In a second step, students explore the history and origin of conspiracy theories. The goal is to enable students to understand where civil disobedience ends and other forms of protest begin, so that they can critically examine conspiracy theories and form their own opinions. In their article, Christian Ludwig and Elizabeth Shipley, introduce the popular TV series *The Americans*, which features the lives of Soviet secret agents in the United States, as an excellent way to engage students in the history of the Cold War and in questions of American identity, as well as strengthen their analytical and critical media skills.

Inspired by the performative turn in cultural studies and recent innovative studies in drama pedagogy, Angelika Ilg and I undertook a research and teaching project to "enact America in the classroom." The seminar-based concept combines the exposure to literary texts and academic writing practices with the invaluable insights students gain in a professionally taught drama workshop. The ensuing article encourages university teachers to carry out similar projects.

The last section of the present volume assembles three individual contributions outside the general topic of the Forum section. Regina Lins provides an overview of her mixed-methods study that critically assesses the transition process from nursery school to primary school. The first Austria-wide implementation of a so-called 'summer school' due to Corona-related school closures after the 2019/20 school year is at the center of Pia Frick, Elke Kikelj-Schwald and Simone Naphegyi's quali-

tative evaluation study. Finally, Petra Hecht and Christoph Weber's contribution presents the results of a longitudinal study that assesses students' attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs, and subjective attitudes towards inclusion as predictors of willingness and relative success to teach in inclusive settings.

In their entirety, the contributions in the forum section and the general section of the volume help inform students and teachers, including EFL teachers and American Studies practitioners, about the best ways to respond to an ever-changing social world in their classrooms.

Dedication

I work at an institution where teaching is a major activity of what I and most of my colleagues do. We teach K12, that is, primary and secondary education, and we offer pre-service teacher-training for the primary and secondary level as well as provide continued educational programs and trainings for primary and secondary school teachers. Students and teachers, in addition to interested members of the public and the scientific community, make up F&E Edition's core readership. It is with pride and great pleasure that I am dedicating this issue to all teachers!

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