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Introduction: American Studies in the Classroom – Arts, Culture, and Critical Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This introduction situates the special issue's central premise that artistic and aesthetic practices offer powerful pedagogical tools for critical inquiry in American studies. Framed by the field's interdisciplinary traditions and its ongoing epistemic transformations, the introduction reflects on how classroom practices can foster analytical, emotional, and ethical engagement with cultural materials. It also highlights the political stakes of teaching US history and culture in a moment marked by curricular debates, book bans, and renewed challenges to critical scholarship. The articles collected here present innovative approaches that expand the interpretive possibilities of American studies pedagogy across classrooms, analog and digital media, as well as public spaces.

KEYWORDS

Interdisciplinarity, public scholarship, aesthetic education, poetry, photography, film

Context and Scope

American Studies in the Classroom: Arts, Culture, and Critical Pedagogy developed out of the 2024 annual conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies titled "Education, the Arts, and American Studies," which took place at the University College of Teacher Education Vorarlberg. In the three keynotes and in the eighteen workshop sessions, presenters and participants explored topics that pushed the boundaries of how we think about and teach American studies.

The thematic scope of the conference program allowed for a comprehensive exploration of how the arts and cultural analysis function as pedagogical and political tools in contemporary American studies. We engaged with topics ranging from "Poetry Pedagogy in Transnational American Studies" to "Creative and Activist Approaches in the American Studies Classroom," and from "Archives, Museums, and Public Education" to the challenges of "Teaching Race and Gender: New and Practical Approaches." We also delved into pressing contemporary issues such as "AI Ethics and Media Literacy," reflecting on how digital media and AI technology are reshaping education. The transnational perspective of American studies was illustrated in a session in which scholars from Israel, Romania, and the Netherlands expanded the range of our conversations even further. Historical contexts were emphasized in discussions on "Education and the Arts in 20th-Century America," alongside with current approaches to "Native American and Indigenous Studies Pedagogy" and the critical investigation of "Indigenous Presences and Absences." Digital engagement was the focal point in a session dedicated to "American Studies and Digital Media Activism," and interdisciplinary approaches were represented through discussions on "Sonic and Aesthetic Approaches to Teaching American Studies" and "Teaching Design and Visual Culture."

With this special issue, we present a selection of conference presentations developed into articles to further critically interrogate the field from the perspective of the classroom. Within this space, American studies provides students and faculty with the intellectual resources and analytical skills necessary to apprehend and reshape the world. At the same time, classroom practice connects the discipline with the rich cultural materials it studies. Americanists identify and decipher relationships between cultural systems and texts that range from cave drawings to buildings and machines, from films and photographs to videos and memes.

Likewise, the editors and contributors to this issue understand the arts as a broad category encompassing the creation and expression of human imagination across both analog and digital formats. This includes the visual and performing arts, literary and musical forms, as well as public art and community-based creative activism.

This special issue emerges from the epistemic transformations that have shaped American studies as a discipline. The field originated as an interdiscipline designed to bolster narratives of US exceptionalism which sought to establish a unified understanding of American culture. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the rise of social and political movements organized around shared identities and experiences prompted a significant shift. Scholars increasingly embraced diverse perspectives in approaching and teaching what it means to be American. In their groundbreaking collection of essays *Teaching American Studies: The State of the Classroom as State of the Field*,

Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, Joseph Entin, and Rebecca Hill aptly capture the key methodological and political shifts in the field as follows: "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. 2).

Historically, American studies has been an interdisciplinary field that engages diverse perspectives on education while embracing innovative approaches to its multifaceted subject matter. In many ways, this has made the discipline one of the most dynamic sites of intellectual engagement within the academy, as it fosters critical perspectives on culture and power, and connects academic inquiry with broader social debates. Jay Mechling famously described American studies as a way of thinking – a particular "cognitive style" (1; 6–10) – while Adam Golub referred to it as a distinctive "habit of mind."

At the same time, emotions have long played a central role in cultural constructions of "America." Scholars associated with the "emotional turn," such as Lauren Berlant (*The Female Complaint*; *Cruel Optimism*), Sara Ahmed ("Affective Economies"; *The Promise of Happiness*), and Ann Cvetkovich (*An Archive of Feelings*; *Depression*), have reaffirmed feelings as a productive lens for cultural analysis.

Taken together, these perspectives raise an important pedagogical question: How can we teach students to think – and perhaps even feel – like Americanists? How can reflective, contextual, and aesthetic engagements with the arts encourage students to step outside familiar frameworks of experience and experiment with new ideas and perspectives?

For scholars and educators, addressing these questions means reflecting critically on what, why, and how we teach. It also requires considering how knowledge produced within academic institutions can be shared beyond them in ways that support critical thinking and creative expression, particularly in challenging political and social contexts. The call for papers for the conference already drew attention to developments in the United States, including legislation regulating curriculum content (for instance, debates surrounding Critical Race Theory and intersectionality), book bans in US public schools and school libraries, and growing parental control over educational practices, including organized involvement in school board governance, challenges to classroom practices, and influence over student services. Only a month after the conference concluded, the urgency of these discussions intensified further following the results of the 2024 US presidential election and the new realities of the second Trump administration.

Against this backdrop, the projects presented in this special issue implicitly and explicitly call on readers to reflect on their responsibilities as educators and cultural interpreters. The contributions highlight the urgency of fostering critical engagement with US history, politics, literature, and media at a moment when educational spaces themselves have become contested terrain.

Intersections: Themes and Methods across the Contributions

The articles collected in this special issue explore artists' conceptualizations and visualizations of the "histories of 'America'" – a feature that Nassim W. Balestrini highlights in her contribution to this issue – as well as artists' engagements with historical events both past and present. Across different media – including narrative fiction, poetry, photography, and film – the contributions examine how artistic practices illuminate complex historical and cultural processes. The issue showcases a range of educational projects that successfully integrate the arts and creative practices into the teaching of American studies. Together, these projects highlight the importance of incorporating creative approaches more fully into school and university curricula – not only to offer students a more holistic learning experience but also because of the potential of artistic practices to generate new forms of knowledge. In this vein, contributors Steven Hoelscher and Stephanie Zeller cite Harriet Hawkins's reminder that scholars should recognize the value of creative practices "beyond their affective and subjective experience" and consider their potential "to create conditions for intersecting research and the world in ongoing ways" (9).

Several contributions describe projects designed to engage broader publics and to connect academic research with communities beyond the university. This public dimension is particularly evident in the cultural work discussed in the articles by Hoelscher and Zeller as well as by Balestrini. The Ansel Adams photography exhibition examined by Hoelscher and Zeller attracted thousands of visitors, exemplifying what Hoelscher calls "public-facing scholarship." Balestrini's article, in turn, discusses Joy Harjo's Poet Laureate project *Living Nations, Living Words*, which introduces a wider public to the multifacetedness of Native American poetry. Both contributions also highlight the crucial role of maps and mapping practices – whether in relation to Indigenous poetry or environmental photography.

Several contributions in this issue address the growing role of multimedia formats and digital technologies in the teaching of American studies. Projects discussed in the articles incorporate short films (Gamböck-Strätz), online archives (Balestrini), and digital tools such as geographic information systems used in the GIS-companion developed for Hoelscher's and Zeller's photography exhibition. In doing so, the issue responds to both the opportunities and the challenges facing the discipline in an era

marked by digitalization and the reality of AI-powered technologies. Furthermore, the projects examined by Balestrini as well as Hoelscher and Zeller demonstrate two important advantages of digital formats: They expand the reach of scholarly work and make cultural content accessible to wider audiences. Harjo's online iteration of her project, for instance, can be understood – in the words of Balestrini – as "a kind of digital monument."

Each contribution in *American Studies in the Classroom* proposes innovative pedagogical approaches that foster students' ability to identify and interpret connections between texts – both written and visual – and the broader cultural systems in which they circulate, a core objective of American studies. Collectively, the articles demonstrate strategies for encouraging critical thinking and cultivating an awareness of cultural interconnections.

The methodologies and approaches explored in the contributions include, among others, "investigative aesthetics." In the respective article, Juliane Gamböck-Strätz draws on Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's argument that aesthetic experience directs "students' attention toward complex phenomena and problems, rather than prescribing how they have to understand certain problems and how, ultimately, they must deal with them" (128). Such an approach encourages an attitude of sustained inquiry rather than fixed interpretation. Shelley Fisher Fishkin's contribution demonstrates how literary texts can serve as entry points for engaging with contested narratives through multiple methods of critical analysis. Vanessa Vollmann's article introduces the pedagogical technique of "paneling" as a way to facilitate classroom discussions about Critical Race Theory and to generate productive counterdialogues around literary texts. All of these approaches encourage an attitude of sustained inquiry rather than fixed interpretation.

Overview of the Contributions

The article that opens this special issue, Nassim W. Balestrini's "Indigenous Poets as Cartographers of Crisis and Memory: Joy Harjo's Poet Laureate Signature Project *Living Nations, Living Words*," examines the conceptual scope and pedagogical potential of Joy Harjo's poetry project during her tenure as US Poet Laureate. Balestrini analyzes both the digital mapping project on the Library of Congress website and the printed anthology, paying close attention to the differences between these formats and their respective modes of engaging readers. By foregrounding the work of poets such as Deborah A. Miranda, Kimberly Blaeser, Laura Tohe, and Craig Santos Perez, the article demonstrates how Indigenous poetry reimagines cartography as a form of cultural and historical intervention. Harjo's project highlights that Indigenous poets and Indigenous mappings of land long preceded the literary and spatial narratives that later

came to define the United States. In doing so, it invites readers to reconsider the beginnings, components, and implications of the histories of "America" and of "American" poetry. Balestrini argues that the project charts possible paths toward a future in which Native poets' engagements with memory, trauma, and place reshape dominant understandings of US-American cultural history.

In "Can Literature Come to the Rescue when History Is Under Siege? How One Novel Can Be a Trojan Horse to Engage Questions Some Politicians Don't Want Us to Ask," Shelley Fisher Fishkin addresses the increasingly restrictive climate surrounding the teaching of US history. Drawing attention to legislative measures in numerous states that seek to limit classroom discussions of racism, Fishkin explores how literary texts can provide a way to open precisely the conversations such policies attempt to suppress. Focusing on Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), the article offers a close reading of the character of Jim, arguing that Twain portrays him as a figure endowed with intelligence, creativity, empathy, and moral insight. Through comparative analysis that includes Ralph Wiley's screenplay *Spike Lee's Huckleberry Finn* (1997) and Percival Everett's novel *James* (2024), Fishkin challenges longstanding critical interpretations that reduce Jim to a product of minstrel stereotypes. The article also highlights Twain's personal familiarity with African American communities and the narrative complexity created by the novel's child narrator. Ultimately, Fishkin contends that teaching *Huckleberry Finn* can function as a powerful pedagogical strategy for engaging students with contested histories at a moment when such discussions face renewed political pressure.

Vanessa Vollmann's contribution, "Paneling to Avoid 'Deer in the Headlights' Moments in Class: Critical Race Theory Counterdialogues in a Seminar on Percival Everett's Novel *James* (2024)," proposes an innovative teaching method designed to facilitate discussions of structural racism in the classroom. Vollmann argues that traditional teacher-centered approaches often prove inadequate when addressing emotionally charged topics, as they may elicit silence, discomfort, or polarized responses from students. As an alternative, she introduces the pedagogical technique of "paneling," a guided exercise in which students collaboratively create panel discussions featuring composite characters who enter into dialogue with one another. This method channels students' creativity while allowing them to explore complex issues through narrative experimentation. Drawing on her experience teaching a seminar that read Everett's *James* as a counterstory to Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Vollmann demonstrates how paneling enables students to develop counterstories themselves that critically engage the discourse surrounding structural racism. The method fosters cross-racial communicative skills, encourages careful attention

to language, and creates a classroom environment in which students can discuss sensitive issues more confidently and productively.

In "Investigative Aesthetics in the American Studies Classroom: Approaching 9/11 through Alejandro González Iñárritu's *11'09"1: September 11*," Juliane Gamböck-Strätz explores the pedagogical potential of aesthetic inquiry as a method for engaging with complex historical events, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks. Gamböck-Strätz argues that aesthetic inquiry enables learners to explore artistic visual and cultural materials more independently, encouraging them to question dominant narratives and to recognize the interplay between knowledge and power. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and others, the article emphasizes that aesthetic experience can direct students' attention toward the complexity of cultural phenomena rather than prescribing predetermined interpretations. By approaching Iñárritu's short film through this method, Gamböck-Strätz demonstrates how investigative aesthetics can foster sustained inquiry and deeper engagement with the cultural memory of 9/11, thereby reinforcing key methodological commitments of American studies.

The final contribution, "Pictures at an Environmental Exhibition: Reflections on the Art of Photography Curation," by Steven Hoelscher and Stephanie Zeller, reflects on the scholarly process of curating a major exhibition devoted to the environmental photography of Ansel Adams and related photographic traditions. Combining analytical discussion with a narrative walkthrough of the exhibition, the article examines how photographs by Adams, as well as by his predecessors and successors, have shaped influential visual narratives of the US-American landscape. Hoelscher and Zeller highlight the capacity of photography to influence viewers' perceptions of environmental history and to illuminate the intertwined histories of nature and culture. At the same time, the article foregrounds the intellectual work involved in conceiving, researching, and mounting an exhibition, arguing that curatorial practice constitutes a form of scholarship in its own right. By adopting a non-propositional approach that encourages viewers and students to draw connections across images and historical contexts, the authors demonstrate how exhibitions can function as powerful pedagogical spaces for critical observation and interdisciplinary learning.

Taken together, the five articles in this special issue demonstrate the vitality of American studies as a field that continuously reexamines its pedagogical practices and intellectual commitments. While the contributions differ in their methods and spatial contexts – from website, to classroom, to museum exhibition – they share an interest in experimenting with forms of teaching and emanating knowledge that invite teachers and students to engage critically with cultural artifacts and the historical narratives and structures that shape them. At a moment when the role of

education itself is being publicly debated and contested, the projects presented here underscore the importance of classrooms that remain open to inquiry, dialogue, and intellectual risk. By foregrounding the interpretive possibilities of the arts and the analytical strengths of American studies, the articles gathered in this issue suggest ways in which teaching can foster both critical awareness and imaginative engagement. In doing so, they reaffirm the classroom as a space where scholarly reflection and social responsibility meet.

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Angelika Ilg taught in the English Department at the University College of Teacher Education Vorarlberg in Feldkirch, Austria, where she co-organized the AAAS conference (2024) and contributed to its associated publication project. She received her teaching degrees in the subjects English and Classical philology and her doctoral degree from the University of Innsbruck, where she held a pre-doctoral position carrying teaching responsibilities at the Department of American Studies. Her dissertation on the literary work of the US-American novelist and short-story writer Elizabeth Spencer was awarded the Siemens Prize. Angelika Ilg's studies and research have taken her to the State University of New York at Buffalo on a Fulbright scholarship,

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Disclosure Statement

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