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Introduction

Historically, the role of American Studies has been to strengthen the foundations upon which the American experience is studied, analyzed and discussed in the academic context. Teachers have been invested with the role of explaining America to European students, making it intelligible by unearthing its numerous contradictions and sophistications, and ultimately favoring exchanges and ties between the US and Europe. However, since its inception in the immediate aftermath of World War Two, American Studies has been facing countless challenges, with generations of scholars contesting its theoretical premises. Born as a project of ‘cultural imperialism’ during the Cold War, American Studies was profoundly transformed by the impact of the radical movements of the Sixties. The proliferation of disciplines such as African American Studies, Native American Studies, Queer Studies and Women’s Studies forced American Studies to abandon its normative nationality-defined framework (Radway).

In the highly influential 1979 essay “‘Paradigm Dramas’ in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement,” cultural historian Gene Wise gave a conceptual infrastructure to a discipline that the 1970s cultural developments were rapidly making no longer usable. Wise’s concept of “Paradigm Dramas” accommodated conflicting tensions in an organic theoretical framework. Suggesting that historical ideas were “a sequence of dramatic acts – acts which play on wider cultural scenes, or historical stages” (Wise 296, cf. Pease and Wiegman 2), Wise argued that historicisations should be abandoned in favor of a model that reflected the fractured nature of the American experience. With this aim in view, he suggested a loose definition of American Studies that would predict its pluralist, particularistic, and comparativist future. In the landmark essay collection *Futures of American Studies*, Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman started from Wise’s essay to offer an updated version of the developments that had occurred in the discipline, dividing the multiple ‘futures’ of

American Studies into four categories: post-hegemonic, comparativist, differential and counter-hegemonic.

RSA Journal invited leading scholars from across the various disciplines in American Studies to discuss pedagogical trends, methodological approaches, module design, and the challenges faced when teaching the literature, culture and history of the United States. The Forum, edited by Virginia Pignagnoli and Lorenzo Costaguta on behalf of the AISNA Graduate Forum, discusses a topic of special interest for early-career researchers, who start teaching at a time fraught with epochal changes both in academia and in the American political and social world. The Forum sought to answer the following questions: have Americanists across Europe succeeded in teaching the complexity of American Studies? What are the main challenges they encounter? What are the theoretical frameworks that are best suited to teach the multiple histories and the multiple contradictions of American culture? How have the field and the various sub-disciplines composing it evolved in the past ten years? What kind of new directions can we envision for the future as far as teaching pedagogies are concerned?

The Forum's contributors, Joe Merton (University of Nottingham), Anna Pochmara (University of Warsaw), Joshua Parker (University of Salzburg), Marietta Messmer (University of Groningen), and Donatella Izzo ("L'Orientale" University of Naples) emphasize the interdisciplinarity and malleability of American Studies, confirming the importance of Pease and Wiegman's analysis. However, while Wiegman and Pease discuss American Studies from the American perspective, (cf. also Wiegman), the Forum's contributors explore the role of American Studies in Europe. This follows a discussion initiated, among others, by Donatella Izzo ("Outside Where?") and Cornelis A. van Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton ("Teaching and Studying").

Teaching American Studies in Europe has always presented a specific set of problems, connected with the evolving and interdisciplinary nature of the subject itself. Moreover, differences in curricula, university systems and research programs within European countries have contributed to create a diverse field of studies, in which our understanding of American Studies has fractured into many different sub-national fields. Today, such a complicated situation faces new challenges vis-à-vis the current socio-political situation, both in the US and in Europe, with events such as

Trump's presidency, Brexit, the threat of terrorism, the consequences of global warming, but also developments in the academic world, from the spread of digital technologies to a lack of job security.

The following essays offer a variety of perspectives on these issues. First, they point out how American Studies, as a discipline, shows differences and similarities according to where it is taught. For instance, in Merton's contribution we observe the marketization of British academia to satisfy the need for the discipline to be appealing to students. In Poland, as Pochmara's essay demonstrates, American Studies have been employed to introduce innovative trends in academia, such as whiteness studies, masculinity studies, ecocriticism and posthumanism. Izzo's contribution focuses on the specificities of American Studies in Italy, also highlighting both the (profoundly negative) impact that the current trend to marketize academia has on the Italian public university system and the role American Studies scholars play in the circulation of the theoretical discourses mentioned by Pochmara. A second aspect, discussed by many contributors, insists on the multiple connections between American Studies and the history of the country where it is taught, as is exemplified by Pochmara and Merton with regard to the issue of race in the UK and Poland. Thirdly, American Studies can be employed to reframe US cultural hegemony through innovative methods. For instance, by abandoning well-established narratives and focusing on less debated aspects of US history, we favour a better critical understanding of both its past and present – and we can do this precisely because US history and its mass culture are so popular and American cultural products are already familiar to European students, as stressed by Parker. Just this pervasiveness and appeal of US popular culture is seen by Izzo as crucial for the revival of the humanities in an education system crippled by budget cuts and neoliberal policies. Ultimately, for all their differences, the contributions focus on two key aspects of American Studies in Europe: transnationalism and interdisciplinarity. As evidenced most clearly by Messmer, European American Studies are in fact ideally positioned to cultivate and strengthen these two aspects of the field, and hence guarantee their ability to encapsulate the multiplicity of the American experience in a period rife with cultural, political and social changes.