

Re-Evaluating Ways of Teaching American Literature Beyond
American Borders in the Global Era
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Abstract: The article focuses on reconsidering ways of teaching American literature outside the US including adaptation of the teaching methods to meet the demands of communal and cultural needs from a larger and wider perspective than is currently the practice. It simultaneously focuses on the American formalistic awareness and on the controversies concerning the pedagogical situation of American literary studies in the curriculums of the Arab-World universities and colleges.

Americanists and American literature practitioners outside the US (including teachers, professors and scholars of "English" all over the Arab World) are presently discussing the challenges and opportunities of teaching American literature and culture, and they are engaged in an on-going controversy over various cultural, literary and linguistic issues about American and British Studies, literary and otherwise, and about whether or not such studies should have a significant place in the study plans of the Arab-World universities at all.¹ Such debates and controversies can no longer be looked at as hasty and over-reactionary. For this reason, it would be axiomatic to say that a large number of American Studies and/or American Literature practitioners are encountering a profoundly challenging array of complex responses and currents of thought (whether academic or cultural) that are beginning to materialize at many universities and academic institutions in the Arab World at large.

Of this pedagogically problematic situation, Americanists in our part of the world, unfortunately, have very little, if anything, to say; for alarm bells go off at the mention of the need to teach American Studies in departments of English as an independent field of academic study. The subject, in the eyes of many, is just around the corner and it has got to stay right there all the time! Admittedly, we have allowed

¹ See Marwan M. Obeidat, "On Non-Native Grounds: the Place of American Literature in the English Curriculum of the Arab World Universities," *American Studies Intentional* 34:1 (1996). 18-30.

our fear at such a prospect to hinder (if not cripple) our own scholarship. And we have done very little work of interest to defend ourselves and our field. We, in English departments of the Arab World, are rich in classes that forefront language/linguistics and British literature.² But where does the American literary tradition stand? Where is American Studies? Why is it so imperceptible? A question facing Arab Americanists in the global era is whether we really want to persist in evading the larger concerns of American Studies, or to continue believing that its sundry issues may annul "English" as a subject of vital in-depth academic inquiry, as some prefer to believe.

For more than half a century, many have claimed either implicitly or (more so nowadays) explicitly that to offer American Literature and/or American Studies in the English departments of the Arab world is to risk making these departments lose their identity. This feeling was so repressive and so intellectually tedious (to me, at least, as an Americanist) that it only repeated doses of cultural "critique" that would eventually serve as a powerful antidote. Departments of English have further tended to marginalize interest in institutionalized American Studies and dismiss it as "unnecessary" and subordinate to the domain of English and linguistic representation. Thus American Studies is hardly ever seen as a discipline whose priorities should be as equal as those of "English" Studies. And it has produced, for Americanists, and non-Americanists alike, much controversy. In sum, American Studies concerns have become so alien to the intellectual domain of English departments in the Arab World that they have been designated as inappropriate for academic consumption -- even though some think that the subject is a legitimate one and it should be worthy of public intellectual and academic inquiry in its own right.

The situation of American, and other related, studies is not currently so hopeful in the Arab World unless Americanists, whether

² See Marwan M. Obeidat, "The English Department in the Arab World Re-Visited: Language, Literature, or Translation? A Student's View." *College Student Journal* 43:4 (December, 2009), 961-978.

Arab or non-Arab, commit themselves, both in theory and in practice, to working out a substantially fundamental and subtle program that has larger and wider concerns than is currently the practice, a program of the kind I would best see fit under the name "Global American Cultural Studies." In order to be able to energize it, American cultural and literary study must, therefore, take the form of International Cultural Studies that breaks decisively with the American distinctiveness or "exceptionalism" that has, in one way or another, long constituted its dominant form-inside and outside the United States of America. This Program would, I propose, take as its focus, in a cosmopolitan context, literary, social, cultural, political, historical and theoretical critique of the relationship between an array of nations and cultures on both sides of the Atlantic to help remove that sense of the American peculiarity or, as Amy Kaplan shrewdly calls it, "imperialism."³

In a Program such as this, we would, I assume, be compelled to consider, among other things, the US ideology, culture, folklore, history and literature within the context of the need for a "redistribution of wealth [and knowledge]," to use Frantz Fanon's words.⁴ That issue posed by Fanon in 1961 is, to me, still a very valid issue in its own right, but at the opening of the 21st century, we have still not responded to it (except with such organizations as The United States Information Service and World Bank, which eventually turn out to be a major part of the problem rather than a useful and hopeful solution). How, then, can this program be formulated? And on what grounds? The program which I am advocating would endeavor to establish a curriculum that links this vast cultural and literary vision to the social and academic needs of non-American communities overseas, a curriculum based more on liberal, non-imperialistic, non-formalistic grounding than on formal transfer of traditional methodologies, for example. That is, the

³ Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *The Cultures of the United States Imperialism* edited by, Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham, NC: Duke P, 1993), 3-21.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* translated by Constance Farrington (1961; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1968), 98.

teaching of American Studies, no matter what the curriculum would be like, can be easily adapted to meet the demands of communal and cultural needs from a larger and wider perspective than just a purely "American" one.

This perspective, as I have been trying to suggest in the course of this article, would necessitate the construction of a program that demands, at the very outset, a clear-cut definition of "American Studies," or "American Cultural Studies," or "American Literary Studies," or what have you, to arrive at a better international and global understanding of it, a perspective which should not necessarily be indicative of the way American Americanists think about their subject. In other words, this perspective should neither be nationalistic, nor should it be formalistic for that matter. The publication in 1928, of Norman Forester's *The Reinterpretation of American Literature: Some Contributions toward the Understanding of Its Historical Development*, and the publication of F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941) may mark the starting point of this nationalistic and formalistic vision focusing on typically traditional categories of interest (the beginnings, the Puritans, Romance, and Realism) as well as on the classic authors (Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman).⁵

Later in the twentieth century, this vision was even more acutely observed in a large number of books, studies and monographs that have become very crucial resource to any Americanist: *The Literary History of the United States* (1948), *Virgin Land* (1950), *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953), *The American Adam* (1955), *The Cycle of American Literature* (1955), *The American Novel and Its Traditions* (1957), *The Power of Blackness* (1958), *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* (1968), *The Romance in America* (1969), and *Literature and the American Tradition*

⁵ For a very useful interpretation see Eric Cheyfitz, "Matthiessen's American Renaissance: Circumscribing the Revolution," *American Quarterly* 41 (1989): 341-361.

(1972), to name only a few works representing the American awareness of the nationalism and formalism vision.

This American nationalistic-formalistic awareness, which I am trying to focus on, would necessarily imply a sense of "exceptionalism" or "Americanness" that is peculiar to the United States as America, a powerful and imperialistic entity, in some ways. In effect, any prospect for American Studies would pose a most vital question within this nationalism-formalism framework: What American history or literature or culture should we (Arab or non-Arab Americanists alike) be teaching? And in what way? A passage from Sacvan Bercovitch's book, *The Rites of Assent* (1993) may provide a useful answer:

The American-ness of American [Studies] was a paradigmatic hypothesis that provided techniques for teaching, themes for anthologies and "casebooks" that supported those techniques, and subjects for theses and monographs that accredited the teachers and anthologists. It raised what must once have seemed a plethora of questions precisely by directing the questioners to a common resolution, centered on an ideological fiction, "American-ness," and grounded in the assumption that that fiction encompassed matters of form and content, text and context. In sum, it opened new vistas for investigation while providing the terms of closure that made sense of the investigations. And in doing so, the focus on "American-ness" [should shape] a community of teachers and students, scholars and critics, which [in turn should reach] beyond national boundaries to include academic communities throughout the world.⁶

Not only is this passage significant, in my view, because it presents a different vision of our profession as Americanists, but because it shows as well awareness of an outside world and culture (not necessarily that of the United States) which this profession is expected (if not urged) to help in providing specialists who will in turn enter a range of similar professions outside America. In Bercovitch's

⁶ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 375.

description, then, it is important to tell the difference between nationalism-formalism (or what he calls here "American-ness") and the profession of American Studies that is expected to reach beyond native boundaries to "include academic communities throughout the world."

It is axiomatic, then, that this traditional vision of American Studies as having to be either nationalistic or familial, or simultaneously both, has to assume the global, international or multicultural mien instead in order for other nations and other cultures to be able to share experience and knowledge with America, and in order for this experience to be a reciprocal, rather than a one-way, experience. In sum, that "American-ness" must be repressed to a most substructural level if American Studies is meant to be effective in academic communities outside the United States.

However, while American Studies continues to be a popular subject in American universities and colleges, it is almost completely ignored on the other side of the Atlantic! Several Arab Americanist critics (myself included) have recently expressed their concern that the subject's cultural vision and methodological direction appear to be uncertain in many Arab universities and academic institutions. Indeed, in some, it has no presence whatsoever! Not very long ago, I had a letter from a fellow Arab Americanist, who teaches in the English Department of Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Meknes, Morocco, expressing concern that there is no such thing as American Studies, when I asked her whether or not American Cultural and Literary Studies have any place in their curriculum. A segment of this letter is worth quoting in full:

Let me first give you a brief synopsis of the situation.... English departments ... faculties of letters, only have two options: linguistics and literature. America ... civilization courses have remained at a relatively embryonic level in undergraduate studies. They are by no means an integral part of the Bachelor of Arts program. There is a

great reluctance to accept the importance of American... civilization courses.⁷

In the words of Norman Foerster, America's "increasing awareness of [her] world supremacy in material forces [has] more and more evoked a sense of need of self-knowledge. [Abroad], similarly, the feeling [is] growing that the power of America renders[s] it perilous to remain in the dark as to what she really [is]."⁸ In fact, there never was a time when this field's presence in the Arab academy has not been problematic: arguments about what American Studies should and should not include, whether it should be offered inside or outside English departments; even worse, whether it is said to constitute an academic discipline at all continues to be raised very often.⁹

These controversies as to whether or not American Studies should have any place in any of the curriculums of the Arab-World universities and colleges I do not intend to rehearse in detail here for two reasons: to avoid unnecessary repetition and, indeed, to consider how, and in what way or ways, the field would make a significant contribution to a better understanding of the United States in the Arab World as well as to a fair intervention within the world of human knowledge at large -- it is hoped. I would say here, as I have said elsewhere, that American Cultural and Literary Studies is unquestionably unable to find itself an important place on the frontiers of the Arab-World scholarship. The "health" of American Studies as an academic field is, therefore, in serious trouble! Jonathan Culler rightly observes: the field "has not had [an] influence on other disciplines that one might expect and has produced an interdisciplinary subfield rather

⁷ Letter to the author, dated January 19

⁸ Norman Foerster, ed. *The Reinterpretation of American Literature: Some Contributions toward the Understanding of Its Historical Development* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1928), vii.

⁹ For further treatment of this point, see Obeidat, "On Non-Native Grounds: the Place of American Literature in the English Curriculum of the Arab World Universities," *American Studies International* 34:1 (1996), 18-30.

than a reorganization of [universal and human] knowledge."¹⁰ To that conclusion I consent.

It should, however, be said that this kind of complaint about an apparent absence of concern with other non-American academic communities throughout the world has been a long-standing issue within the world of Arab Americanists, one that keeps resurfacing occasionally. In this light, a fundamental question arises as to whether American Studies may have become the outgrowth of patriotic, imperialistic zeal more or less, that bears little relevance to the needs of the late 1990s international community. In *Signatures of the Visible*, Frederic Jameson convincingly argues that American Studies programs have "a vested interest in preserving the specificity of their object and in preserving the boundaries of their discipline."¹¹ What Jameson suggests certainly rings true to me; I believe, for one, that the field is gradually in danger of becoming introverted, self-centered, and inward (not outward) looking, self-referential and self-validating at best, a field that ignores, and is unconcerned with, the global intellectual communities outside the nationalistic-formalistic boundaries.

These, among other concerns, are especially important for Arab partisans of American Cultural and Literary Studies, many of whose interest in, and enthusiasm for, the field is influenced by the need to free it from those "exceptionally" American tendencies, and simultaneously by the need to make a major international contribution to the renovation of this academic discipline as a field of literary and cultural study. In a world where (for almost the first six decades of the twentieth century) American Studies did need to wage a protracted battle for space and recognition in the curriculums of English departments as well as for acceptance in an academy that designated it as a new, foreign subject to be taught to Arab students, Arab specialists of American culture, history and literature need to see and

¹⁰ For a very educated study see Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman: U Oklahoma P, 1988), 8.

¹¹ Frederic Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 35.

have an outward-looking, outreaching, and globally conscious subject to teach as an independent full-fledged area of knowledge on what happens to be non-native grounds. Yet I would think that the unstable nature of national and formal identities in our small global "village" may create better chances for the renovation of American Studies, and, in particular, may help Arab Americanists to contribute, with more interest and appreciation, not only to the propagation of this field, but also to a better reception of it.

Though little important work was done by Arab Americanists during the late 1950s and early 1960s to introduce this academic area in the Arab universities and colleges. And much of this work was met with distaste on the part of some colleagues and, at length, by self-doubt. But that is another story. For what these early Arab advocates of American Studies tried to achieve towards "forcing" the subject into the Arab-World universities can never go unnoticed. Those early pioneers did have heated arguments with their colleagues, who were interested then in the purely "English" literary tradition, to convince them of the need to have only a limited number of American culture and literature classes side by side with English, but their colleagues turned a blind eye and a deaf ear!

While some Arab professors of English actually thought that the new area was an "imperialistic, racist" subject spreading reductionist, prejudiced, and hostile views of our own culture, views that sharply conflict with the cultural and ethical codes of Arab students,¹² others, on the other hand, thought that many of the cultural and social values embodied in the American and British literary traditions are alien and opposed to the moral values of our students¹³; and still others raised

¹² For further elaboration see, Muhammad Raji Zughoul, "Restructuring the English Department in the Third World Universities," *IRAL* 25:3 (1987), 232; Jameson, "English Departments in Third World Universities: Language, Linguistics, or Literature?" *Forum* 24:4(1986), 15 and Marwan Obeidat "Beyond American Borders: the Middle East and the Enigma of Anti-American Sentiments in the Aftermath of 9/11." *American Studies Today*, 18(2009):14-21. (Liverpool John Moores University, England).

¹³ See Muhammad H. Asfour, "Cultural Barriers in Teaching English Literature to Arab Students," in Eid A. Dahiyat and Muhammad H. Ibrahim, ed. *Papers from the First*

the questions: What advantages are there in teaching a foreign culture and literature? What intellectual and social effects does a foreign culture have on our students? What is the size and volume of the values of a foreign culture?¹⁴

On a narrower level Arab Americanists are predominantly concerned with the nature of the ideological, historical and literary relationship between the United States and the Muslim World (or the Middle East as some prefer to say), from 1776 to the present. Fuad Sha'ban, for example, in a lengthy study, *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought: The Roots of Orientalism in America*, has examined aspects of American literary and religious thought, and his book chronicles the dreams, illusions, and aspirations of American missionaries, travelers, and national leaders, from colonial time onward. One noticeable emphasis in this book is the battle grounds for Christian Americans and the Muslim Arabs.¹⁵ Likewise, Lotfi Ben Rejeb, in his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "'To the Shores of Tripoli' The Impact of Barbary on Early American Nationalism," has looked at the Tripolitanian Wars (1785-1815) waged to put an end to the capture of American sailors by the Bibary pirates from the coastal areas of North Africa.¹⁶ Farida Hellal on the other hand, has concerned herself mainly with Ralph Waldo Emerson's interest in, and indebtedness to, the Muslim Sufi poets in particular and the Oriental Philosophies in general.¹⁷ And I have considered the historical and cultural background

Conference on the Problems of Teaching English Language and Literature at Arab Universities (Amman: U Jordan P, 1983), 78-92.

¹⁴ On this point see, Eid A. Dahiyat, "three Problems of Teaching English Literature to Arab Students at the University of Jordan," in Eid A. Dahiyat and Muhammad H. Ibrahim, ed. *Papers from the First Conference on the Problems of Teaching English Language and Literature at Arab Universities* (Amman: U Jordan P, 1983), 63-71.

¹⁵ For further analysis see, Fuad Sha'ban, *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought: The Roots of Orientalism in America* (Durham, NC: The Acron Press, 1991).

¹⁶ See Lotfi Ben Rejeb, "'To the Shores of Tripoli'" dissertation, Indiana University, 1981.

¹⁷ See Farida Hellal, "Emerson's Knowledge and Use of Islamic Literature" dissertation, University of Houston, 1971.

of the interrelation between the United States and the Muslim Orient, and against this background I examine Washington Irving's use of Islamic literature as well as Emerson's involvement in Muslim thought and character, including works on the region as described by the numerous travelers who visited it. I finally summarize this development and greater definition of the American interest in the Muslim Orient to suggest that American perceptions of it have continuities and reiterations well into recent times.¹⁸

To promote interest in and have a better role for American Studies in the Arab World, I would suggest two courses of action: 1) to establish an International American Studies Center in the region with the aid of native Americanist colleagues and American academic institutions to help us conduct seminars and workshops as well as share ideas and intellectual experiences, and also to provide us with the latest research in the field, and (2) to redesign the problematic framework of the area studies model so that it would not be understood solely in nationalistic or formalistic terms outside the United States. For, in our part of the globe, there is an increasing recognition of how American Studies could, and indeed has to break free of its own self-referential nationalistic/formalistic preconceptions. To use the words of Myra Jehlen:

There is an imperative need for a forum where Americanists (scholars trained in the rhetoric and rituals of "Americanness,") can learn from [and share experiences with] their colleagues abroad to re-see American [culture and] literature in an international and global perspective. It may well be that this will alter our very concept of "Americanness" by re-contextualizing it--for example, by accentuating Emerson's links to Descartes on the one hand and to Nietzsche on the other, or by replacing the tautologies of exceptionalism with the

¹⁸ See Marwan M. Obeidat's book, *American Literature and Orientalism*. (Berlin: Klaus Schwartz Verlag GmbH, 1998) and, for a more recent study, his article entitled "Cultures in Contact: How Education and Cultural Studies Help Obliterate Unnecessary Perpetuation of Cross-Cultural Misunderstanding between the USA and the Arab World." *Accepted for publication in the May 2011 issue of the Journal of American Studies of Korea*.

transnational categories of gender, class, and race It may even be that this comparatist perspective will eventuate in a shift in the literary center of gravity, from the nationalist American Renaissance to the transatlantic enterprise of a later era....¹⁹

Obviously, it is not too difficult to arrive at a general consensus about the need for global comparative methods. Indeed, the more challenging task is to move beyond nationalistic zeal (if not pious) towards intellectual work that makes a clear-cut difference as to how this area of academic interest should be represented.

A redesigned American Studies needs to acknowledge how international and global perspectives involve building bridges instead of walls, and thus a collapsing of barricades. By shifting the emphasis of American Studies from "exceptionalism" to "globalism," from "nationalism" to "internationalism," Americanists all over the world can position themselves on the critical, aesthetic, and theoretical boundaries of the subject, boundaries that help us see better what is allowed and what is not allowed into this field of knowledge. What I am trying to suggest here is that native American critical accounts of American culture should not (or are not expected to) be self-conscious, inward-looking, and self-validating. Nor am I trying to say that the value associated with non-native reconstitutions of American Studies should, in and of itself, be hard to achieve or realize.

These are, in my view, the scholarly and intellectual circumstances that may help give a better direction to a new generation of Arab work in American culture and literature. Sites of exchange between various academic North Atlantic institutions and the Arab-World academy could undoubtedly become a very "healthy" place for future international cooperation, not for a nationalistic synthesis. Still, the link between American Studies and exceptionalism/nationalism has, to me, always been a matter of historical heritage than contextual

¹⁹ Myra Jehlen, "Introduction" in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) and Sacvan Bercovitch, "the Problem of Ideology in American Literary History," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986), 652.

necessity, and restructuring its scope might provide real opportunities to reshape or remodel the study of this arena within a larger, more comprehensive global framework, eventually helping us, both as Arab Americanists and as peer scholars, to modify our view of America against a more complex-in-demands circumference -- it is hoped. In conclusion, the very fact that we are located outside and beyond American society and culture may enable us to find ourselves in a stronger situation to monitor or assess the American Studies model and its function.

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