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The American Question

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In the summer of 2006, as U.S.-made bombs rained down on Lebanon, President George Bush repeatedly insisted that it was premature to demand an end to the killing, and Condoleezza Rice called the suffering "the birth pangs of a new Middle East"(Rice). Lebanon's share of these pangs included over a thousand dead, a million displaced, infrastructure destroyed, and beaches and harbors polluted with oil. These events were on my mind as I prepared to teach fall semester American studies courses at the American University of Beirut (AUB), but in a sense they merely intensified the already existing context for such teaching. On the one hand, such events obviously demonstrate that teaching American studies is not the same everywhere. On the other hand, the U.S. role in this war points to a concern that confronts people almost everywhere because the power of the United States is palpable almost everywhere. I propose to call this concern the American question.

U.S. leaders have wielded political and military power in an increasingly overt way since 11 September 2001, particularly in the greater Middle East, upping the ante from earlier moments when U.S. global power came into focus, such as at the end of World War II and at the end of the Cold War. The conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and indeed in Lebanon, also reveal the limits of U.S. military might, but — despite the success of the Democratic Party in the November 2006 elections — there is little evidence of a fundamental change in the global projection of U.S. political and military power. People throughout the world are also aware of the economic and cultural power of the United States. Many point to U.S. domination of the key institutions of the global economy, or to the ubiquity of Coke, Pepsi, and Starbucks. U.S. cultural products — television, film, music, fashion, language, and the Internet — permeate almost everywhere. Perhaps the United States is simply the most powerful and successful among a network of entities that currently dominate the globe, but those who consider this network a monster believe its head is in the United States (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004). The on-going PEW worldwide surveys (PEW Global Attitude Project, "U.S. image up slightly") show a remarkably uniform unease about U.S. hegemony that both supporters and opponents are increasingly willing to name "empire"(Bacevich, Fergusson, Kaplan).

Scholars and teachers of American studies would want to complicate this picture in a number of ways. First, the fact that U.S. political and cultural leaders have appropriated the word "America," seems to many living in the other countries of the Americas as a hegemonic act. The recent debates in American studies about the appropriate name for the interdiscipline — should it, for example, be U.S. studies or

studies of the Americas? — have not removed the name but rather turned it into a kind of question (Kadir 2003, 2004, Kadir, et al, Lenz, Pease, Radway, Rowe, Wiegman). Second, people outside of the United States are not passive. What they do with the America they confront is unpredictable; resistance is possible; influences are multi-directional. The global presence of U.S. culture, products, and institutions also presents opportunities: to people throughout the world, it can serve as a resource. Third, there is a growing scholarly awareness that countries, despite their obvious importance, are not neat containers of culture. American studies began as the interdisciplinary study of the culture and history of the United States. Where its practitioners once saw a culture, they now see cultures, and they recognize that individuals may identify with — and feel loyalty to — communities smaller or larger, older or newer, than the national one. For those of us teaching American studies outside the United States today, the global ubiquity of America points not just to the state, but also to these complex and protean realities.

The term "American question" suggests comparison with such phrases as the "Eastern question" (expressing the various ways European countries might react to the erosion of Ottoman power in the decades before World War I) and the "German question" (referring specifically to the issue of the responsibility of German citizens after World War II) (Schaap). Other than indicating widespread concerns, neither these "questions" or any other bear a close resemblance to the American question, but in a very limited way, there is one that comes closer. In nineteenth-century Europe, the transnational presence of Jewish people amid a rising tide of ethnic nationalism elevated to prominence the issue of how Jews were, and should be, related to non-Jews. Although the so-called "Jewish question" was first mentioned in the mid-18th century, it became salient a century later, particularly in response to debates over Jewish emancipation (Abraham, Berman, Bernstein, Easton, Guddat, Sartre, Ungvari, Yaffe). Some believed that Jewish people were assimilable into European nations or that they were capable of living alongside fellow citizens in modern pluralistic states. Others argued that Jews were essentially different from and incompatible with Christians. Non-Jews with such beliefs generally opposed emancipation and favored maintaining traditional restrictions on Jews. Jews who believed in essential differences sometimes also favored segregation, perhaps in autonomous provinces or even in an independent state. The "Jewish question" was a protean phrase. It could encompass almost every aspect of Jewish life in modern European countries. It was a name for a perceived state of affairs, but it could also refer to a specific question about that state of affairs. In the context of a particular country, for example, nationalists might ask: "What does the presence of a non-Christian minority — that we cannot imagine as part of our national community — mean to the project of nation building?" Such a question assumes that it is possible unambiguously to identify what a "Jew" is and that there are no "borderlands" around Jewishness (Anzaldua). Because European nation-building relied on the identification of an essentialized national subject, nationalists frequently named Jews as alien, essentializing them, in turn, and associating them with subversive transnational conspiracies.

In referring to the "American question," I do not intend to imply that USAmericans are the victims of a similarly virulent demonization. Nor is there any equivalence between the claim of an international hegemony attributed to a dispersed stateless minority and one attributed to the world's most powerful country. The American question, I suggest, is like the Jewish question in only one important way: it arises in response to a transnational presence that, in the view of many people in many places, poses fundamental cultural, economic, and political challenges. Although the American presence includes such things as products, media, and military forces — while the Jewish presence took the form of a Diaspora of people — the American question confronts not only people outside the United States but also those within it; indeed, the transnational turn among U.S.-based Americanists is, in part, an attempt to wrestle with the American question.[1] Similarly, the Jewish question — once problematized — confronted European Jews themselves, providing an impetus for, among other things, Zionism. Moreover, we must ask a parallel set of questions about what and who is "American."

Like the Jewish question, the American question is a name for a perceived state of affairs, but it can also refer to a specific question. Because there are so many perspectives on that state of affairs, the specific question might be asked in many ways. In one form, is could simply be "What does the transnational presence of American power mean to people outside the United States politically, economically and culturally?" The moment of European nationalism constellated the Jewish question; what is the moment that constellates the American question? It seems to be a global one. We cannot separate the American question from such questions as "What kind of world do we have?" and "What kind of world is possible?"

Teaching American studies outside the United States today is different from, say, teaching Swedish studies, precisely because it is both animated and burdened by the American question. It bids us ask further questions. What does it mean that people perceive and name a presence "American"? Is American studies now inseparable from questions of politics, economics and culture almost everywhere? The American question, for those of us teaching American studies in places like the Middle East, can seem to be the very air we breathe. For this reason, we must interrogate the American question itself, lest we unwittingly accept the normalcy of American ubiquity and allow this to under gird a new exceptionalism. In identifying the American question as a transnational concern, we must be careful to examine what this concern conceals. Both supporters and critics of U.S. power may use a number of different words to name this concern — words like anti-Americanism, globalization, and empire. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004), for example, argue that the exclusive focus on U.S. power obscures the networks of global power within which the United States is only one actor. Projecting America as not only ubiquitous but also omnipotent hides the real limits of American power and the important roles of other entities and hegemonic states. In Lebanon, for example, one cannot help but be aware of the regional power of Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Moreover, the ongoing tragedy of Iraq presents the perfect demonstration of the limits of U.S. power. To the extent that the

American question is based on a perception of omnipotence, it can also obscure the deep divisions within U.S. society. In the 1840s and 1850s, the United States directed its power against Native groups and Mexicans in an orgy of expansion before its internal tensions erupted in civil war. Are there similar tensions concealed beneath the current global projection of U.S. Power? Although the American question cannot be separated from American studies classrooms outside the United States, those classrooms must also be sites for its interrogation: teaching America cannot be separated from thinking America.

In what follows, I will address two questions about teaching American studies outside of the United States: 1) Why are we teaching American studies? and 2) How might we approach this task in a world where one is never far from American power? My perspective obviously has been shaped by the experience of developing a center and teaching American studies at the American University of Beirut. Like our counterparts in other regions, we have continually faced the American question, but our particular institutional, local and regional contexts have also presented us with distinct challenges and opportunities. In addressing these two fundamental questions, I will try to be clear about what is particular to our situation and what may apply more generally in order to highlight the ways that the American question intersects with more local concerns.

American Studies: Why?

What impulses propel universities to establish American studies centers and programs outside of the United States? Why are courses offered? What motivates students to take courses and pursue degrees in American Studies? The answers to these questions depend upon the time and the place. During much of the Cold War period, when American studies scholars inside the U.S. often lauded a supposedly unitary national culture envisioned as an exception to all others, the U.S. government supported the teaching of American studies in allied countries such as Turkey, Germany and Japan. The demand for American studies, even then, was not separate from the presence of U.S. power. In some of these countries, an almost exclusively literature-based approach has proved difficult to outgrow (Buken). On the other side of the Iron Curtain, at places like Lajos Kossuth University in Hungary, American studies was pursued for very different reasons. The interest, in both kinds of places, was a response to U.S. success, but in Hungary it stemmed partly from a desire to understand an adversary — the sort of motivation, perhaps, that inspired Condoleeza Rice to take up Russian studies, or that inspires Lebanese University to offer Hebrew language courses (primarily to people who intend to monitor Israeli media).[2]

Through the awarding of Fulbright positions and public diplomacy efforts such as the Middle East Partnership Initiatives and other grants, the U.S. government still influences the success of American studies programs in many countries. The American Studies Center at the University of Bahrain, for example, is aided not only by the appointment of Fulbright Scholars, but draws speakers from the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Naval Support Activity. The center also "works closely with

the U.S. Embassy" which sponsored a Symposium, provided scholarships and summer programs via the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) ("American Studies Center"). A new American studies center was officially opened at Queen Arwa University in Yemen in 2007 by U.S. Ambassador Thomas Charles Krajeski. The Ambassador promised "to prepare a lecture for students during the next month, and to conduct a seminar on the United States' policies here in Yemen, the history of American Democracy, and how it relates to Yemen today' (Al-Kibsi). USAID and the U.S. Embassy have also agreed to provide books and a database. The fact that so many Fulbright appointments are in the field of American studies seems to indicate that the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES) is itself responding to the American question. At the same time, every Fulbright appointment — indeed every American studies program, course, and even lecture (even if highly critical of the United States) — increases the presence that evokes the American question.

Governments outside the U.S. sometimes see it in their interest to initiate American studies centers and programs. In November 2006, the Australian federal government endowed the new U.S. Studies Center at the University of Sydney with $25 million. The center is a joint initiative with the American Australian Association, a non-profit organization whose goal is "to encourage stronger ties across the Pacific, particularly in the private sector"(Australian-American Association). At the association's inaugural dinner, attended by Prime Minister John Howard and News Corporation chief Rupert Murdoch, Chairman Malcolm Binks said that "the center will make a contribution to the enhancement of the already outstanding relationship between our two countries" (University of Sydney). Although the center will include an academic component offering M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, its promoters clearly are concerned primarily with enhancing economic and political ties between allies. Hence, the center's inception must be understood in relation to the economic, political and military power of the United States.

A very different initiative is the new M.A. program in North American Studies at the University of Tehran in Iran, which began operating in 2006. U.S.-Iran relations are nearly the opposite of U.S.-Australian relations, at least during the current administrations of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, John Howard and George Bush. The Iranian desire to understand the United States is a direct response to U.S. power, policies and rhetoric. After President Bush labeled Iran as one of the three countries that constituted the "axis of evil,"(Bush) and unleashed U.S. military might on one of the other two countries so named — which happened to be next door — the American question has assumed a striking importance in Iran. Although it may be present almost everywhere, the American question is not an equally pressing concern in all places.

The University of Tehran's center is one of at least six new American studies programs that have opened in the Middle East since the turn of the century.[3] Some of these, like the one at the University of Jordan in Amman, heavily rely upon visiting Fulbright teachers. The Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at AUB, and a second center at American University in Cairo, were established with

endowments from Prince Alwaleed bin Talal of Saudi Arabia. Shortly after the World Trade Center attacks, Prince Alwaleed had offered New York City $10 million in aid, but when the Prince suggested that the United States should have a more balanced policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Mayor Rudy Guiliani turned down the offer. A few weeks after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in response to what he referred to a growing "gap" between the U.S. and the Arab World, the Prince then provided the funds to establish the two centers ("Prince Al-Waleed endows new center for American Studies"). The founding document of CASAR at AUB simply states that the center is dedicated to "increasing mutual understanding between the United States and the Arab World, and increasing knowledge of the United States in the Arab World" through teaching, research and outreach. Since, for Al Queda, the 9/11 attacks were themselves a response to the American question, CASAR was connected to the American question at birth. The Prince wanted to support academic discourse that could counter mutual demonization, but he also wanted to make the United States itself an object of Arab knowledge.

In 2003 AUB formed a Steering Committee and initiated an elaborate planning process to explore what American Studies could be in Beirut. In addition to consultations with Lebanese journalists, academics and political leaders, AUB brought in prominent scholars from Europe, the Middle East, India, and North America to help the center's Steering Committee formulate some preliminary plans. The university also held a series of forums with faculty, students, and representatives of Lebanese communities. The single clearest recommendation to surface from these sessions was that CASAR must make it perfectly clear that it is an independent academic project and not an organ of U.S. public diplomacy. It is difficult to gauge the extent to which this concern is unique to Beirut or the Arab World, but to be perceived as promoting a U.S. government agenda in Beirut, especially after the summer war, would guarantee the failure of any academic project. Hence, we have assiduously avoided the sort of rhetoric used to launch the University of Sydney's new center.

Because Lebanon has the highest proportion of Christians of any Arab country, and because it is connected to a worldwide diaspora (which includes the largest percentage of Arab Americans), and because so many of its people speak French and English, it is a very distinct Arab country. The American University of Beirut is an example of this distinctiveness. Its leaders have never tried to conceal that Americans founded it. Indeed, partly because of AUB's role in empowering Arabs, the term "American" still has enormous cachet in the Arab World. There are dozens of primary, secondary, and higher education institutions with the word "American" in their official names.[4] As historian Ussama Makdisi has shown, because of the positive influence of institutions such as AUB, and because of the perception that the U.S. was anti-colonial compared to Britain and France (especially after the Suez Crisis of 1956), the United States enjoyed a relatively positive image in the region until approximately 1967 (Makdisi, U.). Indeed, a 2005 Gallup poll still showed that nearly as many Lebanese people had a favorable as an unfavorable opinion of the

U.S. — 39% to 41%, respectively. After the summer war, it had become 28% favorable to 59% unfavorable (Mann).

When civic leaders in North Sioux City, South Dakota, decided to refer to their high technology initiative as the Silicon Prairie, or when their counterparts in Portland, Oregon, called theirs the Silicon Forest, they were hoping to capture something of the aura of California's Silicon Valley because the word "silicon" had come to connote innovation and the prosperity that flows from it. What does the word "American" mean in Lebanon? Its resonance is simply one aspect of the American question. It certainly connotes success. It suggests the best kind of education — one that stresses rigor, science, mathematics, reason, critical thinking. It also serves as a foil to the presumably corrupt institutions where success is not based on ability or effort but on **wasta** (connections) or wealth. Partly because of this, it also connotes prestige. Jean Baudrillard suggested that the U.S. flag is "simply the label of the finest international enterprise" (Baudrillard). This is a kind of capital that is remarkably enduring despite the anger most people feel at recent U.S. policies and actions in the region. In an effort to attract students, the website of the American Studies Center at the University of Bahrain asks "Why American Studies?" The first answer is: "INCREASE YOUR MARKETABILITY — employers are looking for graduates who have a solid grasp of the forces that shape our world today. As economic and cultural relations with America expand, such students will increase their chances in the job market." Other reasons include improving "YOUR ENGLISH" and understanding "the impact of dominant cultures such as the U.S. on the rest of the world" ("American Studies Center").

Such considerations help us understand why at least some AUB students take courses in American studies. I have even spoken with young Hezbollah supporters who would like nothing better than a chance to study or live in the United States. Students are attracted to American studies for other reasons as well, but all of them are related to the American question. Like Hungarians during the Cold War, many want to understand their enemy. More, it seems, want to learn how to influence the most powerful country's policies and actions. They often ask: "How does the Israeli lobby do it?"

Because America is present in the Middle East in multiple ways, students come to the classroom with knowledge and experience of it. America's reputation, and indeed its myths, are present as well. A remarkably large percentage believe that anyone who works hard can become wealthy and successful in the United States. In Lebanon, however, conceptions and misconceptions of the United States are never universally shared. In fact, like the U.S. itself, Lebanon is a society characterized by disagreement. Some students fail to distinguish between the actions and attitudes of leaders and those of ordinary Americans. Most Arabs do not make this mistake, if only because they feel alienated from their own leaders. A more common idea is that the U.S. has a unitary culture, and that its people universally feel a profound sense of unity and loyalty. Although at one level they know about the fissures in U.S. society — along racial lines, for example — it seems easy to forget about this and speak of the simple America they often learn of in Hollywood films and

through U.S. public diplomacy efforts, or the equally simple version presented by some Arab critics of the United States.

Partly because of these perceptions, people teaching American studies in the Middle East frequently report that students seem to have learned about the U.S. primarily via American television, Hollywood films, and popular music. Yet this ignores the fact that students may also experience U.S. power directly (as did many of my students during the summer war) or indirectly via the new Arabic media. This experience of being so often on the wrong end of the stick of U.S. hard power provides Arabs with a certain perspective on the U.S. that, to borrow a phrase from W.E.B. Du Bois, we might call the vantage or "ground of disadvantage" (241).

Those who teach American studies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have equally diverse motivations. Some are natives of the region who, like the students discussed above, may be attracted by the success and prestige of the United States. Others are interested in the tradition of dissent in the U.S., and particularly in African American resistance with its own interesting connections to the Arab World. Some MENA scholars have a profound grasp of — and a challenging perspective on — contemporary American studies. Like their counterparts in the U.S., they are fascinated by the intriguing complexity of the issues involved, but the U.S. presence in the MENA is never far from their consciousness. There are U.S. citizens, and a few Europeans, who teach American studies in the MENA. Their motivations and perspectives are also complex. Most have some critical distance from U.S. government policies and actions. They may suffer — or benefit — from what Edward Said called the perspective of the exile. "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home," Said wrote in his 1999 memoir *Out of Place*, "exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that — to borrow a phrase from music, is contrapuntal." An awareness of "contrapuntal juxtapositions," he suggested, can "diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy" (216). Although this can make ex-patriots acutely aware of their own limitations, students often expect professors who are U.S. citizens to synecdochically embody America, as if it were their job alone to provide an answer to the American question. In summary, when we ask "Why American studies?" — for those teaching American studies, for donors and administrators initiating programs, and for students taking courses — the answer is the presence of American power in all its forms. American studies is a response to the American question.

American Studies: How?

Given this situation, what options are open to those of us teaching American studies outside of the United States? My suggestions are based on how my own teaching has evolved in response both to the American question and to ongoing debates within American studies. I have two proposals: that American studies be envisioned as an **encounter,** and that it be constantly **comparative.**

The missionaries who founded Syrian Protestant College saw themselves as representatives of a civilization and a religion that were superior in every way to

their local counterparts. In 1920, the college became the American University of Beirut, and slowly developed into a hybrid institution — both American and Arab — where, as one student recently put it, "Occidental and Oriental streams of thought could meet and debate and reshape each other" (Nahle 1). Some still believe that American studies should be more like the 19th-century Syrian Protestant College than the contemporary AUB. They see the United States as a model of success, both material and moral. American studies, from this perspective, becomes a one-way transfer of information and influence. As noted above, some of our students may be among those expecting or even clamoring for such an American studies. It is an American studies from a single perspective — a perspective from which the U.S. appears as an exception to all other countries — an American studies that does not ask disturbing questions about the meaning of America, in short, an arm of U.S. soft power. Decades of scholarly debate within American studies point in a very different direction: that we examine America from many different perspectives, including those of people outside the United States because they also experience America in complex and sometimes direct ways. My first suggestion, therefore, is that we envision American studies as an encounter, not only in our classrooms, but in our research and community outreach activities. In an environment permeated by the American question, this approach has the most potential to contribute to intercultural understanding.

This is not to suggest that academic values must be sacrificed. Indeed, those values demand such an approach. If we are committed to relentlessly employing the power of thinking and questioning, and encouraging our students to do the same, we must remain as open to their thinking as we expect them to be to ours. Communities of scholars and scientists work because the process of critical dialogue produces more wisdom than even the most brilliant mind operating in isolation. Although universal knowledge may be an inherently unreachable goal when it comes to human affairs, respect for thinking, logic and evidence need not be abandoned. It is through interaction and conversation that thinking evolves. Hence, it is our very commitment to freedom of the mind, and its implication that each of us must be willing to reevaluate our previous judgments and commitments, that can save us from the arrogance of seeing American studies as a one-way transferal of knowledge and expertise. Particularly those of us who have spent long periods in the United States must be open to the possibility of being reshaped. It is often those most different from us who can best challenge us in this way.

One way to implement the strategy of American studies as encounter is curricular. Our Introduction to American Studies course at AUB approaches America as a story of human encounters. Beginning in early 17th century North America, Europeans, Africans, and Native peoples interacted in mutually influencing, if asymmetrical, ways. This intercultural reality later expanded to include Latinos, Asians and even Arabs. The stories that political and cultural elites developed to understand their nation, its history, its distinctiveness, and its destiny ignored these realities. The American question often intrudes into the classroom when we examine the fact that, despite these upbeat stories, the U.S. was born of a

vast conquest and that its economic success came partly at the expense of African slaves. At the mention of these things, a certain percentage of our students are ready to launch into an anti-American rant that totally demonizes the U.S. and its people. They ask: what is wrong with "the American people"? Why are they aggressive, greedy, and racist? I usually respond: "Are you including Black, Latino, Asian and Arab Americans in that judgment?" U.S. citizens may be uniquely powerful, but they are not essentially evil. We must insist on thinking clearly. Here it is also important to point out how people have worked to overcome racism and injustice through struggles such as the Civil Rights Movement, the women's movement, and the gay rights movement. Yet when we speak about these successes, or when we show how the checks and balances of U.S. institutions eventually can correct some of the worst abuses of power, do we run the risk of appearing to draw an unflattering contrast to Arab societies and institutions? Are we presenting the U.S., once again, as a model? Even when trying to critique the U.S., are we innocent of a kind of public diplomacy? The American question twists us this way. Yet we must resist the exceptionalist notion that equality before the law, critical thinking, and struggling for justice are uniquely American ideas. Moreover, I do not attempt to conceal my own commitment to such ideas. That is part of what I bring to the encounter.

My second suggestion is that American studies, particularly outside of the United States, must be constantly comparative. This implies that our inquiry is not simply about America, but also about fundamental questions such as: How does nationalism work? What about other kinds of community loyalty and identity? How does power operate? How does culture circulate? Hence, we take the American presence in the Middle East, and the Middle Eastern presence in America, as central. Recognizing such transnational realities helps us to interrogate the American question itself, for it shows us that although power and culture circulate in asymmetrical ways, the circulation is never one-way or unquestioned. Examining how U.S. power works in relation to a place like Lebanon makes very clear the limits of that power, if for no other reason than that there are a host of other regional and global actors competing for hegemony.

Because American power is present almost everywhere, we might conclude that American studies cannot escape being part of that hegemony, that the study of America and the power of America are part of a single imperialism. Such an argument would be a kind of inverse of Edward Said's suggestion that European knowledge of the "Orient" was not innocently separate from European imperial power (1978). When people outside of the United States acquire knowledge about America, does it increase the power of the United States? The people who established the new M.A. program at the University of Tehran certainly do not believe this. Edward Said himself also disagreed with this view of American studies. He repeatedly recommended that AUB institute an American Studies program and urged other universities in the Arab World to do the same. His advocacy was obviously a response to the American question. American studies is needed, he wrote because "the United States is by far the largest, most significant outside force

in the contemporary Arab world" (Said, 1994, 356). Said argued that Arabs needed to understand how ordinary Americans felt and thought — to grasp American culture — as his sister, Jean Said Makdisi, recalls, in order to "get the facts of the Palestinian question through to the American public, and to create more sympathy for the Palestinians." In general, she continues, Edward believed that Arabs "were going about their efforts in all the wrong ways, in large part because of their misunderstanding of the nature of American society, politics, and policy-making." Said wanted to make the United States an object of Arab knowledge by employing "the highest possible academic standards" to inform an Arab response "based on the reality of the USA and not on mere emotional backlash"(Makdisi, J).

For Edward Said, knowledge and power were always connected, but his commitment to academic integrity meant that the nature of that connection must be open to debate. Hence he believed that the American studies classroom must allow "debate on the nature and institutions of the U.S." (Makdisi, J). If the exile's experience of multiple cultures can "diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy" then classrooms that create intercultural encounter may foster intercultural understanding that is counter hegemonic and promotes social justice. Edward Said had such an objective in mind when, along with Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim, he promoted musical collaborations between young Israelis and Palestinians. Eventually, Said and Barenboim published a record of their conversations on music, culture, and politics. Their conversations, like the experiences of the young Palestinian and Israeli musicians, were open-ended encounters. Music, culture, and politics were connected, Said suggested, in a way that "I am happy to say, neither of us can fully state, but we ask our readers, our friends, to join us in trying to find out" (Barenboim and Said).[5]

We have no way of knowing how our students will make use of the intercultural understanding they may gain in our classrooms, but teaching American studies as an encounter that is constantly comparative, I suggest, offers the best hope of directly addressing the American question without allowing it to overwhelm the experience of thinking and learning.

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Notes

[1] The transnational turn is not only evident in books and articles too numerous to list, but also in the establishment of the International American Studies Association, the journals *Comparative American Studies* and *Review of International American Studies*, and transnational initiatives such as the 2004 American Studies Association Conference in Atlanta.

[2] Only the Biblical version of Hebrew is taught at Lebanese University.

[3] Al-Quds university (Jerusalem, Palestine), Queen Arwa University (Yemen), The University of Jordan (Amman), The American University in Cairo (Egypt), the American University of Beirut (Lebanon), and the University of Tehran (Iran); several other programs, such as Georgetown's new School of Foreign Service in Doha (Qatar) have substantial American studies components; the center at the University of Bahrain began in 1998.

[4] Universities include: the American University of Beirut, the American University of Sharjah, the American University of Kuwait, the American University in Cairo, the American University in Dubai, the Lebanese American University, the American Intercontinental University (Dubai), the American University of Science and Technology (Lebanon), American Lebanese University, American Middle East University (Jordan), Arab American University (Palestine/West Bank); in addition, the U.S. State Department website lists 21primary-secondary schools in the MENA with the word "American" in their name (http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/c1701.htm).

[5] In much of the Arab world, even innocuous meetings between Arabs and Israelis are controversial because some see them as helping to normalize the State of Israel as currently constituted and as implying that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a kind of interpersonal misunderstanding rather than a matter of political power. In Lebanon, such meetings are actually illegal.