Introduction
10.22439/asca.v56i2.7369

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TEACHING AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

An Introduction

Although it was founded in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, American studies has, since its inception, been an international field of study.[1] In the Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden[2]—the 1959 formation of the Nordic Association for American Studies (NAAS), and the subsequent development of national sub-associations, was important for creating a regional community of Americanists and fostering conversations about American studies. However, these conversations have been almost exclusively focused on research, leaving questions concerning teaching in the field underexplored.

In some ways, this is not surprising. Although American studies teaching has been a staple at universities across North America and Europe for decades, it is only in recent years that international conversations on teaching and learning in the field have emerged. In 2016, *American Quarterly* published its first-ever forum focused on teaching and pedagogy, edited by Julie Sze. It covered themes of public humanities and interdisciplinarity, transnationalism, and collaborative practices, and explored aspects of American studies teaching at US campuses.[3] Practical questions of curriculum design and best-practice teaching have of course always been questions for American studies scholars, just as they are for university teachers in all fields. Such questions have been discussed in some scattered articles, dealing, for example, with digital technologies. A notable intervention is the 2021 volume *Teaching American Studies: The State of the Classroom as State of the Field*, edited by Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, Joseph Entin, and Rebecca Hill. It serves as a substantive resource of ideas and practices, grounded in a polarized political landscape and scholars' navigation of neoliberal US universities, where teaching is a form of production and students are commodities. The volume also centers on teaching as a defining dimension of American studies, asking the thought-provoking question: "[w]hat happens when we define American Studies by what we teach?"[4]

During the past decades, the contours of American studies have been redefined through the lens of transnationalism, and this turn has also begun to enter discussions on teaching. Recent examples are two roundtables on teaching American history and culture outside the United

States in *Modern American History* and a special forum of *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (JTAS) that engages with teaching in a selection of countries in Northern Europe and the Asia-Pacific region.[5] Although the JTAS forum represents a willingness to challenge the pedagogical impact of US exceptionalism and imperialism "around the globe," it is, as exemplified by *Modern American History*, important to underscore the specific national contexts—politically, culturally, and institutionally—within which American studies has emerged and developed. Such specific discussions have indeed been conducted (at least incrementally) in several European countries, with the most substantial contributions coming from Germany and the United Kingdom, perhaps the two nations with the strongest traditions of research and teaching in American studies outside of the United States.[6] In a special issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* from 2007, Gerhard Bach and Jürgen Donnerstag problematize the friction between highly theoretical scholarship and the incorporation of American studies in the training of English as a foreign language.[7] This challenge is grounded in the fact that American studies in Germany generally is located within the study of English language, literature, and culture. In the UK, however, many American studies departments and programs have a broad interdisciplinary grounding in history, culture, literature, and politics. Since 2020, the British Association for American Studies (BAAS) has organized the Teaching American Studies Network to gather UK scholars in sustained conversations on teaching and pedagogy.[8]

Discussions and scholarship on American studies teaching in the Nordic countries have likewise begun to emerge in recent years.[9] In an effort to forward this conversation, we organized a panel on teaching at the biannual 2023 NAAS conference in Uppsala, Sweden. The panel consisted of speakers from the four Nordic countries—Kasper Grotle Rasmussen from Denmark, Cassandra Falke from Norway, Rani-Henrik Andersson from Finland, and Jenny Bonnevier from Sweden, moderated by Adam Hjorthén. This special issue is a continuation and expansion of the engaging and critical discussions before, during, and after that panel. There are three interconnected purposes of this special issue. The first purpose is to map the Nordic teaching field, to establish a baseline for understanding the institutional and practical circumstances of American studies teaching in our four countries. Second, through a series of shorter essays, we wish to provide insights from scholars engaged in the day-to-day work of curriculum development, didactic considerations, the negotiation of institutional frameworks, and the challenges of meeting students' needs and expectations. Together, these essays are intended to create a greater understanding of the defining features of American studies as a field of teaching (though, as we shall see, not always as a discipline) in the Nordic countries, to show what our national circumstances look like, and to ask how we can turn its characteristics to a regional advantage.

The first section of this special issue maps the Nordic teaching field through four essays, each dealing with one of the countries represented in the Nordic Association for American Studies. The four essays approach the task in diverse ways, highlight a variety of concerns, and show that there are important differences between the national contexts that shape the teaching of American studies.

In Denmark, Kasper Grotle Rasmussen notes that American studies is currently experiencing a "downward trajectory," with a decrease both in the number of universities that offer courses or degrees with substantial American studies components, and in student numbers at the one university—the University of Southern Denmark—that currently offers both a BA and an MA program in American studies. Grotle Rasmussen suggests remedies, some of which are currently

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being attempted, that include contextualizing the US globally; a greater focus on tasks that connect the theoretical material to real-world action and developments, which then highlights the usability of the subject; and a concrete suggestion for a Nordic summer school in American studies. If there are declining student numbers in Denmark, Rani-Henrik Andersson and Saara Kekki describe a generally positive trend for American studies in Finland, where it is mainly taught at the University of Helsinki and the University of Turku. Among recent changes that have yielded positive outcomes for the current teaching landscape is the growth of online teaching. Here, the development of MOOCs has made possible larger student numbers and enabled innovative teaching and assessment methods. In terms of the content taught, American studies in Finland illustrates the impact a few individual researchers and teachers can have on the field, a circumstance which also holds largely true for all the Nordic countries; in the case of Finland, its current strong focus on migration studies and Indigenous studies is the result of such an influence. Another aspect Andersson and Kekki emphasize is the usefulness of an "outsider's perspective" on American phenomena.

Cassandra Falke traces some important developments of the field in Norway by discussing key moments in its history, including the establishment of the Fulbright program and the professorship in American studies at the University of Oslo. While American studies in Norway today is still characterized by the interdisciplinarity emphasized in its early history, Falke notes that there are "fewer Americanist positions outside of English sections," a situation which leads to a stronger focus on aesthetic questions. However, "American studies teaching in Norway continues to juxtapose America's aspirations, often solidified in literary and historical texts, and in lived reality, especially as that reality is reported on by historically oppressed groups." Courses in American studies are thus important to the academic development of students, but Falke expresses a concern that their institutional invisibility within English sections can lead to their being overlooked by university leadership and education policy makers.

In our own essay on teaching American studies in Sweden, we focus on a distinction—addressed to some extent in the three other essays—between, on the one hand, interdisciplinary programs and courses in American studies, and, on the other, courses on American topics offered within other subjects or degree programs. American studies in Sweden, we suggest, is best described as archipelagic. Sweden has a series of small islands of America-focused courses offered in subjects such as English, political science, and history at several universities, but only one institution, the Swedish Institute for North American Studies (SINAS) at Uppsala University, offers interdisciplinary American studies courses. For this model to be sustainable, connections between these institutions need to be strengthened across Sweden. In addition, American studies at SINAS also needs to be developed to offer its own degree programs.

Two points of comparison can be noted based on the summaries of these essays above. First, the small national contexts mean that a few key individuals, centers, or professorships in each country have a large impact on the field, shaping both approaches and the content of courses, as well as the varied weighting of different subject disciplines within American studies. Second, and relatedly, the existence of America-focused courses in many different subjects impacts American studies in all four countries, but in different ways and to varying degrees. In particular, the relationship between American studies and the subject of English shapes the field in both Norway and Sweden, and to an important extent also in Denmark, but, perhaps, somewhat less

so in Finland. Finally, it should be noted that it is not possible to determine any larger Nordic trends in student numbers. This is mainly due to important differences in national contexts when it comes to higher education policies, economic developments, etc., but there is a sense that changing attitudes to the US in the Nordic countries, both generally over time and in response to specific political changes, have an impact on student numbers. Exactly what this effect is remains unclear. Andersson and Kekki suggest an increase in interest in American studies in Finland following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, whereas Grotle Rasmussen notes the opposite trend in Denmark.

The second section of the issue contains four essays that explore specific aspects of institutional and disciplinary contexts, with a focus on Sweden and Denmark. Three of these essays deal explicitly with the implications of studying North America from the outside. Dag Blanck writes about courses offered in American history at Uppsala University and argues that "location matters" in teaching American studies. Perhaps most importantly, students—including both Swedes and international exchange students—often have limited previous knowledge of American history. This has consequences for the selection of course literature, among other things. Many textbooks on US history are produced for American college students, who have a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. As Blanck notes, however, the internationalization of higher education and the digital connectedness of young generations in Sweden might make the meaning of location less palpable over time.

Focusing on the teaching of American studies within intellectual history in Sweden, David Östlund's essay explores the "the possibilities inherent in seeing things at a distance." He emphasizes the value of an area studies approach to thinking and writing about, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Alain Locke. This approach, Östlund submits, often makes teaching "become exercises in translation," where the different meanings of concepts such as "race" and "liberal" can be explored comparatively in Swedish and US contexts. The pedagogical value of the outside perspective is likewise explored by Christophe Premat, who discusses a course in Canadian history taught at Stockholm University. Through an analysis of submitted student assignments, Premat describes the pedagogy of exploring students' cultural stereotypes of Canada as a way of fostering critical thinking about Canadian identity, multiculturalism, and First Nations history. In doing so, the essay argues for the inclusion of Canada as a natural part of American studies in the Nordic countries and beyond.

Anne Mørk's essay engages the crucial question of what careers we envision for students of American studies, and how we might best prepare them for a job market that may appear challenging for many students in the humanities and social sciences, but perhaps even more so for students of a subject that may not be widely known among potential employers. Mørk addresses how faculty, administrators, and students seek to balance academic content with training in practical and generalizable skills. Here, Mørk argues that there might be promise in the interdisciplinarity of American studies, where students are taught skills and approaches beneficial to a variety of businesses and organizations.

The third and final section of the special issue includes five essays that all focus on methods and/or content matter involved in teaching American studies in the Nordic context. These essays reflect some of the concerns outlined in the mapping of the field in section one, primarily the relation between English—especially literary approaches—and American studies, the ques-

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tion of the interdisciplinarity of American studies, and the opportunities offered by the particular Nordic context.

In an essay of the role of media studies in American studies, Joel Frykholm draws on his own experience of teaching media within American studies courses and makes a case for moving away from traditional foci on mass media and hermeneutic, representational approaches to an understanding of media "as assemblages of platforms and practices." He pays particular attention to the interdisciplinarity of American studies and the possibilities this offers from a media studies perspective. Frykholm's essay can usefully be read against the dominance of the subjects of history, political science, and literary or cultural studies approaches in American studies noted in the mapping articles. In the essay that follows Frykholm's, Erik Mustad, Maren Anderson Johnson, and Sean Taylor discuss teaching historical approaches to American studies, one of the main disciplinary backbones of the field. However, they place their discussion within the subject of English, where, as we have noted above, most American studies teaching at Norwegian universities takes place. The English subject in Norway today, they observe, leaves less room than it used to for American studies content. They argue for a "game-based simulation pedagogy" to teach American studies in this context, more specifically a form of immersion pedagogy called Reacting to the Past. Discussing their experiences of using this method in both the US and Norway, including student feedback collected through surveys, they emphasize the importance of creating learning communities and argue that "introducing the simulation pedagogy will hopefully result in deepened learning and bring past events, decisions and actions into current perspectives."

Stefan Rabitsch's essay also emphasizes the Norwegian context. Here, however, the focus is on how a particular content, "the American West," takes on specific resonances when Norway is the location of teaching. Rabitsch's essay draws on the graduate-level American studies seminars he has taught at the University of Oslo, as he shares both the method of cultural geography fieldwork where students look for traces of the American West in Norway, and the insights provided by the resulting material. As Rabitsch argues, the article "illustrates how that which we study from 'afar' may be found in more local(ized) Norwegian contexts, imaginaries, and cultural practices."

The final two essays both explore the place of literature in American studies. Cathryn Halverson does so in an almost literal sense in her discussion of using mapping as a method in literary courses in American studies. The essay is based on her experiences of adapting a course on regional literature to work in Nordic contexts through making use of maps to place characters and events. Focusing on *The Great Gatsby*, Halverson shows the usefulness of her method to the teaching of literature, but also demonstrates the important roles that literature can play in American studies. Similarly, Myrto Drizou's essay focuses on her experiences of teaching a particular text—Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House*—to make her case for the usefulness of teaching literature in American studies. Drizou argues that American studies necessitates an engagement with questions of identity and presents an opportunity, perhaps even an imperative, to employ a "cross-cultural perspective that helps our students articulate their stories and draw more expansive geographies of their selves."

Together, the nine contributions in these two sections showcase the innovative work being done in the teaching of American studies. The interdisciplinary nature of the subject encourages methods that help push both teachers and students outside traditional subject areas. In particular, it is worth noting that the specific national

contexts in which the teaching takes place are central to the approaches described in these essays. These contexts are either made part of the explicit content matter being taught, or they are used to decide what questions are addressed in the teaching. In some cases, the national context functions in both these ways simultaneously.

The contributions to this special issue provide ample proof of the rich and rewarding teaching and learning that is taking place in American studies and North America-focused courses across Nordic universities. Yet, with few but still notable exceptions—at the University of Southern Denmark, Uppsala University, the University of Helsinki, and the University of Turku—American studies in the Nordic countries is weakly developed as a teaching subject. It is instructive to return to the question posed by Duclos-Orsello, Entin, and Hill, and to think about how our teaching, rather than (only) our research, defines what American studies is. Because of the relatively weak institutionalization of American studies in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, and the fact that American studies in the region is less established as a discipline and exists more as a vaguely defined teaching field, that question has substantial impact. Members of the American Studies Network (ASN)—a pan-European group of American studies research centers—have recently called for greater collaboration in teaching and research between American studies institutions in Europe.[10] Although that certainly would be beneficial, we would also encourage collaboration within the Nordic Association for American Studies; perhaps in the form of joint courses or, following the suggestion by Grotle Rasmussen in this special issue, a Nordic summer school. Such collaboration would naturally involve institutions of American studies. Crucially, it would also involve scholars of American studies employed within other disciplines. Such collaboration must, then, be conditioned on an understanding of American studies as an evolving entity, and as contingent on the specific features and history of Nordic higher education.

There is great public interest in US politics and culture in the Nordic countries. It remains to be seen how recent developments, including the return of Donald Trump as the forty-seventh president, will affect public interest, student enrollment, and the futures of American studies teaching and research. We believe, however, that, in light of the firm connections between the Nordic region and the United States—further solidified after Finland and Sweden joined NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively—these developments make it all the more important to foster broad and complex knowledge of the United States.

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12 December 2024

10.22439/asca.v56i2.7369

Notes

1. Blaustein, *Nightmare Envy*. See also Barreyre et al., eds., *Historians across Borders.*

2. Iceland is a member country of NAAS, though the Icelandic seat on the NAAS board has been vacant for many years and there is currently no active national American studies organization in Iceland.

3. Julie Sze, "Introduction: Engaging Contradictions," 341–45.

4. Duclos-Orsello, Entin, and Hill, "Introduction," 10. See also Howard, "American Studies," 277–91; Takacs, "Making Globalization Ordinary," 221–54.

5. Fazzi et al., "Teaching American History," 366–75; Fredman et al., "Teaching U.S. History," 114–26; Shu and Lai-Henderson, eds., "Special Forum."

6. See, e.g., contributions in Steiner and Danner, eds., *Exploring Spaces*; Kleinberg, "Teaching American Studies," 43–54; Blaustein, "Empire as Province."

7. Bach and Donnerstag, "Teaching American Studies."

8. British Association for American Studies, "Teaching American Studies Network."

9. Hjorthén, "Curriculum Development," 76–87; Falke, "Essentially the Greatest Poem," 283–301; Hanssen, "We are Citizens," 267–82; Dougherty, "We Need to Talk," 249–66.

10. Fazzi et al., "Teaching American History," 374–75.

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