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Living against America: Classroom Encounters in Beirut

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Walking into the classroom on the first day of spring semester 2009, I announced that the course, Introduction to American Studies, would examine the different ways that people have understood “America” and would compare those understandings to the historical evidence. Then I asked each student to write a brief answer to this question: What is the most important way that America enters your awareness? This was the fifth year I had taught this course at the American University of Beirut (aub), and, having tried a number of such exercises, I had come to expect surprises.

Previously, I had posed an even more open-ended question: What word do you most closely associate with America? The responses to that question formed an extraordinary spectrum that ranged from the deeply critical to the fawning: violent, racist, greedy, arrogant, ignorant, superficial, young, multicultural, powerful, modern, successful, innovative, rich, hip, transparent, free, and happy.

My new question elicited less overtly judgmental responses. Many of the ways students noticed an American presence might be characterized as cultural: television, film, music, sports (basketball, introduced to Lebanon over one hundred years ago at the aub, has become an absolute obsession).^[1] A related U.S. presence is commercial; here students identified fast-food chains (which are very successful, especially in Beirut) and products such as computers, iPods, and jeans. Students were often unaware that some of the influences and enterprises they identified were not, strictly speaking, American—particularly fashion trends, supermarkets, and malls, where Europe is the more important source. The United States sometimes functions as a stand-in for the West, the modern, and the processes of globalization. Other students identified institutions such as the World Trade Organization (wto), with which Lebanon is now in negotiation; they see the wto as a U.S.-dominated organization that is forcing Lebanon to liberalize its economy and crack down on violations of intellectual property rights. Still others pointed to the aub itself, a U.S.-chartered school that has always had an American president and has had a significant influence not only on its own students but on Lebanon and the entire Arab world. Some students were particularly aware of U.S. State Department efforts at public diplomacy, such as the Arabic-language Hi magazine, Radio Sawa, and the Al Hurrah television network (although they uniformly mocked these as ineffective attempts to win hearts and minds at a time when U.S. foreign policies and actions seemed at odds with Arab concerns). Many students spoke of America as part of their day-to-day environment, as if it were a kind of medium in which they were embedded, but one that simultaneously connected them to a wider world. Indeed, my students are all fluent in English and speak it with a decided American accent. This is reinforced not only by their education and the American media and entertainment industries but also—crucially—by the Internet.

Although aub students tend to embrace much of what they identify as American and associate it with their individual chances for success, their embrace is complicated by other encounters with America that are immediate and sinister. The U.S. invasion of Iraq spewed millions of refugees into nearby countries, including more than fifty thousand to Lebanon. Many members of the Salafist resistance that arose in response to the invasion eventually infiltrated into Lebanon where they engaged in a long and deadly battle with Lebanese Armed Forces in the summer of 2007. The “global war on terror” seemed to be breeding terrorists who presented a much more existential threat to Lebanon than any terrorists ever posed to the United States. Perhaps the most troubling recent encounter with America was during the summer war of 2006. As U.S.-made bombs rained down on Lebanon, President George W. Bush rushed more munitions to Israel and repeatedly insisted that it was premature to demand an end to the killing. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called the suffering “the birth pangs of a new Middle East.”^[2] Lebanon’s share of these pangs included more than a thousand dead, a million displaced, infrastructure destroyed, beaches and harbors polluted with oil, and

millions of cluster bombs scattered over its landscape. For the students in my class, America was not simply a faraway land; it was a palpable, and sometimes shocking, presence in their lives. Although my course is intended to teach them about America, they already know America—in fact they know it in ways that might help U.S. Americans gain a more complete picture. These students find themselves living against America—for some in the oppositional sense of that word, but for all in its sense of proximity.

Introduction to American Studies is a key offering of the Center for American Studies and Research (casar) at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon. Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal of Saudi Arabia endowed the center a few weeks after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in response to what he referred to as a growing “gap” between the United States and the Arab world. Following the literary critic Edward Said’s repeated urgings, the center aims to promote academic discourse that can counter mutual demonization, but it also seeks to make the United States itself an object of Arab knowledge. casar is one of at least seven new American studies initiatives in the Middle East established since 2001. Some of these are supported by State Department funds and risk being perceived as soft power initiatives. Others, such as the University of Tehran’s program, are attempts to understand a threatening adversary. We have tried to position casar as an independent academic center that is open to a range of perspectives. Clearly, it is the presence of American military, political, economic, and cultural power that forces people throughout the Middle East (and indeed throughout the world) to ask what that presence means for them. Elsewhere, I have proposed to call this concern the American question. That question is at once casar’s *raison d’être* and a constant presence in my classroom.[\[3\]](#)

In the pursuit of its mission, casar sponsors a high-profile lecture series each year and hosts a biennial international conference that brings together American studies scholars from North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. While stressing the academic nature of our program, we have not shied away from controversy: we have invited a diverse group of speakers including Noam Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein, Richard Rorty, and Senator John E. Sununu; we have offered a course in comparative sexualities and another on the Holocaust in American literature and culture. I have traveled to Tehran twice to teach courses in the new program there and have invited its students to Beirut for a special seminar. Yet, of all the center’s activities, it is in the classroom that I feel I am pursuing its mission most intensely because the classroom allows a sustained encounter that offers the greatest possibility for the mutual reshaping of ideas and perspectives.

Introduction to American Studies is a discussion-based course that requires a great deal of writing. In addition to a term paper and essay exams, I ask students to produce a written response to each weekly reading. The typical class consists of about twenty-five students, three-quarters of whom are Lebanese—representing a diverse array of religious and political perspectives—with perhaps one wearing a hijab (veil).

When initiating the course in 2004, I had several broad goals in mind: to present America as a human creation rather than something given by nature or destiny; to examine nationalist narratives as stories created in a dynamic context by those with the power to define the national community; to contrast these stories to the complex historical reality of encounters among Europeans, Native Americans, Africans—and later Latinos, Asians, and others—and to consider the perspectives and counternarratives of those traditionally excluded; and finally, to emphasize the transnational dynamics of America in a way that might shed light on the students’ own encounters with America in their everyday lives.

The students’ reactions to these ideas and to the related readings I assigned surprised me in several ways. Perhaps what I least expected was their response to the idea of the American dream. I assigned works by a semicritical outsider (Jean Baudrillard’s *America*, 1986) and a semicritical insider (James M. Jasper’s *Restless Nation*, 2000) who had two beliefs in common: that the essence of America was specifiable and that they could specify it. While I was hoping that my students would appreciate the role of powerful American narratives—or cultural fictions, as Stephen John Hartnett calls them—in orienting and enabling historical actors, I was also hoping that they would see that these were stories created and shared by certain people rather than complete pictures of North American realities. Instead, the majority of the class members seemed to accept the idea that America represents a pure new beginning, a place where one can start fresh and where anyone who works hard can achieve success. This dream of individual self-transformation calls out even to students with the most anti-American proclivities. Frustrated by this reaction, I asked them to examine Jasper’s

“recipe” for the United States:

Take an enormous territory, rich with deep forests, the blackest soil, every manner of animal, vegetable, and mineral, and endless navigable rivers and coasts. Exterminate most of its native people. Then, over four hundred years, repopulate it with immensely diverse folk, from all around the globe, whose only common feature is their restlessness.

My students found this a compelling picture of the United States, but if restlessness is at the center of the national culture (and Jasper does believe there is one American culture), there is no place in the national community for those who migrated because of desperation, those who came involuntarily in slave ships, and those who were already there. Clearly, I had to find a way to help students think critically not just about U.S. foreign policy but also about American culture.[\[4\]](#)

I was also unprepared for the extent to which the students wanted to practice comparison. When we read Daniel K. Richter’s *Facing East from Indian Country* (2001) they immediately compared the Indians’ experience to that of the Palestinians. When we discussed the Mexican-American War in conjunction with Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), or early twentieth-century U.S. imperialism in conjunction with Gretchen Murphy’s *Hemispheric Imaginings* (2005), they quickly jumped to a discussion of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Continental destiny, hemispheric destiny, and global destiny were “just the same.” I wondered whether I should allow these constant comparisons, or prevent them from possibly undermining learning by exploding the boundaries of the course.[\[5\]](#)

A number of other things surprised me. Although my students were generally trilingual and many had lived in more than one country, most expressed an aversion to concepts of cultural hybridity such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s conscious embrace of her own existence in the borderland region where Anglo and Latino cultures overlap. Most of my students showed an immediate interest in the experience of black Americans in spite of the fact that the Arab world has its own deep variety of racial oppression; they found it easy to identify with another group that found itself defiantly struggling with the center of American power. Finally, about 10 percent of the students strongly supported George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq—their reasons were generally local or regional. My discussion of how I changed *Introduction to American Studies* in response to student reactions will focus on the first two reactions: the students’ embrace of the myths of America and their urge to be constantly comparative.

To counter the seduction of American myths, I developed two strategies. The first was to emphasize an important part of American history that has largely been excluded from nationalist narratives. In contrast to the quasi-religious idealization of the voyages of the *Mayflower* and the *Arbella*, the story of a people escaping a corrupt Old World to establish a “city upon a hill” in a free New World—the story commemorated at Thanksgiving and repeated endlessly in political rhetoric—I reminded my students of the first successful British settlements in Virginia that eventually produced remarkable profits through a system of remarkable human exploitation. To foreground this aspect of American history, I added a unit on the oil industry. We explore its origins in Pennsylvania, John D. Rockefeller’s maneuverings to monopolize it, and Ida B. Tarbell’s campaign to expose its real costs. We follow this with selections from Robert Vitalis’s *America’s Kingdom* (2007), which examines the social and political ramifications of U.S. corporate control of Saudi Arabian petroleum development. This brings up questions about the complexity of U.S. interests in the Middle East, which—some of my students are convinced—are primarily connected to Israel. The discussion is often enlivened by the presence of students who are Saudi or who have lived in a foreigners’ compound in the kingdom. The concentration of economic power is one of the things that has undermined the dreams of many, inside and outside of the United States, for a decent life. The way that concentrated power has helped shape social systems is particularly pernicious. As Vitalis shows, the Jim Crow system of segregating workers and providing them with differential wages and conditions increased profits so much that U.S. corporations brought that system with them to the Middle East.[\[6\]](#)

After reading about the struggles of an Indian (William Apess), an African American (W. E. B. Du Bois), and a Latina (Gloria Anzaldúa), my students still believed that anyone who worked hard would eventually make it into the American mainstream. My second strategy to counter this notion was to introduce the perspectives of working-class Arab Americans. Moustafa Bayoumi’s *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?* (2008) was a perfect

vehicle for this purpose. Bayoumi narrates the struggles of young, working-class Arab Americans living in Brooklyn, New York, before, during, and after September 11, 2001. He shows the difficult economic realities they face and how the added weight of social demonization in the wake of 9/11 affected them. Bayoumi's informants struggled against these conditions, in some cases succeeding and in some cases only surviving. Some dreamed of escaping their situation by moving to a faraway land of promise, a Dubai dream. The aspiration for individual self-transformation was not exclusively American. My students found these stories very compelling. Their gritty specificity—at once foreign and familiar—seemed finally to pierce the students' idealization of America. They began to notice things that surprised them. They were appalled at the demonization of Arabs and Muslims, but noted that the U.S. system of laws provided a way to fight back and sometimes achieve justice. They told me that living in the United States made these immigrants more Arab and more Islamic than people living in the Middle East. "We always watch American tv shows," one female student pointed out, "while they are obsessed with Arabic channels."[\[7\]](#)

To teach a course called Introduction to American Studies successfully, I became convinced that one must begin where the students are—not simply their location, but their ideas, beliefs, and interests. I decided, therefore, to embrace my students' penchant for comparison by shifting the course to include a greater emphasis on American-Arab encounters. One of my goals had always been to reveal the transnational dynamics of America, so why not do this in a way my students were most likely to grasp? Vitalis's book accomplished this in one way, and Bayoumi's stories did it in another. American-Arab interactions are not symmetrical, but neither are they unidirectional. My students' observation—that Arabs in the United States are more Arab than they are—was the sort of comparison worth provoking because it leads to further questions. I initiated this shift toward more course content on American-Arab encounters by adding a reading from Burke O. Long's *Imagining the Holy Land* (2003) that examines the elaborate re-creation of Jerusalem at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Although relatively few Americans had direct experience with the eastern Mediterranean at the time of the fair, many were obsessed with the region for religious, and—as Long points out—nationalistic reasons. I also added a component on the history of the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, an institution founded by American Protestant missionaries in 1866. The aub has been lauded as one of the most successful examples of American influence in the region, but its success owes a great deal to the ways that Arabs have helped reshape it into an increasingly more cosmopolitan institution.[\[8\]](#)

Next, I added a course section that compares the growth of evangelical Protestantism in the United States with that of political Islam in the Middle East. Many of my students are critical of the way U.S. leaders and the mainstream media demonize groups such as Hizbollah. They point out that Hizbollah is a complex group that not only resisted Israel during the long occupation of Lebanon and the 2006 invasion but also provides health care and education to some of Lebanon's poorest people and has evolved into a responsible political party willing to compromise and live with Lebanon's other political and religious groups. I asked the students to examine American evangelicals using the same open-minded perspective in which they wished others would regard Hizbollah and to notice that evangelicals also comprise a politically and socially diverse group that is showing signs of significant change.

Finally, I decided to conclude the course with Melani McAlister's account of how the U.S. policy evolved from 9/11 to the invasion of Iraq—an analysis that focuses on the cultural work done by certain iconic images that circulated publicly. My students were familiar with these images but often saw meanings in them completely at odds with the meanings through which the images had accomplished their important cultural work in the United States. After these changes, about one-third of the course content focused on American-Arab encounters. Obviously, these specific alterations would be inappropriate in most other places, but they have helped me capture my students' interest, engage their critical faculties, and increase their appreciation of transnational processes.[\[9\]](#)

My experience of struggling to teach Introduction to American Studies in Beirut has altered my view of American history and how to teach it, not only outside of the United States but anywhere. I do not mean to suggest a template; indeed, paying attention to the specific perspectives of my students was the key to improving the course. Lebanon is a politically mobilized country. On two successive weekends in March 2005, public demonstrations drawing eight hundred thousand and one million people, respectively, took place in the

center of Beirut.^[10] In such an atmosphere, I insist that classroom discussions respect everyone's perspective, but I cannot demand that we avoid questions of value and justice. No matter where our classrooms are located, historians stress academic values—a respect for careful argument and evidence—but history is about human concerns. We cannot bracket questions of value and justice if we expect to fully engage the humans who enter those classrooms.

This experience has also convinced me that when teaching a course in the twenty-first century about the history of the United States we must constantly be attentive to the world beyond the U.S. borders. The closer that history approaches our own time, the less we can separate America from global questions, such as: What kind of world do we have? Is another kind possible?

Finally, there is the question of viewpoint. Daniel K. Richter attempts to complicate the white European, or Euro-American, perspective by asking us to consider how the story of America might look to those facing east from Indian country. The New World that those looking toward the West imagined was an old one. In a similar way, we might tell the story of America facing it from Beirut, Lebanon; Hanoi, Vietnam; or Baghdad, Iraq. From multiple vantage points, America might come into focus in a way that would reveal more of its actual dimensions. Yet, for many of my students, the process of gazing off toward America threatens to evolve into something very much like the dreamy westward gaze that Richter describes. We can counter this slippage by recognizing that America is not simply there. We face it directly no matter where we are. We are all living right against America.

[1] Patrick McGreevy is dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and former director of the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for American Studies and Research at the American University of Beirut.

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An example is William McClenahan, "Lebanese Sport from a Basketball Perspective" (M.A. thesis, American University of Beirut, 2007).

[2] Condoleeza Rice, "Special Briefing on Travel to the Middle East and Europe," U.S. Department of State, July 21, 2006, merln.ndu.edu/archivepdf/syria/State/69331.pdf.

[3] 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 Rudolph Giuliani turned down the offer. "Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Endows a New Center for American Studies and Research," *Main Gate* (Summer/Fall 2003); Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1994), 356. The new American studies programs include Al-Quds University (Jerusalem, Palestine), Queen Arwa University (Yemen), University of Jordan (Amman), American University in Cairo (Egypt), American University of Beirut (Lebanon), University of Tehran (Iran), and Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Doha (Qatar). In addition, the center at the University of Bahrain began in 1998; Patrick McGreevy, "The American Question," *Journal of American Studies in Turkey*, 24 (Fall 2007), 15–27.

[4] Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (Paris, 1986); Stephen John Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America* (Urbana, 2002); James M. Jasper, *Restless Nation: Starting Over in America* (Chicago, 2000), esp. 4.

[5] Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco, 1987); Gretchen Murphy, *Hemispheric Imaginings: The Monroe Doctrine and Narratives of U.S. Empire* (Durham, 2005).

[6] For a discussion of the idealization of the Puritan tradition, see David W. Noble, *Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis, 2002), 215–49. For an analysis of John D. Rockefeller and the early oil industry, see Brian Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom* (Baltimore, 2000). Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford, 2007).

[7] William Apress is discussed in Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, 237–53. W. E. B. Du Bois's perspective is outlined in Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 171–212. Moustafa Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America* (New York, 2008), esp. 144–45.

[8] Burke O. Long, *Imagining the Holy Land: Maps, Models, and Fantasy Travels* (Bloomington, 2003); John M. Munro, *A Mutual Concern: The Story of the American University of Beirut* (Delmar, 1977); A. L. Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria, 1800–1901: A Study of Educational, Literary, and Religious Work* (Oxford, 1966); Ussama Makdisi, “‘Anti-Americanism’ in the Arab World: An Interpretation of a Brief History,” *Journal of American History*, 89 (Sept. 2002), 538–57.

[9] Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley, 2005), 266–307.

[10] This, in a country with a total population of 4 million.

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