

Essentially the Greatest Poem: Teaching New Ways of Reading American Literature

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Abstract

This essay arose from a debate held at the 2018 American Studies Association of Norway (ASANOR) about the value of teaching American Literature and Culture survey courses at Norwegian universities. My role, as ASANOR's president, was to facilitate the debate and offer a response. In the extended version of that response published here, I accept the critique of national survey courses as tending toward exceptionalism and nationalist interpretations of transnational political and aesthetic flows, but in the end advocate for American survey courses. I shift the focus from whether these courses should be taught to how. Taking up Walt Whitman's description of America as 'essentially the greatest poem', I propose that survey classes can 'read' that poem in a way that acknowledges America's complexity and the woeful inconsistencies between its history and its national ideal, while still finding beauty and value in that ideal. The first half of the paper historicizes the American literature survey in Norway in reference to international and national developments in the field of American Studies. The second half elaborates ways of teaching American Literature surveys that foreground students' and professors' 'horizons of expectation' for American literature and culture, assessing which of those come from American literary and cultural documents and which come from the uses to which the idea of America is put in the lives we live here and now.

Keywords: American Studies Association of Norway (ASANOR), literature surveys, Sigmund Skard, transnationalism, American exceptionalism, Walt Whitman

In 2018, at the American Studies Association of Norway (ASANOR) conference, Ken Runar Hanssen and Stephen Dougherty engaged in a lively debate about the value of teaching a designated American Literature survey course in Norwegian universities. Stephen was sceptical about the benefits of the national survey and argued that 'we should feel a greater sense of responsibility to consider arguments for and against the American

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literature survey on political, ethical, and pedagogical grounds'. The theme for the conference as a whole was cosmopolitanism, and the national horizon that circumscribes an American literature survey seemed to him a barrier to the broad, cross-cultural awareness that cosmopolitanism advocates. Ken defended the American survey as important for shaping society in Norway on the grounds that American literature 'has sought to explore, shape, celebrate, critique, and transform the ideas that form the very basis of our societies'. He suggested that the English language generally and American culture particularly are the media through which cosmopolitan education occurs. As the incoming president of ASANOR, my role was to frame the debate, respond and facilitate discussion afterward.

In keeping with the special issue's goal 'to outline some of the trends in the recent history of the academic English subject in the Nordic countries', the three of us have extended our arguments from that debate, and we offer them here to exemplify the contemporary discussion about grouping English-language literature into national categories. All three of us are based in Norway, where American literature and culture surveys tend to be part of a year-long set of courses designed to give students a basis in English language and literatures. This set of courses forms a crucial first step in bachelor programs in English and integrated bachelor/master's programs that prepare students for teaching, but it may also be taken on its own as a one-year study program. The debate about American literature and culture classes in Norwegian universities connects to broader international debates about the configuration of American Studies and to ongoing pedagogical discussions of the role of national surveys as a foundation for further study in English. With several hundreds of students taking British and American surveys each year in Norwegian universities, the entry-level survey course is probably the place where the debate about the national configurations of literatures affects the most people, and it has implications for hiring and research as well. One might ask, for example, if universities should continue to hire scholars in designated American or British literature and culture positions. Because the context of our debate was an American Studies conference, we focused on American literature and culture survey courses. Discussing the American survey evokes, without really resolving, a comparable debate about British survey courses. Although some of our claims address problems of the nation as an organizing principle, which makes them

relevant for considering the British survey also, many points are focused on America's unique history and unique array of subcultures. That is not to say that America is somehow more unique than other nations, but to confess that it would take another debate and another set of articles to tackle the question of the British survey.

Although I think Stephen is right to question the purpose of American literature surveys in Norway, I ultimately agree with Ken that they should continue to be taught and should continue to be integral to single-year and bachelor study programs. The survey course should include an inquiry into American exceptionalism, just as Stephen advocates, but many works of American literature are themselves ideal for facilitating that inquiry. Crèvecoeur's 'What is an American?' comes to mind, or Toni Morrison's *Home*. I retain hope that American literature surveys can produce ways of thinking much more subtle than, as Ken put it, two 'equally fallacious opposing polarities: That of the Western tradition as one of oppression, patriarchy, racism, and colonialism—and that of the Western tradition as one of liberty, equality, tolerance, and democracy'. To this end, I explore different ways of reading the American literary tradition that can expose students to the messy contradictions of that tradition, as well as its beauty and force.

In his 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman writes that

The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. (5)

This essay uses Whitman's metaphor to suggest different ways of reading and teaching the poem that America is. Because the United States is, as Whitman says, 'a teeming nation of nations' an American literature survey class contains stories of immigration, forced displacement, environmental catastrophe, cultural alienation, and education amidst adversity—all themes of pressing relevance in our globalizing world. It contains the voices of success, failure, critique and longing, and unless a false expectation for unity is imposed on that cacophony of voices, students hear all of them as results of the great historical experiment of America itself. Any poem can be read multiple ways, and anyone reading the US as a teacher or a student enjoys that same interpretive freedom. The history of

the earth has progressed another 165 years since Whitman's preface. New problems in the US have arisen, and old problems have refused to go away. But those problems are part of what students need to encounter, and literature, more than other forms of cultural engagement, facilitates an in-depth, complex, imaginative and moving way to encounter them.

Although wonderful works of literature are now being produced in English in many parts of the world, and although English-language authors increasingly have more than one national homeland, it remains the case that most existing English-language literature can be divided into work from America, and work from Britain and the post-colonies. Furthermore, however interlocked national destinies may be now, it also remains the case that for the two-hundred-year period out of which most of us draw most of the literature for entry-level classes (1800–2000), nations and the subcultures within them were the primary cultural horizons in which authors worked. Professors can bicker over who gets to claim American-Anglo T. S. Eliot, who currently appears in both the American and British Norton anthologies, or Nigerian-American Chimamanda Adichie, who must appear in the next edition of one of them. In the meantime, as long as the degree structure in Norway gives us two or three slots in the schedule into which we must divide the multifarious English-language literary tradition, the convenience of an even transatlantic divide will be hard to depart from in light of these historical realities. The alternative would seem to be a chronological split, but if students are wading back and forth across the Atlantic every week, then it will be difficult for them to get a sense of literature as an expression of culture.

While it is reasonable to ask whether or not Nordic universities should continue to teach American literature surveys because they appear nationalistic, it might be more beneficial to consider *how* we teach them. The first half of this paper, therefore, looks at how they have been taught in Norway in the past and how they are being taught now. I historicize the American literature survey in Norway in reference to international developments in the field of American Studies. I pay particular attention to the beginnings of American Studies in Norway because those beginnings reveal an enthusiasm and sense of discovery that continue to characterize the discipline in Norway today. The second half of the article proposes teaching American literature surveys the way a phenomenological critic reads a poem, attending to one's own horizons of expectations and exercising empathic intentionality. In my mind, this way

of teaching the survey addresses Stephen's concerns without sacrificing what works in the current national division of English literatures.

American literature surveys of the past and present

American literature surveys entered the Norwegian curriculum in the late 1940s, an age when American literature was largely approached in the US via the techniques of New Criticism (Martin 2000: 298–301). Prior to this, university curricula in English-language literature focused almost entirely on the British tradition, in Norway and elsewhere in Europe. New Criticism emphasized the formal analysis of literary works over their affective or contextual interpretation and tended to favor works, most often poems, that reward multi-layered analysis and attention to irony. However, in the US, the bases for a more inclusive American Studies were already being laid. American Studies emphasizes context and examines diverse genres of texts—historical, political, and popular, as well as literary. The fledgling multi-discipline quickly established its own institutions: the *American Quarterly* began publication in 1949, and two years later the American Studies Association was formed. Leo Marx (1999) recounts the co-existence of New Critical and American Studies methodologies as peaceful, even playful in the early 50s, but there was a discernable divide that expressed itself in course curricula and reading methods. When the study of American literature came to Norway from America, it came in the form of American Studies courses. To say that the study of American literature in Norway has predominately taken the form of American Studies is not to suggest that there is not also a tradition of solid, formalist reading practices here. (For the past few years, in fact, I have taught a course on literary form that does not use a national framework.) Rather, it is to emphasize that American literature, perhaps more than other national literatures taught in Norway, has always been seen as a function of society.

Two simultaneous events led to the founding of a Professorship in American Literature at the University of Oslo, the first of its kind in Norway, in 1946. Both of these events reveal the methodological openness and civic commitment characteristic of American Studies. Sigmund Skard, who fled Norway during the war and worked for the US Office of War Information and the Library of Congress during his displacement, procured American books for Norway immediately following the end of the second World War, using funds provided by the American Library Association (Skard 1980: 53). Skard recalls that the list of books was

compiled by '40 American specialists and institutions in all fields of learning, except medicine and military science' (53). This acquisition was complemented by a further gift from the Rockefeller Foundation for American books, 'particularly in literature', which would form the seed library for the American Institute at the University of Oslo (UiO). This acquisition of American texts was one of the first gestures toward institutionalizing the study of the United States in Norway, and was already collaborative and multi-disciplinary.

The second event was the demand by existing UiO faculty that the university create a special position for American 'literary history' (Skard 1980: 61). The proposal suggested that 'American literature today is not only of great value in itself, but is one of the most important means, even an indispensable means, for the study of American social and cultural life as a whole' (61). The faculty anticipated increasing cultural, educational and political cooperation between Norway and America and viewed the study of American literature as a means of encouraging such cooperation. Skard was the university's top choice for the position, but he hesitated because, by his own confession, he had 'hardly read *one* book of American *belles lettres* or one work on American literary history' (64). When he shared his hesitancy with the Faculty, they declared that they had 'never had the idea that the new chair should be devoted exclusively to American literature' (65). Skard was granted a year to travel back to the States to prepare for his new position, and rather than settle himself at a library desk, he toured the US to experience the country as 'a physical fact' (73). Mule-back, driving, walking, he toured every region of the country—rural and urban, coast to coast. His intention was to return prepared to teach 'literature as a function of society' (71). Here, too, the goal was to understand literature as a cultural expression. Both Skard, in his writing about developing Norway's resources for researching America, and the University of Oslo's description of how America's stories would be taught, portrayed the new field as crucial for understanding an increasingly-connected post-war world. The goal was not to learn about literature itself or even one country's literature, but to learn about America as such. Literature was viewed as the best means to that end. Although some students do go on to make researched contributions to the formal understanding of literature, I would say that most students in entry-level American literature classes have chosen them for the same reasons that

Skard and the UiO faculty created them—they want to understand American culture better.

An excerpt from one of Skard's letters at the time captures the optimism with which the venture of American Studies in Norway was begun. Writing to his wife, after receiving the position but before taking up teaching, Skard recalled reading Emily Dickinson for the first time:

Many years have passed since a poet moved me so deeply. And it's blissful ... I sang and conducted all of Mendelssohn's violin concerto afterwards, while dressing (good thing no psychiatrist saw me), and I am still in a general state of exaltation. To find myself still capable of such an experience, and a complicated and difficult one, as the direct result of the new reading of a new author from far away, strengthens my self-confidence and determination: *this* is going to be my real job, to experience such things, and to make others do the same. What a *challenge!* (68)

Much as I would love to linger over the image of Americanists conducting imaginary concertos following, say, a Dickinson lecture for first-year students, what compels me to recount Skard's story is the commitment to a spirit of discovery, even exaltation, that characterized the founding of American literary and cultural studies in Norway. The challenge was not to learn a publication chronology or patterns in American nature imagery. The goal was to help students 'experience' the thrill of Dickinson. That is not accomplished with empty enthusiasm—Skard went on to translate Dickinson and wrote a scholarly afterward about her place in American literature—but enthusiasm is an essential component in making students experience the abiding relevance of these works.

Underlying Skard's enthusiasm was a commitment to learning about America because he knew US actions were going to increase in their importance on the world stage. He and the other architects of Oslo's American program recognized that political power had shifted toward the US. Whether one characterizes US global influence since then as imperial or capitalistic, spontaneous or engineered, it unmistakably *has* grown (Mann). American literature and the mix of values underlying it form, to borrow Ken's useful phrase, part of the 'the superstructure of global hegemony'. The original reason for creating American studies courses in Norway, therefore, has only gotten stronger. If literature is a way to facilitate cultural understanding, and if cultural understanding is (in addition to being a good in itself) necessitated by power dynamics on a global stage, then American culture remains important to understand.

As society has changed, approaches to American Studies have changed also. Globalization has radically altered the relationship of cultures worldwide, but this has been particularly true for English-language cultures. According to the British Council, two billion people speak or are learning to speak English worldwide (2). Business markers for online-learning software, job predictors, patterns in expanding internet access, and measures of current and past levels of English competence suggest that this number will continue to increase exponentially ('Why the ESL market is set to boom'). The spread of English-language popular culture is both a cause and a consequence of this expansion. And as new learners recognize, American and British literatures are not merely a historical backdrop to narratives in popular culture, but an active source of inspiration. The hundreds of thousands of ex-English majors now deployed around the world as language teachers bring knowledge of English language literatures with them into their hundreds of thousands of classrooms. New connections between American literature and global English are being made so continuously that it would be difficult to describe them, but we know that the change, in terms of cultural modifications, is moving overwhelmingly toward greater global connectedness, and this makes current approaches to American Studies very different from the Cold War-era's celebration of exceptionalism. While one version of the American literary field is squeezed into the pages of an anthology, another exists as a 'crowdsourced' canon generated by readers around the world (Dimock 2017: 38). New American Studies takes account of both of these open canons. This is where the spirit of discovery that took Skard into the cane fields of Louisiana and into the 'bliss' of Emily Dickinson takes us.

Transnationalism within or instead of American studies

The globalization of English-language cultures has been paralleled within the field of American Studies by what has been called the 'transnational turn'. Donald Pease argues that the transnational turn is the 'most significant' reimagining of the field of American Studies 'since its inception' (38). The transnational perspective evolved as a critique of American exceptionalism following the Cold War and has become an umbrella concept for border and migration studies related to America as well as to studies related to Native American nations pre-dating and co-existing with the United States. Although the term 'transnational' is used

differently by different American Studies scholars, it generally refers to scholarship that ‘presuppose[s] globalization rather than exceptionalism as the horizon of intelligibility for their scholarship’ (Pease 2015: 40). Within a transnational perspective, concepts like domestic vs. foreign, or nation vs. region, globe or hemisphere, become historicized objects of study. Most often evoked in the contexts of migration, imperialism, and cross-cultural influence within American literature, transnational approaches may also investigate the influence of American works on other national and transnational literatures and vice versa. Stephen’s concerns about the American literature survey arise from the transnational presupposition that we are already, inescapably within a globalized teaching space. Not only does he question the exceptionalist narrative that sometimes still circulates in post-Cold War scholarship, but he also recognizes that Norwegian students are heavily involved in American popular culture through music, series and film. Teaching American literature—teaching English at all—in Norway necessarily involves a transnational perspective.

How does the unavoidable presence of a transnational perspective within the Norwegian American literature classroom align with new transnational perspectives in American Studies, and what does that mean for teaching the national survey course? I would say that new transnational perspectives make Stephen’s injunction to involve students in questioning the purpose of the American literature course more essential, but also easier to carry out. In order to see why, it is helpful to step back and look at the programs these American courses are embedded in. Some students enter our English classes because they hope to teach English at the secondary level. A few hope to pursue research in English literature, and many have elected to take a one-year program in English. At most Norwegian universities, this will include 30 study credits in literature and 30 in linguistics. At UiT-The Arctic University, which is my institution, we divide the 30 credits of literature equally into American Studies and British Studies, both of which include literary and other cultural works, and a third, general Introduction to Literature course, which focuses on the formal analysis of literature and writing techniques. Texts for this more general class may be from anywhere provided they were originally composed in English. In Oslo, students take 10 credits of British Literature, 10 of American Literature and 10 of American Civilization. In Bergen, Stavanger and Bodø, the literature credits are divided equally between American Literature and Culture and British Literature and

Culture, courses which each have 15 credits. Adger also uses two 15 credit courses in British and American Literature and Culture, but divides them chronologically. All of these programs except for Adger's refer to English as an 'international' or 'world' language. UiT even names 'globalization' as a reason for the program's increasing importance. According to current program descriptions, the American and British survey courses lay the groundwork for students to be citizens of a world in which the power of the English language and English language culture is a given. Students are not studying American literature apart from global connectedness; they are studying because of that connectedness.

Looking at the objectives for individual American Literature and Culture courses, one finds, too, that the courses are designed to help students reflect on the conditions that allow literature and society to flourish more generally. The University of Bergen states that their ENG 122 course 'aims at providing increased knowledge about the diversity of American culture from a historical perspective, and an understanding of the foundational premises for the development of literature and society'. Students are encouraged to reflect on 'the ways in which literary texts speak' to them at the University of Oslo. Interestingly, similar claims are not made for the British Literature and Culture class. There remains an underlying sense that, as Ken argues, understanding America's past can help students contemplate Norway's future. At Nord Universitet, the American course is divided into four thematic foci: 'Frontier, Space and Wilderness; Hope, Struggle, and Transformation; Race, Rights, and Inequalities; and Markets, Materialism, and Money'. Who would suggest that these themes are irrelevant for students who will face decisions about increasing eco-tourism, immigration, and alterations to an oil-based economy? Who would say that *Death of a Salesman* or *A Raisin in the Sun* does not speak to students who are about to begin their careers and start families? Following a lecture on 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' in Bergen, a student shook my hand and thanked me with great sincerity. Two weeks later she wrote to tell me that the lecture and story had 'changed her life'. That could equally have happened following a lecture on Wordsworth. I am not arguing against the British survey or any other literature class. But the experimental nature of America, the idea that the people of the country could make it what they wanted and the idea that an individual can make himself what he wants do invite students in a unique way to see themselves alone in their mind on a cot in a field thinking about their unarticulated

past and what it might all mean. Baldwin claims that ‘alienation from oneself and one’s people is, in sum, the American experience’ (1998: 89). I hope he is wrong, but there *is* a tendency in American literature for authors to go to those existential places where big questions seem inevitable or where one sees that we, as a society, have made a mess and ask how things might become better.

Reading the American poem

Stephen suggests that ‘The survey paradigm essentially commits the instructor to foreground the story of national growth and development as correlative to literary expression’ and that ‘the national literature survey perpetuates in the minds of our students a nineteenth-century vision of separate national destinies’. These are both very real problems with national survey courses, and it could be argued that the American literary survey conjures these problems in a particularly emphatic way since the US has an ongoing tendency to act independently of internationally cooperative organizations. But the field of American Studies, as a whole, tends to push against this story of separate national destinies, especially in its more recent, ‘transnational’ iterations. Individual instructors may, of course, fall back on the narrative prescribed by the *Norton Anthology*’s table of contents, but many of them foreground processes of canon formation in ways that highlight the interpretive actions involved in deciding what America and what American Literature might be. And the Norton, which inevitably draws critique because it is so widely used, now begins its presentation of American literature with the Iroquois, Cherokee and Navaho nations and ends with writing by Jhumpa Lahiri (born in London of Bengali parents), Junot Diaz (born in the Dominican Republic) and Tracy K. Smith, who wonders if ‘Perhaps the great error is believing we’re alone’. So even if, in a great imaginary semester with 221 weeks instead of 15, one taught the *Norton* right through, it would be difficult to maintain the illusion that the US is a light on a hill, separate and glowing. Nor have I met any instructors of American literature in Norway who wish to maintain that illusion.

At the core of American Studies remains, not a commitment to a particular canon of texts, but a commitment to a set of ideals. Leo Marx, who has historicized American Studies at several stages of his career, enumerates these ideals with admirable clarity:

The nation's distinctiveness was a defining premise of American studies from the outset. It assumed the importance of such singular political innovations as a written constitution; the rule of law; federalism; a commitment to the idea that government rests on the consent of the governed, and the notion (as Lincoln put it at Gettysburg), that the United States is a nation defined neither by its location nor its ethnic composition, but rather by a 'proposition'—a cosmopolitan, multicultural, potentially universalizable set of principles. We all know, of course, about the nation's failure, to act on those principles, but this discouraging fact does not cancel out the extent to which the avowal of those principles (and the not entirely unsuccessful effort to realize them) distinguishes the United States from many other nations. Explaining, understanding, and criticizing American society and culture, past and present, has been the tacit purpose of academic American studies since its emergence on the eve of World War II. ('Reflections' 1999: 43)

'Explaining, understanding, and criticizing' does not take any of these ideals for granted, but contends that they remain compelling.

In individual works of literature, so-called New Critics finessed away inconsistencies in the expectation that a poem made a unified and autonomous whole—a 'well-wrought urn' as Cleanth Brooks puts it in his famous book of the same title. For all its openness to multiform cultural products, American Studies began in the US with scholars who read the nation in just this way. Marx summarizes pre-1960s American Studies by saying that 'their chief aim was to make credible the illusion that American culture is best understood as an essentially seamless whole' ('Believing in America' 1969: np.). It is, of course, still possible to teach American literature this way, as though the departures from the goal of liberty and justice for all were digressions enhancing the overall plot, as though the unassimilable voices in American literary history contribute 'ironic tension' without disturbing an imagined whole. If taught this way, the American literature survey would reaffirm assumptions about the nation as a primary location of cultural identity and natural means of organizing social life. But the United States is not a poem that invites that sort of reading, and the curricula of American literature and culture surveys in Norwegian universities today do not suggest that professors teach their students to read them that way.

Last semester at UiT, students began with Emma Lazarus's 'The New Colossus', which portrays America 'Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, / With conquering limbs astride from land to land'; but as the 'Mother of Exiles'. Paired with John Moore's photos of the US/Mexico borders, this makes a powerful starting point for a conversation about America. The ironic tension between Lazarus's idyll and the current reality

Moore captures should not be finessed away, but critically interrogated. At Nord, students finish their American survey with Viet Than Nguyen's story 'Fatherland', from his 2018 collection, *The Refugees*. The story begins with a Vietnamese father with two sets of children, one in the US and one in Vietnam. When the eldest daughter of the US set comes to visit Vietnam for the first time as an adult, her younger half-sister in Vietnam has to reconcile the glamor and kindness she expects from her sister with the reality. The story invites questions about the perception of America abroad and the expectations of the oft-told tale of immigrants' children returning to the home country of their parents. There are layers of meaning in the story, particularly about representation versus reality. As the final text in the course, the final line, as it were, in the poem of America as presented to the students, Nguyen's story raises more questions than it answers. What does it mean that the poem of the US, in this course's presentation, ends with a Vietnamese-born author and a story set in Vietnam? Nguyen, who has lived in the US since he was four, is one of the rising stars of American fiction, having won the Pulitzer Prize in 2016. He also writes perceptive non-fiction and literary criticism. He fled Saigon with his parents in 1975 when the city fell. How does his biography compare to those of Fredrick Douglass or Benjamin Franklin, about whom students might have read earlier in the semester?

Both of these examples illustrate instructors' intentional foregrounding of the gap between the idealization of America and American reality, and it is works of American literature and culture that facilitate discussions of that gap. And these discussions easily move beyond America. Is there a country now that students would call the 'Mother of exiles'? What do they think a Norwegian-American would expect coming to Norway, and what do they think he or she would find? How do they feel that Europe/Norway/their hometown is reacting to an increasingly heterogeneous population? These questions do not imply that one should depart from an investigation of literary form. Students might also be asked why Lazarus's image of America begins with a negation of expectations or why Nguyen's story concludes with Saigon being 'as far as' the Vietnamese sister's 'eyes could see'.

Good teaching begins with teachers and students assessing their own position in relation to the literature to be studied and trying to discover the interpretive horizon they are already operating within. Some professors try quite directly to think about their own interpretive horizons and ask their

students to do the same, while others find their own position implicitly as they create a reading list and prepare to frame the class for students on the first day. Hans-Georg Gadamer explains that discovering one's own horizons of expectations includes 'a spirit of self-reflection' (2013: 289), '[c]onsciousness of being affected by history' (312), and an awareness that tradition is 'always part of us' (294), including classroom traditions that produce expectations for how to engage texts. Literary theory in the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions recommends that the reading of a work begins with the reader contemplating her horizons of expectations in relation to the horizons in which the work was created. Such contemplation makes it easier to appreciate the otherness of a literary text while also clarifying some good reasons for reading it. If America is to be read as 'essentially the greatest poem', or at least as a poem worth reading, then it is worth trying to discover our horizon of expectations with regard to that poem. And it is worth teaching students to discover theirs.

One function of the American survey is to change students' horizons of expectations about America itself. Teaching literature from the American South, for example, I have been able to draw students' attention to their own prejudices about the region and the way those prejudices inflect their reading. Being born in Louisiana and raised in Georgia, I have a southern accent when I talk to family, but I think that other than dropping my -g's, I scale it back to something vaguely mid-Atlantic when I teach in Norway to be as easy to understand as possible. It is therefore likely that my students in Bergen did not know I was asking them about my home country when I asked them to write the five first things they thought of when asked about the American South. 'Racism.' The person who said that was confident enough I did not even have to call on him. 'Ignorance'. 'Poverty'. 'Gun violence'. 'Anti-migration'. I have a pretty good poker face, so at this point I am just nodding and writing on the board. 'Fried chicken'. One good thing at least. We eventually worked our way around to whole sentences about lack of opportunity and generally slothful dispositions. I put on my home accent and told them where I was from, and then some of them remembered hearing something about hospitality and the biodiversity of the landscape.

The class and I looked together at some maps before getting into the literature. I had chosen a map of diversity in America today, like the one published by *The Washington Post* (Williams and Emamdjomeh), a map of average scores on standardized tests, like the one created by Sean

Reardon at Stanford (Rabinovitz), and a map of ‘the American dream’, put together based on the chances of a child from a low-income family having a low-income as an adult (Ydstie 2018). It became clear that some of the students’ expectations were supportable in the data. Segregation turns out to be a nationwide problem, not limited to one region, but people born in low-income households tend to stay low-income in the south, and the educational attainment is lower. My hometown has a 14% graduation rate from college and a median household income of \$28,000 (about 248,000 NOK, Norwegian krone). Immigrant families do better financially, earning a household income of \$52,000 (about 461,000 NOK). No researcher appears to have mapped the quality of fried chicken. We read James McPherson’s ‘Why I Like Country Music’, Alice Walker’s ‘Everyday Use’, and William Faulkner’s ‘Barn Burning’ and talked about the extent to which one can or cannot choose one’s heritage and what there is to be done with heritage that is rich and beautiful and horrible all at the same time.

Because of Norway’s long engagement with America’s constitutional ideals, the huge numbers of families that have immigrated between the two countries, and its close relationship with the US following World War Two, Norway has a unique cultural relationship to the US. Talking to a group of Norwegian university students about America, it is hard not to notice that their sense of America’s role in their lives differs significantly from the role of other countries. Norwegian students steeped in American popular culture see so much that they have in common with Americans, but there is so much struggle and grit and hope and heartbreak that they don’t see. Consequently, teaching American literature requires and refines what phenomenologists call ‘empathic intentionality’, the willingness to receive information about another’s life world and conceive of that other as producing new emotions and ideas in relation to changing circumstances. All literature refines this capacity to some extent, but American literature facilitates empathic intentionality in particularly challenging ways because of the country’s enormous cultural diversity. By encouraging students to elaborate characters’ unstated motivations or imagine unrecorded thoughts, American literature professors can encourage habits that break down the nationalistic barriers to empathy that a course organized according to national identity might be suspected of supporting.

If I said that American literature has something unique about it—the freedom of its forms, perhaps, or embrace of extreme states of being, maybe the tendency to wear existential alienation lightly in the end and get on with what needs to be done—then no matter what uniqueness I suggested, someone could find a counter example in another literature. But if I restrict my claim to my own experience of teaching American literature in Norway, then I can say that compared to other literatures I have taught, American literature has consistently produced more reflections about students' lives in the present and their hopes for Norway's and Europe's future. I am not sure why that is, but my guess is it relates to the intertwined histories of immigration, resource exploitation and I'll-do-it-myself idealism. American authors' reflections on these histories clarify what is at stake in decisions Norwegian students know that their generation will have to make. Ken's point about the sheer size and diversity of the United States is relevant here, too. 'Billy Budd' to Willa Cather, 'Brer Rabbit' to Phillip Roth—how could students not find something in this melee that speaks to them? In contrast to Stephen's struggle to dismantle a national narrative, I find it almost impossible to create one.

Conclusion

To conclude, as I began, with Whitman, America 'awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it'. Diverse and changeable as it is, America has multiple stories to tell Nordic students through its literature. I have tried to present the transnational turn in American Studies as a correlate to the recent, increasing globalization of English and a recognition of the shortcomings within some conceptions of America, American literature, and the American survey course. The teaching of American literature in Norway has been, from the very beginning, open to the societal changes that mark literary history and the contingencies that affect a discipline's future. Thankfully, our students arrive with some of the world's highest level of English-language proficiency (EF: Education First), so in contrast to English professors in many other regions, those of us in Scandinavia have the flexibility to lead our classes to a higher level of reflection about the ideas they encounter in American texts. The transnational turn has happened at the level of the international practice of American Studies, but pairing this with an examination of American literature teaching at the national level, I found that many scholars in Norway are following—and innovating on—transnational work that has been done elsewhere.

Approaching the United States as ‘essentially the greatest poem’, professors and students walk away with hundreds of different versions why that poem is as brash, tragic, gorgeous and decrepit as it is, but at the center of that poem’s narrative there is always someone walking down a road—be it a dirt road in Mississippi or a boulevard in Paris—looking for something a little better. That stubborn, rough-cut optimism seems worth sharing.

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