

Essays, Notes, and Dialogues

Making Context Matter: American Studies and the Connecting Imagination

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Abstract: This essay explores the importance of context as an interpretive framework in American Studies. It lays out an interdisciplinary approach to teaching the “connecting imagination” in college and university classrooms, discussing strategies for introducing the concept of context and teaching students how to connect primary sources to their social milieu. The process of constructing context is broken down into a series of steps that include close reading of a text, identifying a network of related discourses and representations, looking at change over time, studying cultural production and reception, and making an argument about a text’s cultural work. Context is a defining element of the field of American Studies, and this essay makes the case that the “connecting imagination” should be central to its pedagogy and practice.

“Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development.”

– John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*

“I think you need a lot of context to seriously examine anything.”

– Gus Haynes, *The Wire*

In December 2016, *The Washington Post* launched an online tool designed to add context to tweets by Donald Trump. Once installed on an internet browser, the tool would “provide additional context where needed for Trump’s tweets” (Bump 2016). A month later, National Public Radio began annotating Trump’s tweets on their website, telling readers that “140 characters rarely gives the full context” (“President Trump’s Tweets” 2017). The contemporaneous “Trump Tweet Tracker,” developed by *The Atlantic Monthly*, similarly promised to “track and unpack” Trump’s tweets and supply “our best understanding of their significance” (“Trump Tweet Tracker” 2017). Meanwhile, the Twitter account “Real Donald Context” (@RealDonaldcontext) was created—also in December 2016—to add “context to the tweets of @realDonaldTrump.”

The age of Trump has spawned a preoccupation with the concept of context in our news and social media landscape. This concern, of course, is not just about putting the 45th president’s tweets in context. Media outlets have attempted to contextualize a number of actions and statements made by the new administration: boasts about the size of Trump’s inauguration crowd, for instance, were contextualized by photographic evidence to the contrary; boasts about the size and significance of Trump’s electoral college win

were contextualized by hard numbers; claims by the Trump administration that Executive Order 13769 was not a travel ban were contextualized by Trump's own statements about said travel ban; and so forth. This media focus on contextualizing has presumed that locating statements by the administration within a larger framework will potentially expose falsehoods and distortions. Indeed, context has emerged as a kind of fact checking mechanism in the Trump era. Context, we are told, can provide historical perspective, "unpack" and illuminate significance, and reveal some measure of truth.

The renewed public interest in context as an interpretive tool represents an opportunity for the field of American Studies to share what it knows and does well, and to redouble its efforts to teach students how to contextualize in a meaningful way. The notion that context is key to interpretation is certainly not new to American Studies. American Studies has long been concerned with context as a constituent, if not a defining element, of its interdisciplinary mode of inquiry. Gordon Kelly argued in his 1974 *American Quarterly* essay that American Studies practitioners "would do well to begin with a concept of context that directs attention to the rules and definitions which order and govern the creation and consumption" of texts (147). In 1979, Gene Wise argued that "contemporary cultural problems require understanding in their full interconnecting context" (335). In 1989, Robert Berkhofer ventured, "If the disparate interests that comprise American Studies are united about anything, it is the necessity of contextual knowledge" (589). Philip Deloria made the case in his 2008 presidential address to the American Studies Association that the American Studies scholar "refuses to leap directly from the textual to the theoretical... and turns always to context" (15). As American Studies thinkers, we are in the habit of asking how texts shape and are shaped by context. And we typically employ a fairly

expansive definition of “text,” one that can include novels and films, fashion and food, sermons and speeches, parades and protests, landscapes and—yes—Tweets. We approach disparate sources as subjects to be read closely and to be read into a larger context. Indeed, we tend to subscribe to the notion that “the smallest topic is replete with history, significance, and consequence” (Miller and Paola 2012, 63). Or, to invoke the poet Theodore Roethke, our line of inquiry presupposes that “all finite things reveal infinitude” (Roethke 1964).

There’s little question that American Studies as a field encourages its practitioners to cultivate what Wise calls the “connecting imagination,” the ability to “probe beyond the immediacy of the situation to search for everything which rays out beyond it” (1979, 336). How do we do this? It is one thing to say context matters and to urge our students to contextualize; it’s another to break down what exactly we mean by “contextualize,” and to show—step by step—how we try to create meaningful contexts for interpreting cultural phenomena. In the introduction to her book *Epic Encounters*, Melani McAlister writes that “the task of any study of culture... is to reconstruct the larger world in which a given cultural form was made meaningful” (2005, 6). My goal with this essay is to provide students, teachers, and indeed anyone interested in why context matters, with a pedagogical primer on how to “reconstruct the larger world” and probe beyond the immediacy of the text. The approach I describe is one I have taught to undergraduates and graduate students alike, using it to contextualize songs by Bessie Smith and Nine Inch Nails, literature by Walt Whitman and Sylvia Plath, material objects like toys, clothing, and the Fender guitar, films such as *King Kong*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Thirteen*, as well as statues, photographs, graphic novels, amusement parks, the Lindy Hop, the quinceañera, the frozen dinner, and the second fight between boxers Joe Louis and

Max Schmeling. In the pages that follow, I lay out my pedagogical approach to teaching context and provide examples from my classroom experience to show how these various interpretive strategies can be synthesized and applied. Ultimately, it is my hope that engaging with this subject will encourage further discussion about how we can practice and teach the “connecting imagination” in a variety of American Studies contexts, both within the classroom and without.

How do we introduce students to a concept as abstract and complex as context? On the first day of the semester, I like to walk into class carrying a big bag of Tupperware. Silently, I start distributing the Tupperware around the room, giving each student a container. I ask students to look at the object on their desk, to hold it and study it from different angles. I ask them to tell me what it is and describe it in detail—its size, weight, shape, and color. I ask them to tell me what Tupperware is used for—both its intended use (food storage) and its unintended or incidental use (student responses have ranged from holding jewelry, to trapping spiders, to using the lids as Frisbees). I ask students to brainstorm the meanings we attach to Tupperware: thrift, preservation, efficiency, and home, for example. I ask them to contemplate why we tend to value these particular ideals. I then ask them to reflect on where else in our culture we might find these ideals (recycling, personal finance, collecting, and so forth). I ask them where Tupperware is sold, and I ask if they know where it is manufactured or what it is made of. I then ask if anyone can guess when Tupperware was invented. Students usually guess the 1950s. I ask why they think so, and their responses often make reference to the suburbs, or the Tupperware party, or the popular image of the white, middle class postwar housewife. At this point, I proceed to tell them the story of Tupperware: how it was invented by New Hampshire tree surgeon Earl Silas Tupper in

1942, and how Tupper initially tried, with little success, to distribute his polyethylene containers through department stores and mail order catalogues. Then I tell students how Brownie Wise, a single mother from Detroit, innovated a method of selling Tupperware door to door. When Tupper heard about her success, he withdrew his kitchenware from stores and focused on selling his products exclusively through the home demonstration party. I relate to students how Tupper hired Wise to be his vice president in 1951, how she built a predominantly female salesforce of 20,000 members by 1954, and how Tupper fired Wise in 1958 over alleged financial differences and subsequently erased her from the official company history.

After I narrate this story, I ask students to think about the ways in which the meaning and use of Tupperware has changed from the 1950s to the present. Does Tupperware still symbolize both thrift and abundance, as it did in the postwar era—a traditional value embodied in a modern design? Does Tupperware still have gendered associations attached to it? Most students answer that the plastic container is little more than an everyday object about which they give little thought. It is no longer new. It no longer carries the same symbolic and historical freight. We then talk about why this is the case. What has changed over time? We also reflect on which objects today are considered “new” and modern (the smartphone, wearable technology), and which, like Tupperware, may have lost some of their shine and become part of the taken-for-granted ecology of our everyday lives (the microwave, contact lenses). I conclude this activity by telling students that the process we just went through with Tupperware is the same process we are going to use to understand all kinds of cultural texts in this class. I explain to them that I have just modeled, in miniature, what we in American Studies call the connecting imagination. For the rest of the semester, the stu-

dents and I will converge—again and again and again—on context.

What is context? On a fundamental level, I tell my students, context is akin to setting in fiction writing: it provides a vivid sense of time and place. Context is the stage on which historical dramas are played out. Yet context is not simply decorative; we do not evoke it to just be descriptive. In American Studies, setting is central to story and meaning. We reconstruct the social milieu surrounding a cultural artifact because the milieu helps us understand the artifact's significance. Context is not just backdrop; it pulsates, it has power. Context is the ecology, the matrix that interpenetrates a cultural phenomenon and gives it meaning. Context surrounds, shapes, and can be shaped by the object of our study. Only when we consider context can we begin to study "the ways and the degrees to which any given cultural product takes hold and why" (Blair 2000, 17).

To help students think about the relationship between context and the texts we tend to analyze in American Studies—the artifacts, the phenomena, the cultural products that "take hold"—I like to introduce the concepts of resonance and porosity. Cultural texts can "resonate," I tell my students, meaning they "vibrate in sympathy with a similar frequency" in the surrounding culture (Phillips 2005, 5). If the text is a bell, for example, resonance is the vibration its chime sets off in the larger world. Resonance refers to the ways in which a text "vibrates" and connects, intentionally or not, with audiences, discourses, histories, and representations that are circulating in the broader culture. The context, in turn, also vibrates with the text, resounding just as the environment amplifies the original chiming of the bell; to resound is to be "filled to the depth with a sound that is sent back to its source" (Moore 2010, 9).

In this way, text and context are interconnected. So, for example, a film and its historical moment can resonate with one another—a specific film might strike a particular chord in the culture and the culture can simultaneously amplify the resonance of the film. The tone of the bell is intensified by the supplementary vibration.

Texts are also porous. They are permeable. They are susceptible to cultural influences, and they in turn influence other cultural expressions. A text has “no clearly defined boundaries: it spills over constantly into the works clustered around it” (Eagleton 1983, 138). The same film that resonates with its historical moment is also traversed by that moment—the culture seeps into it. Context inscribes texts. The concepts of resonance and porosity help us start to conceive of texts as agents of cultural formation, as “accumulative, intertextual, or even collaborative productions” (Wilson 1989, 469). Resonance and porosity remind us that texts are “vehicles for meaning,” and that this meaning is not generated in a vacuum (Garrett 2017, 19).

Thinking about the text as a resonant, porous “cultural informant” is just the first step in cultivating a connecting imagination. How do we begin to explore what the text might be telling us? This is where the tools of close reading and the habit of wide reading are both helpful in American Studies. Close reading is integral to constructing context, because it helps us pinpoint the relevant discourses and representations to focus on in the broader milieu. And we are better at identifying those relevant discourses when we have been reading widely in the field of American Studies, when we become more familiar with the social, cultural, and intellectual history of the United States.

Close reading often starts with the identification of themes that are articulated by the text. What are the manifest themes, the stated content, the overt focus and orientation of the text in question? Is this a story – or song, or painting, or performance, or “telling” material object like Tupperware – about family, or technology, or romantic love, or death? What narrative categories can we fit this text into? Are there patterns here, certain “repetitions and oppositions” that emerge in our reading of the text? (Scholes 1985, 32). What issues, ideas, anxieties, or controversies is the text resonating with in the wider culture?

Then, equally, if not more important, I teach students to think about the themes and perspectives that are silenced or marginalized in a cultural text. Paul Lauter refers to this close reading strategy as looking for the “ghost in the machine,” identifying the themes “that are present... but functionally unstated, not given narrative form” (2001, 106). Jay Mechling suggests we ask, “What could have happened here and didn’t?” (1997, 21). A film might overtly be about romantic love, but it can also under-examine, suppress, or otherwise push to the side important questions of gender, sexuality, race, age, class, religion, and so forth. What assumptions about romantic love are embedded in the text? Which perspectives are privileged and which are denied? When we read closely, we identify what is obvious and taken-for-granted, and then we work to deconstruct the text and its subtext. We try to discover the text’s internal contradictions, to expose the underpinnings of its cultural logic, to explicate the ways in which the text, in the words of Toni Morrison, “mystifies what it cannot bring itself to articulate but still attempts to register” (1992, 66).

Close reading is key to constructing context because it helps us start to imagine connections. Close reading turns our attention to the larger world; it prompts us to contemplate the

text's resonance and porosity. Eric Greene observes that "any cultural product... can and should be seen as a text that is suggestive of the cultural context out of which it emerges" (1996, 7). Close reading of themes and silences helps suggest that context.

After identifying themes and silences, we go about the hard work of constructing a context for analyzing the text. Where to start? Here we benefit from our wide reading, and also work to fill in what we do not know. Typically, we first get a sense of chronology. What was going on at the time when our text appeared? What were the main currents in the larger culture, the historical "headlines" with regards to politics, economics, science, arts and letters, social issues, and so forth? I tell students they need to be aware of the "big events" that shaped a particular era. What "master narratives" have been used to explain the period? What have scholars already written about this time period and about our text? In other words, what is the contextual work that has already been done by others? Working to answer these questions helps us get a handle on the general historical milieu and scholarly dialogue within which we will construct a more specific context relevant to our text—a context that may and in fact often does contradict the "master narratives."

The next step is to take the themes and silences we have identified in our text and start connecting them to related discourses circulating in the broader culture. As a side note, I find that discourse, like context, is one of the words teachers often deploy without definition, presuming students will know what it means. I explain to my students that discourse can be understood as a multivalent conversation about the same topic that is taking place among different voices across different cultural venues. For example, if a theme in a text is marriage equality—or if marriage equality is a silence in the text—

then where are the conversations about same-sex marriage taking place in the culture writ large? What is being said about this issue in the news media, in legal circles, in the popular culture, in the performance of wedding rituals, in vernacular wedding photographs? In what ways are a text's engagement with same-sex marriage resonating with the culture, and in what ways has the text been shaped by this ongoing conversation? Seeking answers to these questions requires us to look at the "network of discourses and representations which inform or inhabit texts, or... are 'inscribed' into them" (Wilson 1989, 469). Jean Howard talks about studying a text relationally, "by seeing how its representations stand in regard to those of other specific works and discourses" (1987, 19). Close reading suggests themes and silences, which in turn point us in the direction of discourse and representation, which helps us begin to construct a relational context.

Working our way through this process compels us to create what Margaret Faye Jones calls "a larger cultural picture of the historical period" (2006, 349). Along similar lines, Lauter encourages American Studies practitioners to "think about how comparable patterns in a set of historically coincident texts may be seen in relation to specific historical events" (2001, 110). At this stage, I push my students to think creatively and expansively across diverse modes and forms. A network of discourses and representations might include a song, an advertisement, a television show, a material object, a monument, a politician's speech, a legal decision. When exercising our connecting imagination, we endeavor to "connect elements in a culture without recourse to a hierarchy of high and low" (Braudy 2016, ix). This is the fun part, I tell my students. We "play with the discourse," as Mechling says (1997, 22). We crash conversations that are taking place across the culture, listen in, search for patterns, try to connect the dots. We work to

cultivate a deep understanding of the discourse, so we can try to figure out how our text might fit in. At the same time, we pay attention to power dynamics, considering the ways in which power acts upon and within networks. Context is not neutral: it is shaped by cultural politics and power relations that determine access to discourse and give voice to certain perspectives while muting others.

At this stage, I'm reminded of William Graebner's admonition about contextual analysis (which I've always read as a welcome challenge):

"One's ability to generate accurate readings depends on one's knowledge of the culture—on knowledge of the range of ideas and values it normally generates—and that, in turn, can come only from familiarity with a wide range of historical research and with numerous documents and performances, not all related in any obvious way to the text under consideration" (1991, xiii).

Have at it, Graebner suggests. If you want to make a convincing case about the significance of a text, then develop a deep familiarity with the culture—through wide reading—and chase after connections, even when they are not immediately apparent. If pushed seriously, the interpretation of any text, as Robert Scholes points out, "will lead us not to some uniquely precious exegetical act but to cultural history itself" (1985, 35).

Of course, the process of constructing context does not end with this extended stay in the cultural moment. The themes and silences of a given text have very likely been explored prior to and after the moment when the text was created or "spoken" into the culture. This means that change over time necessarily becomes

part of the context we create in American Studies. What were the terms of this cultural conversation before? How has the discourse changed? How have the parameters of debate shifted? How have the assumptions altered? Are the silences the same or have they changed? For example, how does the discourse about marriage equality that resonates with our specific text at a particular moment in time relate to the conversation that was taking place earlier? Context is not just contemporaneous. Context can comprise a far greater swath of history. For every cultural phenomenon we examine, we strive to “show not only that it has a history, but also how it has evolved” (Braudy 2016, x). Today, Tupperware is still Tupperware, but it doesn’t mean what “Tupperware” used to mean.

After becoming familiar with the timeline events, master narratives, and the scholarly literature, discovering the related network of discourses, and attending to change over time, our work is not yet finished. There are two key cohorts still missing from this construction of context. The first is the creator. Who made this text? Who wrote it, or built it, or performed it, or innovated it? When and where and why—to what end—was the cultural text produced? By what means was it made available to the public? Did the creator have an intention in mind, a theme in mind? What was the creator’s background, social location, and own cultural milieu?

We also consider audience as part of context—the everyday people who consumed, viewed, read, listened to, or otherwise made use of a cultural text. A text is a “living cultural artifact that arises out of the conflicts and contexts of people’s lives” (Jones 2006, 354). Networks of discourse can give us some sense of those conflicts, but the “everyday” dimension of context is more difficult to determine. What did a text mean to an individual per-

son—or group of people—in a given place at a given time? How was the text consumed, interpreted, rejected, or re-appropriated by diverse audiences, by non-elites who did not have the power to access and contribute to the dominant discourse? How did everyday people make sense of an artifact? The creator and audience are part of the setting; they resonate with the culture, and, challenging as it may be, we try to seek them out as we construct context.

This is admittedly a lot of work. Themes, silences, chronology, master narratives, historiography, networks of discourse, change over time, creator, audience—context spirals out, and can spiral out of control: “all finite things reveal infinitude” (Roethke 1964). After all, “What is not connected to innumerable other incidents, events, trends?” (Braudy xi). But if we have any methodological conviction in American Studies, if we are committed to any one approach to producing knowledge, it is our determination to pursue those connections, to at least reach for that infinitude. We listen for resonance, we examine for porosity, and we “find the webs attached to the subjects” (Miller and Paola 2012, 72). Constructing context is a labor of embroidery—and arguably a labor of love.

So how do we make sense of all this? Once we have done the yeoman’s task of trying to construct context, of tracing the strands of this intricate web, how do we bring our research to a conclusion and make an argument about the relationship between text and context? This is where the concept of “cultural work” is useful. In American Studies, we tend to subscribe to the notion that a text does work in the culture. As a porous, resonant text, it plays a role in the wider ecosystem; it performs a part on the historical stage. Each text is active and productive. It is meaningful in some way. It is engaged in cultural work. Trying to understand the re-

relationship between text and context helps us think about a text's possible significance. I find it helps to model potential questions for students to ask of their evidence as they begin to build a case for its cultural work. Is the text working to help construct an individual's personal identity, or a group's social identity, or our national identity? Does the text reinforce dominant ideologies, or expose them, or subvert them? Does the text offer a counter-memory of a historical moment? Does it "reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience" (Lipsitz 1990, 213)? Is the text the subject of a struggle for meaning and cultural domination? Does it invert established hierarchies? Does it represent a gesture of refusal that disrupts systems of signification? Or, is the text evidence of hegemony, of the power of a particular discourse to shape cultural production? Might the text itself be contested and contradictory, an instance of how a cultural phenomenon can at once reproduce and undermine master narratives? Or is the text an example of how audiences—everyday people—derive a meaning from cultural products far different than what is intended or widely accepted? Or is something else entirely going on here?

In American Studies, I tell my students, we try to make a bold but demonstrated assertion about cultural significance. We try to answer the "so what" question and show why people should care about a text and its connections. Jane Tompkins argues that texts should be studied "because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself" (1985, xi). Our job is to explain what the text might exemplify about the culture—what it can tell us about the workings of culture. In the final analysis, we try to make an argument grounded in context that shows why context matters.

If we at once conceive of American Studies as a field of interdisciplinary inquiry, a pedagogy, and a public practice, then surely context is in our wheelhouse. We spend our careers studying the vast messiness of culture. We understand that there is “complexity in attempting to define an experience” (Lawler 2008, 57). We cultivate—and teach our students to cultivate—what Howard Gardner calls the “synthesizing mind,” a mind that “takes information from disparate sources, understands and evaluates that information objectively, and puts it together in ways that make sense” (2006, 3). Contextualizing is more than just an academic exercise; it is a way of understanding the world. The connecting imagination is a habit of mind that can shape how we assimilate knowledge, how we conceptualize problems, and how we learn to see and interpret the patterns and silences and histories of everyday life. There seems no better time than the present to share our expertise and enthusiasm with a public plagued by the urgency—and impoverishment—of context.

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NOTES

1 Elsewhere I have written about the American Studies habit of mind. See "Teaching American Studies as a Habit of Mind" *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, edited by Simon Bronner, Online Forum 3, 2012 [<https://www.theasa.net/node/4919>] and "We Are What We Teach: American Studies in the K-16 Classroom," *American Quarterly* 60 (2): 443-454.

2 I have used the Tupperware activity in both undergraduate "Introduction to American Studies" classes and graduate-level theory and methods seminars.

3 In "Introducing American Studies: The Moral Ecology of Everyday Life," James Farrell writes about the need for teachers to practice "a pedagogy of connected learning" (85).

4 Along similar lines, Farrell writes that his goal in teaching American Studies is to "complexify students' lives and their perspectives on the world" (85).