

THE NATURE AND MEANING OF RESEARCH in American Studies

An ASA White Paper

The field of American Studies encompasses a diverse community of scholars who make use of a wide range of disciplines and methodologies. Since many of these fall within the humanities and social sciences, peer-reviewed books and articles are the most common form of publication, though scholars with various disciplinary backgrounds may place different emphasis on one or the other.

“The interdisciplinary rigor of American Studies ... often drives scholars in the field to engage unconventional or innovative archives of evidence. This also requires American Studies scholars to deploy sophisticated contextualization and reflexivity about their research materials.”

—Ben Chappell, University of Kansas

American Studies has a number of dedicated journals, such as *American Quarterly* and *American Studies*, and is also informed by the intellectual debates and contributions published in journals of literature, history, sociology, and other fields. American Studies is frequently and substantially advanced as a field by essays in edited volumes, even though these are not as easily tracked by academic metrics as journal articles.

The subjects taken up by American Studies researchers are even more diverse than their methodological approaches. Scholars in the field conduct empirical studies of people in the United States as well as those whose lives are shaped by transnational, diasporic or migrant experience. They conduct critical studies of cultural production, media texts, and the arts. They examine social institutions and sites. They conduct policy studies of the actions of the U.S. state and international relations. Often research on these topics and others is based on connections drawn between varied materials and views on both the past and present. The interdisciplinary rigor of American Studies, which prioritizes pursuit of a research question over maintaining the boundaries of a discipline, often drives scholars in the field to engage unconventional or innovative archives of evidence. This also requires American Studies scholars to deploy sophisticated contextualization and reflexivity about their research materials.

Writing and speaking for a variety of audiences is considered a strength in American Studies, as many scholars in the field view public engagement as an important dimension of inquiry, pedagogy, and civic professionalism. Members of the field contributed to the *Imagining America* report *Scholarship in Public* (2008), which describes an array of projects in publicly engaged scholarship and discusses how to assess their value for purposes of academic promotion and tenure. Such work may include exhibitions; theatrical productions; public dialogues; K-12 classroom presentations and curriculum development; documentary film, television, and radio; writing for magazines and newspapers; expert testimony; website, weblog, and podcast development; and other forms. 

The Author

BEN CHAPPELL

Associate Professor of American Studies

University of Kansas

About the 2015 ASA White Paper Series

The ASA National Committee, in response to a proposal put forward by the Committee on Departments, Programs, and Centers, established a Task Force to coordinate advocacy efforts for ASA institutional members. Launched in 2014, the Task Force set about to produce, among other resources, a white paper series that addressed key questions and concerns that confront chairs and directors of American Studies. Authored by chairs, directors and coordinators at a range of institutional types, the 2015 ASA White Papers aim to create, understand, articulate, position, and sustain American Studies within the current landscape of higher education in the U.S. and globally.

Acknowledgments: Lynne Adrian, Ben Chappell, Lorraine Cox, Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, Lisa Duggan, Ben Feldman, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Alyosha Goldstein, Rebecca Hill, Karen J. Leong, Curtis Marez, Chandan Reddy, and Mark Rice.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives 4.0 International license. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>.

About the American Studies Association

Consisting of over 5000 members and supporting scholars, teachers, administrators, writers, critical thinkers and activists from the U.S. and around the world, the American Studies Association is the oldest and largest association devoted to the interdisciplinary study of U.S. culture and history in a global context. In pursuit of these goals, the ASA has evolved into one of the leading scholarly organizations known for taking action in the worlds of politics and policy to create and defend conditions for open debate and the pursuit of meaningful, engaged scholarship, and teaching.

Contact the ASA

AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

1120 19th Street NW, Suite 301

Washington DC 2003

Tel 202.467.4783

Fax 202.467.4786

Email asastaff@theasa.net

Media asamedia@theasa.net

www.theasa.net

