

**TEACHING ANGLO-AMERICAN CULTURE
AT THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT:
THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE**

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Abstract. *Following the example of the European and American universities in the last three decades, the English Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš has introduced seven courses dealing with the particulars of foreign cultures - British, American, Canadian, Australian, Irish, Scottish and African American studies - all evolving over the years to encompass both the historical and the contemporary socio-political contexts necessary for educating language and literature students - future teachers - and provide them with the background knowledge indispensable for teaching language and literature in context. At the English Department, the mandatory introductory courses in cultural studies are complemented by electives that provide a deeper understanding of both the theoretical concepts and theories pertaining to cultural studies, and the specifics of individual Anglo-American nations and their cultures.*

Key words: *humanities, cultural studies, university education, Anglo-American literature and culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural studies have taken an important place in higher education all over the world, despite the fact that its inception as a scholarly discipline was met with some hostility in academic circles. It is now an almost universally uncontested truth that the awareness and the knowledge of the cultural and historical context, of both “high” and popular culture, is an indispensable part of education in humanities. Universities outside Great Britain and the United States teaching English at the tertiary level usually apply a combination of teaching linguistics, literature and foreign culture (Breidlid *et al.* 2008, 1). This approach has proven

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to be particularly popular and effective, and has been implemented in the curriculum of the English Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš for three decades.

Teaching cultural studies at this Department is inextricably connected with the now classical approach established by The Birmingham Center for Cultural Studies and the so-called “Founding Fathers” of cultural studies: Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, to name but a few. Hall (1990, 12) locates the beginnings of cultural studies in the post-WWII debate about the changes in the British society and notes that many scholars back then saw the establishment of the Birmingham Center as a sort of an academic impostor, based on the leftist ideas and approaches from the margins of the academic sphere. Soon, however, cultural studies took the academic world by storm and gained popularity in America, as well as all across Europe and the rest of the world. As Raymond Williams put it, cultural studies is about “the desire to make learning part of the process of social change itself” (qtd. in Grossberg *et al.* 1992, 201). This political dimension pertaining to the active involvement and participation of the intellectuals in the analysis and the functioning of the social world around them has marked cultural studies from its beginnings. It is no wonder, then, that one of the leading English Departments in the country (or, rather, to be more precise, the countries of former Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro and Serbia) recognized the importance of such academic discipline for the overall education of the tertiary-level students of English.

If one is to identify key features of cultural studies, interdisciplinarity and a holistic approach to culture come to mind first. Cultural studies can be defined as “an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic conception of culture” (Grossberg *et al.* 1992, 4). The fact that cultural studies draw on many other related disciplines and fields within the framework of humanities, including history, sociology, cultural anthropology, literature studies, studies of feminism, racism and alterity, post-colonial studies, semiotics and many other has made them an especially convenient subject area for the study at the English Department in Niš. Therefore, since the 1990s, cultural studies have been an important part of the curriculum and individual syllabi. A particularly close connection has always been maintained between the courses in cultural studies and the courses in Anglo-American Literature at the English Department. This is not surprising, especially bearing in mind that one of the basic premises of the cultural studies is that any cultural item can be read and interpreted as a text (Longhurst *et al.* 2008, 26). Almost all professors of cultural studies at the English Department (have) also taught one or more courses in English or American Literature.

2. BRITISH STUDIES AT THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

British Studies, the mandatory introductory freshman course encompassing the socio-political and cultural evolution of the nations settling the British Isles, was first introduced at the Department of English by Professor Ljiljana Bogoeva Sedlar as English Studies.

The form that the British Studies course has today is owed to Professor Vesna Lopičić, who gave it shape in her *British Studies Course Book* (2005) - a guide through the historical circumstances that defined the nation and culture that we today know as the British, but also their political and cultural involvement at the global level. Professor Lopičić started teaching this course in 1999, and authored the already mentioned coursebook in the early

2000s, as well as edited two anthologies as course supplements: *British Studies Anthology I: From the Iberians to the Angevins* and *British Studies Anthology II: From the Plantagenets to the House of Windsor* (2005), both providing historical and critical insight into the given periods and historical events encompassed by the course. As an introductory course, British Studies is designed to provide students not only with the brief historical account of the culture whose language Serbian students about to study in-depth, but also insight into the peculiarities of the historical, social and political circumstances that have contributed to its present state. Moreover, as the first introductory course into the history of the English speaking world, the course chronologically covers the major historical periods and events that have marked, impacted or changed the course of history within and outside this seemingly isolated island-nation. Throughout the course, the students are, therefore, acquainted with the circumstances that impacted European and world history, created the momentum for the major undertaking of colonization and thus British colonial history, but also its aftermath, as well as the contemporary state of affairs. However, even though emphasis is placed on the historical perspective, the variety of topics throughout British history offer insight into the evolution of the religious matters in today's UK - a persistent issue with serious political consequences even in recent history, the origins of the ongoing political and military conflicts between the nations of the British Isles, the philosophical and political thought, the socio-economic circumstances and, to an extent, the role of the United Kingdom in contemporary foreign politics. The main objective of the British Studies Course is to contextualize the students' notions about the culture and language they have started studying, and provide a historical background against which these can be assessed critically. As Professor Lopičić notices in the Introduction to *British Studies Course Book*, "[a] society unaware of its history is as unable to make responsible decisions as a person suffering from amnesia" (2005, 7), and in the case of the English Language and Literature students and the English Department in Niš, this extends to the vast field of cultural studies which require a solid grasp, as well as appreciation, of the different historical events and perspectives. In fact, the British Studies Course represents only a part of the cultural mosaic taught at the English Department, and introduces along with the brief historical accounts the basis for a critical approach to both history and culture, all with the goal of raising the students' cultural awareness.

The course has undergone its own evolution being taught by several professors at the Department of English over the years, each providing their unique critical outlook - the already mentioned Professor Ljiljana Bogoeva Sedlar who first introduced it, but also Professor Ratomir Ristić, Professor Dragana Mašović, Professor Vesna Lopičić, Professor Milena Kaličanin, and lastly, starting from the fall semester in 2021, Assistant Professor Sanja Ignjatović who will be teaching British Studies in the 2021 accredited program. Undoubtedly, British Studies has inspired several other courses combining cultural, literary and linguistic studies, both mandatory and elective, such as American Studies - a mandatory course currently taught by Assistant Professor Ana Kocić Stanković, British Studies - Visual Approach, an elective taught by Professor Milena Kaličanin until spring semester 2021 and Assistant Professor Sanja Ignjatović starting from 2021, Irish Studies - an elective taught by retired Professor Dragana Mašović until 2020, Canadian Studies - a mandatory course taught by Professor Vesna Lopičić, Scottish Studies - an elective taught by Professor Milena Kaličanin, Australian Studies - a mandatory course taught by Professor Milica Živković and African-American Studies - an elective course taught by Assistant Professor Ana Kocić Stanković.

2.1. Canadian Studies at the English Department

Originally introduced as part of the Canadian and Australian Studies course by Professor Ratomir Ristić, Canadian Studies is now taught separately at the Department of English by Professor Vesna Lopičić as a course integrating Canadian history, culture and literature, with the emphasis on literary works as illustrations of the developments in Canadian history, national identity, but also a testament to the historical, economic and socio-political circumstances that created the Canadian nation as we know it today. The lectures, as well as the appreciation classes taught by Assistant Professor Sanja Ignjatović, cover a range of topics starting from the most important historical events, the geographical features of Canada, literary works dealing with the prominent motif of the Canadian landscape and animal and plant life, the early settlers' experience, the emergence of the notions of Canadianness and the process of arriving at an idea of a nation, but also the historical issues involving women's rights and minorities, First Nation Peoples and their struggles, as well as contemporary issues in multicultural Canada.

The course currently includes some of the most notable literary works of the Canadian canon, and a number of contemporary authors whose works have gained international recognition, such as the Nobel Prize awarded Alice Munro (one of stories from the 1972-collection), Margaret Atwood (a selection of poetry), Thomas King and Yann Martel (with their internationally acclaimed novels respectively), to name a few. However, the syllabus not only includes, but also endorses Canadian literary authors who have not yet been translated into Serbian and whose works are often inaccessible to the Serbian public and students, but authors who brilliantly represent the Canadian storytelling craft, and particularly so when it comes to short fiction - Margaret Laurence and Rudy Wiebe, among others. It is through the appreciation of these works, their close reading and discussion classes that the fragmentedness of the notion of Canadian identity is explored, as well as postmodern trends in Canadian literature.

Taking notice of the growing interest in Canadian short fiction as a particularly proliferate genre and Canadian export, Professor Vesna Lopičić introduced an elective course by the name of Canadian Short Story - Canadian Female Authors in early 2000s. Exploring the genre itself as a specific form of expression, and particularly so with Canadian female authors, the course includes a number of contemporary female authors - Canadian in different modalities of what Canadianness might imply: indigenous, naturalized, immigrants, etc. With the focus on contemporaneity, the selection of short stories contextualizes the challenges faced by women in Canada, or Canadian women, simultaneously exploring the concept of personal against national identity, gender and politics. The syllabus covers short story fiction by authors such as E. Pauline Johnson, L. M. Montgomery, Emma Lee Warrior, Beth Grant, Sandra Birdsell, Janette Turner Hospital, Isabel Hogan, Cynthia Flood, Himani Bannerji, P. K. Page and Janice Kulyk Keefer.

Apart from making significant contribution to the promotion of Canadian studies in Serbia, Professor Vesna Lopičić and Professor Milena Kaličanin have also, among others, participated in numerous conferences, activities and events organized by the Serbian Association for Canadian Studies - a part of the Central European Association for Canadian Studies and a full member of the International Council for Canadian Studies. Because of the European engagement in promoting Canadian studies, the students at the Department of English have had numerous opportunities to attend guest lectures and live-streamed lectures by eminent Canadian scholars and speakers, as well as participate in academic

events organized by the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, and the Canadian Embassy. Moreover, doctoral students as members of the CEACS have had the opportunity to use various resources offered by the Canadian government through the CEACS funded programs, such as scholarships for short-term research stays at the Brno Center. Assistant Professor Sanja Ignjatović, who completed both her master thesis (2015) and doctoral dissertation in the field of Canadian studies (*Postmodern Interpretations of the Contemporary Canadian Short Story*, defended in November 2020), was granted this research scholarship in 2019, which was invaluable for the successful completion of the dissertation. The mentioned MA thesis is but one of many completed over the years the course has been introduced, and the interest in Canadian culture and literature persists among students at all levels. The interest in Canadian culture and contemporary Canadian authors among more recently employed teaching staff ensures that the Canadian Studies course, as well as the elective, remain updated.

2.2. Australian Studies at the English Department

The Australian Studies Course has been taught by Professor Milica Živković as a separate course, and much like Canadian and Scottish studies, it focuses on culture and literature rather than the purely historical overview of the development of Australian nation and culture. The course familiarizes the students with what can be considered Australian culture against the backdrop of what they have already learned through their British and American Studies courses, and introduces the basic notions of postcolonial theory, the postcolonial identity, nation, cultural differences, discrimination and the colonial experience through an overview of British-Australian history, as well as Indigenous history. Whereas for the purposes of the historical overview Professor Ratomir Ristić's coursebook, *An Introduction to Australian Studies* (2003) is used, the required literature provides the students with additional resources - historical and theoretical, granting them the opportunity to master cultural concepts relevant to contemporary culture in general, the knowledge to recognize the cultural phenomena in literary and other discourses - historical and contemporary, as well as enable them to critically analyse what may be termed 'Australian topics'. Australian Studies tackle the issue of multiculturalism from yet another perspective allowing students at the Department of English to comprehend the modalities of this socio-political phenomenon in different cultures. Professor Danijela Petković was engaged on the course for a number of years as a Teaching Assistant, and the TA on the course is currently one of the newest staff members, Dušica Ljubinković, a doctoral student and research assistant.

2.3. Scottish Studies at the English Department

The Scottish Studies course, introduced as an elective by Professor Milena Kaličanin, complements the multidisciplinary character of English Language and Literature studies at the Department of English by approaching the specificities of the Scottish as part of British culture, as well as a culture in its own right. The historical overview provides the methodical basis for the understanding of how the particulars of the Scottish culture evolved and in what socio-political contexts throughout centuries. Moreover, it serves to enable students to competently understand the background of the cultural and linguistic variety that Scottish represents. The syllabus includes critical works on Scottish culture and history, but also the literary works that enable discussions on what can be deemed culturally specific or singular in terms of myths, religion and art in general with an emphasis on literature. However, the course is designed in

such a manner that focuses predominantly on the contemporary context, and one of the main objectives is to enable the students to confidently observe the differences and similarities between cultures and critically assess the basis for their conclusions. The literary works included in the syllabus serve to illustrate the varied aspects and modalities of the Scottish experience and, therefore, the complex relationships between British and Scottish cultures and, by extension, the issues in the contemporary United Kingdom. For this reason, Professor Kaličanin deals with ScotLit and poetry on history and nationalism, the Scottish Renaissance and their language through literary works by Scottish authors who themselves explore the constructs of their own culture in everyday contexts. Professor Kaličanin published *Uncovering Caledonia: An Introduction to Scottish Studies* in 2018 - a study serving as a guide to Scottish history and culture.

3. AMERICAN STUDIES AT THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

American Studies transformed from a field dedicated predominantly to the celebration and examination of American exceptionalism to an area widely taught all over the world encompassing the variety of American themes and voices (Campbell&Kean 2016, 2-6). In accordance with Emerson's ideals for an American Scholar, who would be "an intellectual fully engaged politically and philosophically aware" and "distill all the systems" (Tate 1973, 3), or Whitman's poetic self who would "contain multitudes" (Bradbury&Temperley 1981, 14), American Studies employ a holistic approach including history, geography, politics, sociology, gender, ethnic and race studies as well as studies in popular culture.

When it comes to the beginnings of teaching American Studies at the English Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, the key figure has been Professor Dragana R. Mašović. By introducing the mandatory course in American Studies at the second year of studies, Professor Mašović has both offered an opportunity for our students to participate in a contemporary educational process and has paved the way for many of her younger colleagues in the same field. American Studies (sometimes under the name Introduction to American Studies) has been a part of the English Department curriculum since the 1990s. As Professor Mašović states in her book, a seminal introduction to this area written in Serbian and in English, introducing a somewhat controversial subject at a university at the time of a major political, economic, and we may add, cultural and educational crisis was not an easy task (Mašović 2002, 2). However, the position of this subject became "cemented" when the course book *Sudbinski snovi: Uvod u američke studije (The Fateful Dreams: An Introduction to American Studies)* written by Professor Mašović was published in 2002 (the second edition was issued in 2010). According to its author, one of the goals of the book was to inspire students to learn more about the American, but about their own culture as well (Mašović 2002, 3), as this is also listed as one of the major goals and contributions of cultural studies in general.

The mandatory course in American Studies has been fashioned to include several major areas pertaining to American history, politics, regions, religion, mythology and the issues of race and gender. Besides acquainting students with the most important events of American history, the goal of the course is also to develop the knowledge and awareness of the most important tenets of the U.S.A. as we know it today. Starting from the idealistic and mythological dimension of America that has been its mark since the Age of Discovery, the students learn about the first important colonies and their legacy. A particularly

important aspect of the course is American political history, its election and government system and the legal and political basis of the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, its political system and institutions. Furthermore, as many critics believe that the studies of America should include “views from those excluded and marginalised by mainstream, dominant American culture” (Campbell&Kean 2016, 13) an important part of the course is dedicated to ‘American Others’ – Native Americans, African Americans, women and immigrants. Besides lectures and class discussions, the course offers a reading list which includes some of the most important texts about the American society from its beginnings to the present day. Students read the texts, discuss their various meanings and interpretations and analyze various accompanying video contents. As previously mentioned, contemporary cultural studies are about popular culture as well, so feature films, cartoons and YouTube content is also occasionally used in class discussions. Student presentations are also a common means of inspiring students’ interest for some of the important American themes and they represent an opportunity for the further development of students’ critical thinking and foreign culture appreciation skills. Many students continue to pursue their individual interests in various areas of American Studies outside the university environment as well: e.g. the cooperation with the American Corner in Niš where students’ presentations on various aspects of America are rather frequent. As stated in the course objectives, the goals are to enable students to individually interpret the American and other foreign cultures, by raising their critical awareness of cultural phenomena and their further political, social and other implications. Since 2017, the course in American Studies is taught by Assistant Professor Ana Kocić Stanković, while MA and PhD candidate Marko Mitić has been in charge of the discussion classes since 2019. There have been several Fulbright ETAs as guest lecturers in American Studies so far. Students especially benefit from such contacts as they have an opportunity to discuss various aspects of American everyday life with native speakers and get information firsthand. Judging by students’ response so far and the number of those who elect other courses related to the American culture, American Studies remains one of the most popular and beloved courses at the English Department.

The course in American Studies has been instrumental in the introduction of several other elective courses related to American Studies. First of all, since the 2006-2008 accreditation until 2020, the elective course in American Film was conducted by Professor Mašović. Using the multidisciplinary approach, the course was aimed at further developing students’ skills of critical interpretation of various cultural phenomena, especially of American cinema and its connection to the society and culture of contemporary America. Various course themes, including immigration, the American Other, American youth culture(s) and subculture(s), American road movies, etc. as visually represented in Hollywood and independent movies were discussed and analyzed by students. The course was very popular among the second-year students of the English Department and has resulted in numerous individual essays and term papers dealing with various topics pertaining to American culture. Another highly popular elective course was introduced by the aforementioned Professor in the fourth year of studies – Irish Studies. Although Irish Studies are only tangentially related to American studies (when it comes to American-Irish immigration), it had been a very popular elective course for many years. Students organized class and public presentations, concerts and public recitals dedicated to the celebration of the Irish culture as extracurricular activities. A large volume of literature dedicated to Irish Studies has been produced by Professor Mašović, including a collection of essays in Serbian (*Divlja Harfa*, 1996) and two volumes of Irish Literature reviews from its beginnings to the present day (*Irska književnost*, vols. I and II, 2013).

Another popular elective course at the English Department can also be considered an “intellectual offspring” and an extension of the American Studies course. Since 2017, as a part of the program accredited in 2014, the English Department offers an elective course in African American studies. Similar to its predecessors, the course is centered around the idea of a multidisciplinary and holistic approach to a foreign culture and is a combination of historical, literary, cultural, political and audio-visual contents. Students are encouraged to pursue their own interests regarding various elements of African American culture and literature and the course offers an extensive reading list along with the video materials and lecture notes. The course was designed by Professor Ana Kocić Stanković, and, since 2021, it is accompanied by a course book published by the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš. Professor Kocić Stanković is the author of the book *The African American Experience: An Introduction* which covers the syllabus of the course, including a brief historical overview, excerpts from some of the most notable texts mostly by African American authors and various subjects and questions for discussions which encourage students to critically consider the complex (cultural) history of African Americans. Lectures, class discussions, readings and student presentations constitute this course aimed at representing the most important figures of African American culture and literature to Serbian students. Another elective course introduced by Professor Kocić Stanković on the MA level of studies at the English Department is called ‘Images of Others in American Literature and Culture’. The purpose of the course is to complement the BA studies in English Language and Literature by drawing students’ attention to the issues of alterity and various criteria for the status of Others in American culture. In line with the contemporary trends in cultural and literary studies, this course aims at developing and advancing students’ awareness of the importance of Others for the culture and literature in America. The extensive reading list comprises excerpts from some of the most important academic books and essays about alterity, stereotypes, representation, feminist and postcolonial, as well as the studies of racism and ethnicity. What is more, students are encouraged to read novels, plays, short stories and poems by American authors who are not a part of the “canon” typically taught at universities in order to define and develop their own criteria and critical thinking skills. As the primary objective of the MA studies at the English Department is to enable individual and independent academic effort, one of the goals of the course is for the MA students to be able to produce an original term paper considering various aspects of alterity in American literature and culture. Several students have already defended their MA theses in this subject area, which, hopefully, proves that there is a continued interest for the area of American culture in the students of the English Department in Niš.

4. CONCLUSION

Over the course of the previous 50 years, the English Department in Niš and its BA, MA and PhD curricula have evolved in line with contemporary trends in tertiary education. The place of cultural studies has become strengthened and secured with a number of mandatory and elective courses introduced by the experts in the area of Anglo-American literature and culture, many of whom acquired their PhDs at the English Department in Niš. One can only reflect with pride on the scientific production in this area. Considering the students’ steady interest in cultural studies reflected in their engagement in individual research assignments and MA theses topics, the current selection of cultural studies courses

has potential for branching in the direction of very specific explorations in the area of literary and artistic practices. Moreover, in the light of a well-established synergy between the literature and cultural studies courses at the English Department, this branching, both at the BA, MA and PhD levels, may in the future imply the introduction of such courses as Canadian Contemporary Drama and Theatre, Contemporary Canadian Short Fiction (as a course encompassing a greater number of emerging Canadian short fiction authors), African American Literature, the reintroduction of courses dealing with Irish literary production, etc. It seems that the future of teaching cultural studies at the English Department, based on the well-established practices and traditions, will continue to ride on the crest of the wave of the innovative spirit of the most recent scholarship.

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PROŠLOST, SADAŠNJOST I BUDUĆNOST STUDIJA ANGLIO-AMERIČKE KULTURE NA DEPARTMANU ZA ANGLISTIKU

U poslednjih trideset godina, Departman za anglistiku Filozofskog fakulteta u Nišu je, sledeći primer evropskih i američkih univerziteta, u svoj program uvrstio sedam predmeta koji se bave pojedinostima britanske, američke, kanadske, australijske, irske, škotske i afroameričke kulture. Ovi predmeti razvijali su se tokom godina tako da svojim sadržajem obuhvate istorijske i društveno-političke kontekste specifične za pojedinačne kulture, i pruže studentima jezika i književnosti, budućim nastavnicima, znanja koja su u nastavi jezika i drugim srodnim zanimanjima neophodna. Na Departmanu za anglistiku, obavezne predmete iz oblasti studija kulture prate i izborni predmeti koji pružaju bolji uvid u pojedinosti teorija i koncepata potrebnih za uspešno kritičko sagledavanje kultura, kao i specifičnosti pojedinačnih anglo-američkih nacija i njihovih kultura.

Ključne reči: *društvene nauke, studije kulture, univerzitetsko obrazovanje, Angloamerička književnost i kultura*