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Retrofitting American Studies for the Climate Crisis Era

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Retrofitting American Studies for the Climate Crisis Era

Debra J. Rosenthal and Jason Molesky

- 1 Unlike our energy and transportation systems, American Studies can embrace climate-oriented praxis without completely overhauling its core structures and assumptions. An architectural analogy may help to clarify the situation. To render a good building more climate resilient, one need not dynamite the foundation and begin again from bare bedrock. Instead, one retrofits the existing structure for greater energy efficiency. One may even partner with electric utilities to achieve such improvements at larger scales. Similarly, American Studies needs no gleaming new analytical edifices. The ones we have are highly capable of clarifying and contesting the climate emergency, especially insofar as the deep cultural histories at the core of our field continue to shape the uneven distribution of greenhouse emissions and their climatic impacts. At this point, what we need most are institutional retrofits that encourage us to treat the climate emergency as an emergency, as well as practical strategies for affording it greater emphasis in our research, teaching, and departmental structures.
- 2 Ironically, the evolution of American Studies renders it particularly suitable for this kind of climatic retrofit. The field began in trenchant studies of New World wilderness ideologies by Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, and other postwar scholars associated with what is often called the myth and symbol school. Some of this work came to be seen, often for good reason, as troublingly exceptionalist or exclusionist in a romantic nationalist sense. In response, the field has terrifically expanded its canons and concepts, often through the rubric of group identity. However, as we focused on challenging received ideas of the cultural landscape, we sometimes lost sight of the natural landscapes that sustain us. For all its achievements, American Studies has become increasingly decoupled from its origins in environmental thought. Today, climatic breakdown calls those working in the field to recenter our focus on the interstices of human meaning and the natural world. But this time, we can do so in alliance with the enormous cultural and canonical diversity produced over the last half century, which, as recent developments like racial capitalism or the global turn make

clear, are already situating the field within deep, planetary histories of expropriation and empire. It is this inherited body of knowledge that uniquely enables American Studies scholars to view climate change as the foremost symptom of a broader sociocultural crisis, and to advance critical perspectives aimed at safeguarding the vulnerable around the world.

- 3 US military officials frequently refer to climate change as a “threat multiplier,” by which they mean that climate impacts like droughts and sea level rise are already enflaming geopolitical tensions and imperiling the current global order. One broadly applicable strategy for a climatic retrofit in American Studies might involve inverting this concept. That is, we can productively repurpose the military’s logic of threat by refracting it through a more socially conscious idea of planetary security, one that values lives and ecosystems over the interests of corporate empire. Our societies are structured upon histories of injustice, such that a crisis as profound as climate change must indeed act as a threat multiplier—one that intensifies existing dangers to poor and marginalized communities. In our rapidly warming world, it becomes more crucial than ever for American Studies scholars to share their expertise on questions of race, gender, sexuality, class, migration, and other themes related to climate vulnerability, not only with our colleagues in the academy, but with the public at large. Whether we apply our specializations to cultural objects that respond directly to the crisis (such as climate fiction), or reread the American Studies canon with an eye toward carbon emissions or energy exploitation, the goal is to nudge the field’s existing analytics closer to the sign of climate as such.
- 4 As we retrofit our work in this way, we should also bear in mind that, just as climate impacts can be seen as “threat multipliers,” so can climate mitigation efforts be seen as what we might call “justice multipliers.” If the marginalized will suffer first and most from climate fallout, they will also benefit first and most from climate action. Shutting an oil refinery and building on its footprint a zero-emissions energy facility—for example, a nuclear power station, as the NASA climatologist James Hansen advocates—will obviously improve the climatic outlook for all living things. But for area residents, including nonhumans, the public goods go far beyond that baseline: clean air, better health, and sustainable careers, to name just a few. And for those who inhabit island nations, coastal regions, or other ecologically sensitive areas, climate action may preserve ancestral homes and homelands from irreparable ruin. Using concepts like “justice multiplier” in conjunction with those like “threat multiplier” may enable us to take our audiences past the necessary doomsaying to emphasize also the real opportunities for progressive social change that the climate emergency makes available to those equipped with the lenses to detect them. Pointing out the structural histories at stake in the crisis, as valuable as this is, only goes so far. Another key goal of any climatic retrofit should be to provision our students with the kinds of conceptual tools that might spotlight opportunities to enhance climate justice.
- 5 Disciplinary boundaries often prevent American Studies scholars from collaborating with their STEM colleagues. In keeping with the architectural analogy, the structural edifice of American Studies can add a new wing by partnering with climate sciences to fortify the study of the physical and natural world. For example, Richard B. Primack’s work in *Walden Warming* recasts Henry David Thoreau as an observational climate scientist whose data sets allow him to serve as a virtual coauthor with researchers today. At John Carroll University, one of us (Debra J. Rosenthal, a literary scholar) team

teaches a climate change course with a biologist; students learn actual climate science and then how it is represented in the literary imagination. STEM faculty could also team teach with historians, for example, to highlight the environmental history of farming, the industrial revolution, and our modern petropolis. Having a better grasp of greenhouse gases, the hockey stick curve, sea level rise, the albedo effect, mitigation efforts, etc., can help American Studies students and scholars keep pace with ideas about planetary warming that fiction writers, filmmakers, historians, and other creatives are already engaging.

- 6 Institutional frameworks can provide an expanded roof under which to assemble “climate audits” of professors and departments. For example, if a university requires annual faculty self-evaluations, a prompt or two could ask professors to reflect on if or how they teach the climate crisis, or what resources they need to develop a unit or an assignment on the topic, and how their discipline can bring climate education to the classroom. During both internal and external program assessment reviews, one consideration can be whether and to what extent the American Studies program under review embeds climate change in the curriculum. A university Dean can instruct the external program reviewer to make recommendations for how American Studies faculty can make climate studies a structural part of the program, and investigate what aspects of climate scholarship students deem important for their education and for their program to succeed. The program itself needs an internal audit of what resources it needs to help its faculty feel confident and comfortable teaching about the historic American reliance on fossil fuels. Of course, this idea requires that Deans value adding climate change pedagogy and awareness to an existing program, and that Deans themselves are conversant in current climate issues.
- 7 Publishing and conference venues also play important roles in encouraging (or discouraging) climate-oriented practices. Special issues and series, large themed gatherings, and regional symposia all offer possibilities for American Studies scholars to undertake climatic retrofits. The two of us have coedited a forthcoming essay anthology, *Cli-Fi and Class: Socioeconomic Justice in American Climate Fiction*, so as to create an opportunity for researchers pursuing broadly class-based approaches to the crisis. Subjects range from racialized resource extraction in the *Black Panther* film to neoliberal water management in Southwestern speculative texts. Other volumes or journal issues could bring the discipline’s various analytics to bear on climatic upheaval in similar ways. They might make space for queer-, race-, gender-, or migration-based reflections, or constellate work on climate’s relation to specific regions or themes—the Pacific, for example, or financialization. The 2021 American Studies Association (ASA) annual meeting featured a number of panels on such topics, highlighting the potential for further collaborations. Like many other recent gatherings, the 2021 ASA meeting also utilized a virtual format that greatly reduces the carbon footprint of our work. Efforts to balance the advantages of in-person meetings with the flexibility and environmental benefits of virtual formats, perhaps through experimental, multisite, or hybrid models, will present additional opportunities for the discipline to rethink or remake habituated practices.
- 8 From its origins in exceptionalist ideas of the environment, American Studies has evolved into a robust, capacious edifice with strong foundations across diverse canons and histories. Like buildings in earthquake zones that sit on shock-absorbing springs, the field has proven, time and again, that it can adapt to shifting circumstances and

counter emerging threats to social well-being. The urgency of the climate crisis, though great, does not imply that it needs remaking. A collective process of retrofitting should again prove up to the task. But this will be neither simple nor of short duration. It is the work of years, even decades. The sustained efforts of generations of scholars were required to establish broad, far-sighted vistas of American culture. We should expect that current efforts to return more expansively to questions of the environment and its vexed relation to human societies will require similar persistence. American Studies scholars possess particular skills that can help to move the broader culture toward just modes of climate mitigation. Let's work together to retrofit our institutional structures and analytical models to accord with the urgency of the crisis.

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