

American Studies: Themes, Problems, Methods

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Tues, 12-14:00

Webb 103

Introduction

What does America stand for? What does it mean to be an American? And subsequently, who “is” considered an American – and who is not? These are the core questions – as timely as ever given the heated election season in the United States – that we will seek to explore and explain during the semester. This course will introduce students to American Studies, as both an academic discipline that we study as well as a contested idea to be publically debated. It surveys the increasingly broadening fields of study that fall under the rubric of American Studies – literature, history, social sciences, cinema, popular culture, music and art – and teaches students ‘how to’ conduct research by applying or combining them. At heart, the course seeks to give students a “taste” of the excitingly diverse, and constantly evolving, flavors of American Studies in order to help them locate a particular area/topic/era/methodology that they might wish to pursue in a more advanced manner in their later studies. The course will provide students with a basic understanding of the themes (i.e. what subjects do we study?) and problems (why are they problematic?) in American Studies, while also instilling in them a basic set of analytic skills and a familiarity with the various methodologies (i.e. how do we study them?). It will also assist with the larger transition into university life by methodically teaching students to read and write in an academic setting. The course will be divided into three parts (each comprised of four meetings):

Part One: The Origins. We will review canonical writings about American Studies as a discipline in order to first understand the history and evolution of why and how scholars have come to think about the meaning of America. From the inception of American Studies as an academic discipline in the wake of WWII, through its rebellious reconstruction under the pressures of post-1960s Identity Politics and Multiculturalism, and to the recent transnational turn that it has taken in an effort to adapt to globalization and waning geographic-cultural boundaries, we will critically trace the different meanings and problems of American Studies in the past decades.

Part Two: Developing a Methodology. We will learn how to conduct research by closely engaging diverse forms of secondary research (i.e. salient scholarship about America by scholars) that incorporate a wide range of interdisciplinary methods in order to analyze a variety of important issues. We will often deconstruct these works to understand not only what they are arguing – but also the evidence and techniques they employ in order to do so.

Part Three: Writing Workshop. Having learned how scholars conduct American Studies, we will dedicate the last four weeks to actually doing so ourselves. Every week a host of primary sources will be assigned (i.e. historical documents, cultural productions like short stories or movies, or social scientific studies)

that concentrate on particular themes like ethnicity, class, power, race or empire. These will then be explored from at least two different aspects (for example history and music, or political science and literature) with the underlining goal being: to construct and substantiate our own original arguments that tell us something fresh, interesting and meaningful about America. In every session we will engage the assigned material in order to jointly formulate an argument and then sketch out a solid outline for a potential essay.

Grading and Assignments

- **25%** class Participation (including short response paper)
- **25%** midterm (December 1st)
- **50%** Final Paper (5 pages). Due Date TBA
- Participation includes either informed in-class participation about the assigned readings/materials **or** written participation sent via email to me prior (or immediately after) the class. This is my only way to evaluate your understanding of the material and is a crucial part of the grade. If you don't participate in any one of these ways – it will affect your grade!

Attendance

- You are allowed **THREE** unexcused absences (without Dr.'s Note or Emergency circumstance). Any additional unexcused absence will incur a penalty in your final grade for the course.

Reading Materials

- Readings/viewings will all be made available as internet links or PDF's on the moodle website.

- **PLEASE TURN OFF CELL PHONES IN CLASS!!!**

Part I: What is American Studies? Origins, Evolution and Revolution

Week 1: An Introduction to the course

Week 2: In search of a discipline

- Christopher Moses, "What is American Studies?" In *American Studies: An Annotated Bibliography*, 16-22.
- Thomas Jefferson, The Declaration of Independence
- Frederick Douglass, "The Meaning of the Fourth of July to the Negro," 4 July, 1852

Week 3: The "Exceptionalist" Tradition (1945-1960s)

- Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Theory of America: Experiment or Destiny?", 3-22
- Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*, chapter 5

Week 4: Multiculturalism and its Discontent (1970-1990s)

- Alice Kessler-Harris, "Cultural Locations: Positioning American Studies in the Great Debate," 335-347
- Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (excerpts)

Week 5 Transnationalism, Globalization and the Challenges to Studying American Studies *outside* America (2000s-Present)

- Doris Friedensohn, "Towards a Post-Imperial, Transnational American Studies: Notes of a Frequent Flier," *American Studies* (Summer 1997), 69-85.
- "Backlash against Israel Boycott Throws Academic Association on Defensive," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 Jan., 2014.

Part II: How to "do" American Studies

Week 6: Race and Gender

- Peggy Pascoe, "Race, Gender, and the Privileges of Property," *American Studies Anthology*, 89-98

Week 7: Economics and Class

- Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm, "Dead Man's Town: 'Born in the U.S.A.,' Social History, and Working-Class Identity," *American Quarterly* (June 2006), 353-378.

November 30: Midterm Exam

Week 8: Imperialism and Violence

- Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in 20th Century America*, chapter 15

Week 9: Visual Politics and Memory

- Philip Deloria, "I Want to Ride in Geronimo's Cadillac," *American Studies Anthology*, 413-423.
- Marita Sturkin, "The Wall and the Screen Memory: The Vietnam Veteran's Memorial," *American Studies Anthology*, 540-549.

Part III. American Studies Workshop: How to write about America

Week 10: Urban Studies, Racial Strife and Postindustrial Decline (Political Science and Music)

- Kerner Commission Report (1968)
- Listen to Public Enemy and N.W.A

Week 11: Ethnicity and Identity (Sociology and Literature)

- Nathan Glazer "Beyond the Melting Pot" (selections)
- Phillip Roth, *Eli the Fanatic*

Week 12: Gender, Sexuality and the Frontier (History and Ballet)

- F.J. Turner "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (selections)
- Watch and Listen to Aaron Copeland's "Appalachian Spring" performed by Martha Graham

Week 13: The #MeToo Movement (Gender, Literature and Media)

- Kristen Roupenian, "Cat Person," *New Yorker* (December 2017)