Introduction to American Studies

26:050:501 and 26:510:533:01
Monday, 5:30pm-8:10pm
Conklin 324

Instructor Information:

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Description:

Ask three American Studies scholars to define their field and you'll probably get four different answers. By examining both classic and cutting-edge texts, this reading seminar will introduce students to the methods, theories, and approaches of this interdisciplinary field from its inception to today. Topics covered will include cultural studies, approaches to race, gender, and sexuality, empire and colonialism, and public history. Through this course, students will become familiar with major issues in American Studies, preparing them for further graduate work in the field.

Expectations:

- This course will expect you to engage deeply with readings on the history, theories, and methods of American Studies. Come to class having read the materials and prepared to discuss them.
- You are not expected to have any specific knowledge before coming to this class. You are expected to be an independent learner who will attempt to figure out complex issues, work collegially with your classmates, and come to me with questions and problems as they arise.
- You will be expected to respond to emails from me in a timely manner. Because we only meet once per week, it will be necessary for me to communicate with you by email outside of class. I recommend strongly that you link your Rutgers email account (which is what is connected to our course site) to your personal email so that you are sure to get all the emails that I send.
- While the Covid-19 pandemic has receded, it’s impossible to predict what will happen in terms of public health over the next semester. I will be flexible to accommodate issues that arise that may impact your ability to turn in assignments on time or may cause you to miss class. I also hope that you will be flexible with me if circumstances outside my control impact my accessibility. Ideally, this class will be a caring, collaborative space to work through ideas.

Objectives:
By the end of this course, students will have:

- Become conversant with the history of the field of American Studies and be able to identify key moments and thinkers in the field;
- Developed an understanding of the major issues, theories and methods of American Studies in the past and today;
- Learned how to analyze texts at the graduate level and identify subfields within American Studies;
- Learned more about academia, graduate school, and non-academic careers; and,
- Improved skills in scholarly writing and analysis in a variety of formats.

Academic Integrity:

Academic integrity is essential to the success of the University’s educational and research missions, and violations of academic integrity constitute serious offenses against the entire academic community. The entire Academic Integrity Policy can be found here: http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/

I strictly follow the University’s rules regarding plagiarism and other academic irregularities. Please consult me if you have any questions about what is and is not appropriate regarding the use of sources or citation.

Assignments:

1. **Reading Response Posts – 20%**: Using the Canvas discussion board, you will be expected to write a response to one or more readings (not those marked PROF) several times throughout the semester. Response posts show me that you understand the readings and are grappling critically with ideas.
   - Reading responses are due at noon on Monday of the week they’re on the syllabus.
   - Four responses are required, as indicated on the syllabus. To get an A, you must write an additional 2. If you do 1 additional response, you will get a B. If you only do the required reading responses, you will get a C.
   - There will be no more reading responses after early November, so keep that in mind as you plan your semester.
   - These will be graded on a 3-point scale. 2 points is an excellent post, 1 point means it could use work and 0 points means that it did not meet the criteria. Any 0 point posts will not count towards your grade. I will give feedback on the first one. See Reading Response Posts guidelines at the end of the syllabus.
   - All students should check the discussion board before class and read any posts. To show solidarity and community, comment on at least one post.

   - Due October 16 on Canvas

3. **Annotated Bibliography of a Subfield – 20%**: Because we can’t cover everything in one semester, you will research a subfield of your choice in American Studies and develop an annotated bibliography for it. All annotated bibliographies will be shared with the class to create a guide to the field for your future use. More information to be distributed later.
   - Topic Paragraph DUE October 30 on Canvas
   - Final Bibliography DUE November 27 on Canvas

4. **Final Paper**: You will have three options for your final paper.
Identify an issue, theme or idea in American Studies and analyze how different writers we’ve read this semester have addressed it. This is called a lit review or historiographical essay.

Write a proposal for a future research project and situate it within our readings in American Studies, as well as outside material.

Examine how American Studies as a field has changed over time. More information to be distributed later.

Topic Proposal DUE November 20 on Canvas

Final Paper DUE DATE TBD on Canvas

5. Participation and Attendance - 10%

Grading Scale:

- A = 90-100
- B+ = 85-89
- B = 80-84
- C+ = 75-79
- C = 70-74
- D = 59-69
- F = 0-58

Late Assignments:

I expect assignments to be completed on the day they are due. If there are circumstances that prevent you from doing so, please contact me as soon as possible. Knowing when to expect papers to be submitted allows me to manage my time and be responsive to you.

Attendance and Participation:

You will be expected to attend class having completed readings and assignments and be prepared to actively participate. Reading is more than just running your eyes over the pages. It means thinking about what the author is trying to say. Taking time to engage with the readings will make your class experience more fruitful. If you cannot attend class, please let me know at least 24 hours before class (except in the case of emergencies).

Participation can take several forms. Asking thoughtful questions is as important as making an analytical point about a reading. We are not here to prove to each other how smart we are, but to learn together.

Masks and Covid Concerns:

Rutgers no longer requires masks to be worn in class. If that changes, you will be notified.

Disability Statement

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University’s educational programs. The Office of Disability Services (ODS) works with students with medical, physical, and/or mental conditions who encounter disabling barriers in order to determine reasonable and appropriate accommodations for access. Students who have completed the process with ODS
and have approved accommodations are provided a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) specific to each course. To initiate accommodations for their course students must both provide the LOA to and have a conversation with the course instructor about the accommodations. More information can be found at ods.rutgers.edu. Contact ODS: (973) 353-5375 or ods@newark.rutgers.edu.

Required Texts:

You are required to buy or borrow these texts.

- George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001)
- Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Be sure to buy or borrow the edition published in 1991, not the original version)
- Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (Random House, 2021)

Other readings are either linked below or available on the Canvas site for our class. Readings marked PROF are focused on professionalization issues.

To access Canvas, go to: [https://canvas.rutgers.edu/](https://canvas.rutgers.edu/). If you have any problems, please contact Canvas help at help@canvas.rutgers.edu.

Weekly Schedule:

Introduction

**Sept. 11 – Week 1/Introduction to the Class**

- “America” and “Nation” from *Keywords in American Cultural Studies*.
- PROF THOMAS Worksheets

OPTIONAL: Reading Skills for History Graduate Students, Dr. Timothy Stewart-Winter, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehB_CNpVyJ8

**Section I: Foundations of American Studies**

American Studies is a relatively young discipline, dating back only to the 1930s.

But what does it mean to “do” American Studies? Where did it come from and what defines it? In this section, we will discuss readings about the formation of American Studies as an academic discipline.

Understanding how a field has developed over time is what scholars refer to as historiography. You’ll need to be able to position your own research and writing within or against strands of
thought in the field as you write your thesis or capstone, develop reading lists, take comprehensive exams and write dissertations.

When you read footnotes, notice who is citing who (and who is being ignored). The politics of citation are about identifying peers who you are in conversation with and is a key part of scholarly writing.

**Sept. 18: Week 2/Myth-Image-Symbol**

- Leo Marx, excerpt from *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), p. 3-33, 325-341 (If you’re interested, the whole book is available as a PDF at [http://wtf.tw/ref/marx.pdf](http://wtf.tw/ref/marx.pdf))
- If you haven’t read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, review the plot summary for it [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adventures_of_Huckleberry_Finn#Plot_summary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adventures_of_Huckleberry_Finn#Plot_summary)

**PROF Take a look at the Citation Management Tools available to you through Rutgers:** [https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/services-for-researchers/citation-management-tools](https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/services-for-researchers/citation-management-tools)

In class: Zotero

**Required Reading Response Post Due**

**Section 2: Close-up on Cultural studies (Pun Intended)**

Perhaps more than anything else, American Studies has been defined by the centrality of analyzing popular culture through interdisciplinary perspectives. In this section, we will do a deeper dive into several approaches to cultural studies that have been important within American Studies. If the first section of the syllabus was a map of the whole territory, this section is an inset to zoom in on one specific topic.

Here are some key questions to think about as you read these pieces. What is popular or mass culture’s relationship to capitalism? Who controls the meaning of mass or popular culture? What is the relationship of class, race, gender, and sexuality to popular culture and how have ideas about that developed over time? What theoretical approaches do these authors take and how does that shape the questions they’re asking of their sources? What methodologies do these authors use? How does that shape the sense they’re able to make of the objects of their analysis?

Often, when scholars are writing about popular culture, they are really using it to talk about something else. An article or book about the history of childhood toys, may actually be about capitalism, gender, or imperialism. Try to identify themes between these readings. A few that come up repeatedly are the meaning of the nation, the role of culture in national identity, and racial and ethnic identity. How do different authors approach these topics differently?

A bit of advice when reading this section. Try to test out the ideas in the readings on popular culture today. While this is a reading seminar rather than a research one, trying to apply a scholar’s ideas to a specific object can help illuminate their meaning and any problems.

**Sept 25: Week 3/Frankfurt School and Marxist Approaches to Culture**
• C.L.R. James, “The Effects of Capitalist Propaganda,” (September 1939) and “On Gone with the Wind” (December 1939).


Required Reading Response Post Due: Using 2 of the authors from this week, discuss the “problems and possibilities” of mass culture.

Oct 2: Week 4/Birmingham School in America
• George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture (University of Minnesota Press, 2001)

Required Reading Response Post Due: For this post, you’re going to do something different. Find a published review of Time Passages in a journal of your choice (please don’t all choose the first result in the library search!). Read the review and analyze how the reviewer connects the book to the journal’s field. What do they see as the book’s significance? Flaws?

Oct 9: Week 5/Audience and Reception
• Janice Radway, Reading the Romance (1991)

PROF: Skim through recent issues of American Quarterly and American Studies through the library databases. Identify themes, topics or fields that come up repeatedly or that interest you. Now try to find more information about this theme, topic or field. Does it have a professional association? Journal? Twitter presence? How would you learn more about it?

Optional Reading Response Post Due

Oct 16: Week 6/Black Cultural Studies and American Studies from the 1990s to 2010s

Review of Reading the Romance Due

Section 3: Race, Empire and Borders
In this section, we’ll look at readings dealing with two broad areas of scholarship in American Studies. In the 1990s, American Studies scholars began conceptualizing a transnational approach to the field. From military intervention to immigration to the globalization of commerce, scholars working in this area have examined the porousness of borders. How have American ideas about capitalism, gender, and race followed American imperialism?

Race has been, of course, one of the major forces shaping the American nation. Through methods from sociology to literature, American Studies scholars have been at the forefront of theorizing the process of racial identity formation, including seeing whiteness as a racial identity.

What are the broader issues that motivate the scholars in each of these areas? How do these issues relate to the time period the authors are writing in (for example, why are the ethnic studies scholars developing their subfield in the 1980s and 1990s)? How do these authors think about issues differently than the ones in the cultural studies section?

Oct 23: Week 7/ Empire, Transnational Studies and Borderlands

- Additional reading TBD

Optional Reading Response Post Due

Oct. 30: Week 8/ Racialization and Whiteness

- Reading on whiteness TBD

PROF: Finding and Responding to CFPs

Optional Reading Response Post Due

Topic for Annotated Bibliography Due

Nov. 6: Week 9/ Public History Foundations

- Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History
- PROF: Higher education is under attack around the country. These two short pieces focus on efforts in Florida to bring universities under tighter state control.

Optional Reading Response Post Due
Michelle Goldberg, “At a College Targeted by DeSantis, Gender Studies is Out, Jocks are In,” New York Times, August 14, 2023. (if that link doesn’t work, try googling the article or searching in the Rutgers library database).


Required Reading Response Post Due

Nov 13: Week 10/ Public History and the Tradition of Social Justice

- Selections from Radical Roots

Section 4: American Studies Today TBA

In this section, we will collectively determine specific themes, topics or theories that American Studies scholars are currently exploring on which we want to focus our last section of readings. The goal here is to immerse ourselves in current debates in the field and draw connections between the readings from the past and today.

Some possible topics include environmental studies, native studies/decolonization, neoliberalism, queer theory, digital humanities/technology, archives, racial capitalism and neoliberalism.

Nov 20: Week 11/ When the Archive is Incomplete

- Tiya Miles, All That She Carried (2021)

Topic for Final Paper Due

Nov 27: Week 12/

Annotated Bibliography Due

Dec 4: Week 13/

Dec 11: Week 14/


Final Paper Due TBD

Reading Response Post Guidelines

On the syllabus, several weeks are marked with “reading response post.” For these weeks, you will post a response on the Canvas discussion board analyzing and responding to one or more of the readings for that week.

Requirements:
• Briefly summarize the argument of each reading you discuss
• Respond to one or more ideas in the reading(s), connecting them to current events, other readings, your research interests, etc..
• Give your post a creative title
• Use images, gifs, or videos to illuminate ideas
• Length can vary, but 250-500 words is a good ballpark
• You are also required to comment on at least one other student’s post each week.

The writing doesn’t have to be as academically formal as a paper. The goal of these posts are for you to think about ideas, rather than focus on writing in an academic style. It’s also more engaging to read when your voice comes through in your posts. Have fun with it!

Due: blog posted by 12pm on Monday; comment posted by class time on Monday
Accommodation and Support Statement:

Rutgers University Newark (RU-N) is committed to the creation of an inclusive and safe learning environment for all students. RU-N has identified the following resources to further the mission of access and support:

- **Temporary Conditions/Injuries:** The Division of Student Affairs can assist students who are experiencing a temporary condition or injury (broken or sprained limbs, concussions, or recovery from surgery). Students experiencing a temporary condition or injury should submit a request for assistance at: https://temporaryconditions.rutgers.edu.

- **Pregnancy:** The Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance is available to assist students with any concerns or potential accommodations related to pregnancy. Students may contact the office at (973) 353-1906 or TitleIX@newark.rutgers.edu.

- **Gender or Sex-Based Discrimination or Harassment:** The Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance can assist students experiencing any form of gender or sex-based discrimination or harassment, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, or stalking. Students can report an incident to the office at: (973) 353-1906 or TitleIX@newark.rutgers.edu. Incidents may also be reported by using: tinyurl.com/RUNReportingForm. For more information, students should refer to the University’s Title IX Policy and Grievance Procedures located at https://uec.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/60-1-33-current-1.pdf.

- **Interpersonal Violence:** The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance (VPVA) can provide any student with confidential support. The office does **not** have a reporting obligation to Title IX. Students can contact the office by calling (973) 353-1918 or emailing run.vpva@rutgers.edu. There is also a confidential text-based helpline available to students; students can text (973) 339-0734 for support. Students do not need to be a victim/survivor of violence; any student can receive services, information and support.

- **Crisis and Concerns:** The Campus Awareness Response and Education (CARE) Team works with students in crisis to develop a plan of support plan and address personal situations that might impact their academic performance. Connect with the CARE Team by using the following link: tinyurl.com/RUNCARE or emailing careteam@rutgers.edu.

- **Stress, Worry, or Concerns about Well-Being:** The Counseling Center has confidential therapists available to support students. Students should reach out to the Counseling Center to schedule an appointment: counseling@newark.rutgers.edu or (973) 353-5805. If students are not quite ready to make an appointment with a therapist but are interested in self-help, check out Sanvello for an easy, web-based approach to self-care and support. Visit https://my.rutgers.edu/, click on Sanvello: Wellness @ RUN, and log in with your netid to begin your journey toward wellness.

- **Emergencies:** Call 911 or contact Rutgers University Police Department (RUPD) at (973) 353-5111.

Learning Resources:
• Rutgers Learning Center (tutoring services):
Tutoring available in a variety of math, science, technology, and business courses. Contact the Learning Center to determine whether tutoring is available for a specific course. Room 140, Bradley Hall (973) 353-5608
learning.center@newark.rutgers.edu
https://sasn.rutgers.edu/student-support/tutoring-academic-support/learning-center

• Writing Center (tutoring and writing workshops) (973) 353-5847 nwc@rutgers.edu
https://sasn.rutgers.edu/student-support/tutoring-academic-support/writing-center

Technology/Internet Resources for Students:
  o https://myrun.newark.rutgers.edu/covid-technology-resources
  o https://mytech.newark.rutgers.edu/tp