

## Introduction to American Studies

Monday, 5:30pm-8:10pm  
Hahne's 411

### Instructor Information:

Mary Rizzo  
Associate Professor  
History Department  
Office: 247A Conklin Hall  
Office Hours: By appointment  
Email: [mary.rizzo@rutgers.edu](mailto:mary.rizzo@rutgers.edu)  
Twitter: @rizzo\_pubhist

### Description:

How has the field of American Studies been defined? This reading seminar will introduce students to the methods, theories, and approaches of this interdisciplinary field. We will examine a combination of classic and cutting-edge texts ranging over a variety of critical topics, such as the history of American Studies, cultural studies, and approaches to race, gender, and sexuality. Through this course, students will become familiar with major issues in American Studies, preparing them for graduate work in the field.

### Course Website:

We will use Canvas for this course. All readings, assignments, and discussion board questions and posts can be found there.

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

### 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.
- As I'm writing this syllabus, the pandemic is still raging across the U.S. It's impossible to predict what will happen in terms of public health over the next semester. I will be extremely flexible in this class 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:

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- 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.

### Assignments:

1. Reading Response Posts: 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. The purpose of these response posts is for you to show that you are grappling critically with the ideas in the reading and the class. These are not meant to simply be summaries of the readings, but instead a way for you to work through ideas that you may or may not agree with and to test out your own ideas.
  - Reading responses are due at noon on Monday of the week they're on the syllabus.
  - Three responses are required, as indicated on the syllabus. To get an A, you must write an additional 2. If you do an additional 1 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 as complete or incomplete, but 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.
2. Book Review: You will write a review of the book, *Reading the Romance*, as if for an academic journal. More information to be distributed later.
3. Annotated Bibliography of a Subfield: 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.
4. Final Paper: You will have three options for your final paper. You can 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. The second option is for you to write a proposal for a future research project and situate it within our readings in American Studies, as well as outside material. The final option is to examine how American Studies as a field has changed over time. More information to be distributed later.

### Grading:

- Participation and Attendance: 10%
- Reading Responses Posts: 20% (I will give you feedback on the first one, but the rest will be graded on a complete/incomplete basis)
- Book Review: 20% - Due Oct. 11
- Annotated Bibliography: 20%
  - Topic Due: Oct 25
  - Final Annotated Bibliography Due: Nov. 15
- Final Paper: 30%
  - Topic Proposal Due: Nov. 22
  - Final Paper Due: Dec. 18

### Grading Scale:

- A = 90-100

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- 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.

### **Academic Integrity:**

You will follow the University's Policy on Academic Integrity, which falls under the Code of Student Conduct. The policy and the consequences of violating it are outlined here:

<http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/office-dean-student-affairs/academic-integrity-policy>.

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.

### **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)

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

### **Disability Statement**

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>.

If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>. For more information please contact Kate Torres at (973) 353-5375 or in the Office of Disability Services in the Paul Robeson Campus Center, in suite 219 or by contacting [odsnewark@rutgers.edu](mailto:odsnewark@rutgers.edu).

### **Weekly Schedule:**

## **Introduction**

### **Sept. 8 – Week 1/Introduction to the Class**

- “America” and “Nation” from *Keywords in American Cultural Studies*.
- PROF Larry Cebula, “How to Read a Book in One Hour,” [northwesthistory.blogspot.com/2010/04/how-to-read-book-in-one-hour.html](http://northwesthistory.blogspot.com/2010/04/how-to-read-book-in-one-hour.html)

### ***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. 13: Week 2/Myth-Image-Symbol**

- Bruce Kuklick, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* (AQ), October 1972.
- Elaine Tyler May, “The Radical Roots of American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, June 1996, 179-200.
- C.L.R. James, “[The Effects of Capitalist Propaganda](#),” (September 1939) and “[On Gone with the Wind](#)” (December 1939).
- Leo Marx, excerpt from *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), p. 325-341 (If you're interested, the whole book is available as a PDF at <http://wtf.tw/ref/marx.pdf>)
- If you haven't read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it may be helpful to 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>

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 20: Week 3/Frankfurt School**

- T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review* 90 no. 3 (June 1985): 567-593.
- Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947, 1944; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
- Benjamin Wiggins, "You Talkin' Revolution, Sweetback": On Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song and Revolutionary Filmmaking," *Black Camera*, Winter 2012, 28-52.

In-Class: Overview of library resources for American Studies with Natalie Borisovits

### **Optional Reading Response Post Due**

### **Sept 27: 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. How does the reviewer organize their review? What do they see as the book's significance? Flaws?

#### **Oct 4: Week 5/Audience and Reception**

- Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (1991)
- Look through the 2019 American Studies Association Conference Program. Using Hypothesis on Canvas, identify 2-3 topics that you're interested in learning more about.

#### **Optional Reading Response Post Due**

#### **Oct 11: Week 6/ Black Cultural Studies from the 1990s to 2010s**

- Robin Kelley, "The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics During WWII," from *Race Rebels* (1996).
- bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy," *Black Looks* (1992).
- Mireille Miller-Young, "Ho Theory," *A Taste for Brown Sugar* (2014). Winner, 2015 John Hope Franklin Book Publication Prize, presented by the American Studies Association

#### **Review of Reading the Romance Due**

#### **Oct 18: Week 7/Afrofuturism**

- Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars* (1994).
- Alondra Nelson, Introduction to special issue on Afrofuturism, *Social Text* (Summer 2002).
- Lisa Yaszek, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," *Socialism and Democracy* (2006).
- Q.U.E.E.N. video by Janelle Monae. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEddixS-UoU>

**Required Reading Response Post Due:** In this post, choose to either write about how the readings on Afrofuturism build on and reference each other and how each author utilizes the concept OR apply an idea from this week's readings to an analysis of the Monae music video. If you choose the latter, you may also include earlier readings in your analysis as well.

### ***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. 25: Week 8/ Empire, Transnational Studies and Borderlands**

- Amy Kaplan, “‘Left Alone with America’: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” in Kaplan and Pease eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Duke, 1993), pp. 3-21.
- Gloria Anzaldúa, “The Homeland, Atzlán,” and “Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan,” *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987).
- Janet M. Davis, “Cockfight Nationalism: Blood Sport and the Moral Politics of American Empire and Nation Building,” *American Quarterly* (September 2013). Winner of the 2014 Constance M. Rourke prize for the best article in *American Quarterly*.

PROF: Finding and Responding to CFPs

Optional Reading Response Post Due

Topic for Annotated Bibliography Due

**Nov. 1: Week 9/ Racialization and Whiteness**

- Toni Morrison, “Romancing the Shadow,” *Playing in the Dark* (1992)
- Matthew Frye Jacobson, “Becoming Caucasian,” from *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998) (also available from library)
- Mary Helen Washington, “Disturbing the Peace: What Happens to American Studies if You Put African American Studies at the Center,” *AQ* (1998)
- Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “The Theory of Racial Formation,” *Racial Formation in the United States* (2015; updated from 1986)

Optional Reading Response Post Due

**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 8: Week 10/

Nov 15: Week 11/

Annotated Bibliography Due

Nov 22: Week 12/

Topic for Final Paper Due

No Class Nov. 29

Dec 6: Week 13/

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Dec 13: Week 14/

**Final Paper Due on Dec. 18**

### **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**