

Introduction to American Studies

Wednesday, 5:30pm-8:10pm
Online

Instructor Information:

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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 .

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, however, 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 their skills in scholarly writing and analysis in a variety of formats.

Assignments:

1. Reading Response Posts: Using the online discussion board, you will be expected to write a response to one or more readings 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. These are due by Wednesday at 12pm. You should also read your classmates' posts and comment on at least one each week prior to our class meeting. See Reading Response Posts guidelines at the end of the syllabus.
2. Book Review: You will write a review of the book, *Reading the Romance*, as if for an academic journal (you may also write an op-ed based on the book instead). More information to be distributed later.
3. Comparative Paper: More information to be distributed later.
4. Annotated Bibliography of a Subfield and Presentation: 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. You will present your subfield in class. 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.
5. Historiographical Analysis: The cumulative project for the semester will be for you to identify an issue, theme or idea in American Studies and analyze how different writers we've read this semester have addressed it. This project will be completed in several steps. 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 check/check+/check- basis)
- Book Review: 10% - Due October 21
- Comparative Paper: 10% - Due November 11
- Annotated Bibliography and Presentation: 20% Due on date of presentation
- Historiographical Analysis: 30% - Due December 18 (Topic Due December 2)

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. If you cannot attend class, please let me know at least 24 hours before class (except in the case of emergencies).

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:

There is one book you must buy or borrow for this course:

- 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.

We will also use a shared Google Doc to collect and define unfamiliar terms. You can access that doc [here](#).

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.

Weekly Schedule:

Introduction

Sept. 2 – 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
- PROF Citation Management Tools, <https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/services-for-researchers/citation-management-tools>

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 analyze three key points in the development of American Studies as an academic discipline from the 1930s to around the 1990s.

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.

What to think about while doing these readings: what topics are these scholars writing about and how does that change over time? While an article or book may be about a specific topic (childhood toys), it’s always also about something much broader (capitalism). 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)? 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?

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. 9: Week 2/Myth-Image-Symbol

- David W. Noble, “Elegies for a National Landscape,” *Death of a Nation*.
- Bruce Kuklick, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies,” AQ.
- C.L.R. James, “[The Effects of Capitalist Propaganda](#),” and “[On Gone with the Wind](#).”
- Leo Marx, excerpt from *The Machine in the Garden*, p. 325-341 (If you’re interested, the whole book is available as a PDF at <http://wtf.tw/ref/marx.pdf>)

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

Reading Response Post Due

Sept 16: Week 3/Ethnic Studies and Whiteness

- Lisa Lowe, “Introduction,” *Immigrant Acts*.
- Toni Morrison, “Romancing the Shadow,” *Playing in the Dark*
- Matthew Frye Jacobson, “Becoming Caucasian,” from *Whiteness of a Different Color* (available from library)
- Mary Helen Washington, “Disturbing the Peace: What Happens to American Studies if You Put African American Studies at the Center,” AQ

Reading Response Post Due – For this post, you’re going to do something different. Find a published review of *Immigrant Acts* 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?

Sept 23: Week 4/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*.
- Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies," *American Quarterly*.
- PROF "Becoming a Twitterstorian," *Clio and the Contemporary*.
<https://clioandthecontemporary.com/2019/10/14/becoming-a-twitterstorian-social-media-scholarly-communication-and-professional-practice/>

In-Class: demo my website and google scholar page. Choose one thing that you'll do to increase your professional presence online.

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 answers the sense they're able to make of the objects of their analysis?

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 30: Week 5/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).
- Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) from *Illuminations* reprinted in the *Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*.
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>
- PROF Continuation of discussion on professional use of Twitter: Audrey Truschke, "Hate Male,"
<https://therevealer.org/hate-male/>

Reading Response Post Due

Oct. 7: Week 6/Birmingham School

- Dick Hebdige, “Style as Intentional Communication,” *Subculture*.
- Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular” from J. Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (Prentice Hall, 1998), pp. 442-452, (orig. 1981).
- George Lipsitz, “Popular Culture: This Ain’t No Sideshow,” *Time Passages*. (rescan)
- Angela McRobbie, “Clubs to Companies: Notes on the Decline of Political Culture in Speeded Up Creative Worlds,” *Cultural Studies* (2002)

Reading Response Post Due

PROF: Mental Health

Oct 14: Week 7/Audience and Reception

- Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*

PROF: How to Write a Book Review or Op-Ed

Oct 21: Week 8/Gender, Class, and Race at the Movies: Cultural History Case Study

- Kathy Peiss, “Cheap Theater and the Nickel Dumps,” *Cheap Amusements*. (1986)
- Nan Enstad, “Movie-Struck Girls: Motion Pictures and Consumer Subjectivities,” *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*. (1999)
- Jacqueline Stewart, “Some Things to See Up Here All the Time: Moviegoing and Black Urban Leisure in Chicago,” *Migrating to the Movies*. (2005) (available thru RU lib online)

PROF: Identifying a field AND deciding our final set of readings

Review of *Reading the Romance* Due

Oct 28: Week 9/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*.
- Mireille Miller-Young, “Ho Theory,” *A Taste for Brown Sugar*.

PROF: Finding and Responding to CFPs

Section 3: American Studies Today TBA

In this section, we will collectively determine specific themes, topics or theories that American Studies scholars are currently working on that we want to focus our last section of readings on. 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 4: Week 10/Careers Beyond the Tenure Track Panel Discussion

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Nov 11: Week 11/

Comparative Paper Due

Nov 18: Week 12/

No Class Nov. 25

Dec 2: Week 13/

Topic for Historiography Due (includes preliminary thesis)

Dec 9: Week 14/

Historiography 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 Wednesday; comment posted by class time on Wednesday