

## **Introduction to American Studies: The Past and Future in American Culture**

American Studies 050:101  
Spring 2008

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Office Hours: Wed. 1-3 (and by appt)  
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“Give me insight into today and you may have the antique and future worlds.” --Ralph Waldo Emerson

“As you live, believe in life! Always human beings will live and progress to greater, broader and fuller life. The only possible death is to lose belief in this truth simply because the great end comes slowly, because time is long.” --W.E.B. Du Bois

### **Description**

This course is an introduction to methods and central themes in the field of American Studies. Students will learn to evaluate and make cultural sense of a wide range of sources—films, literature, music, material objects, photographs. We will also survey a variety of major developments in American cultural life, past and present. Members of the American Studies faculty will present guest lectures throughout the semester, offering further introduction to a range of topics and influential approaches in the field.

The special concern of this class is the meaning of the past and the future in American culture. By many accounts, the United States—whether imagined as a nation outside of time, a harbinger of an unfolding providential plan, or a society forever straining toward expansion and self-invention with little concern for custom or tradition—stands in a peculiar relationship to both the bygone and the yet to be. We will consider the ways various American identities have taken shape around novel understandings of the past and future, and we will explore some of the most important expressions of memory, historical imagination, prophecy, and futurity in American life.

### **Required Texts**

Appleby, Joyce. *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s*. New York: New York University Press, 1984.

Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*. 1888. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hass, Kristin Ann. *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Momaday, N. Scott. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. New York: Vintage, 2004.

Wojcik, Daniel. *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

The books for the class are available at the Douglass Co-op bookstore. Other required readings (marked with an "\*" below) will be available through Sakai. There are also a few internet readings indicated below. **You must print out all readings and bring them to class.**

### **Course Requirements**

**Class Participation:** You must attend class consistently and come prepared to engage actively with the course materials. A pattern of absences will result in a lower grade. You are expected to complete the assigned readings by the date on which they appear in the syllabus. Though the bulk of class time will consist of lectures, there will be plenty of discussion mixed in. So come to class with ideas. There will also be at least two quizzes or in-class assignments (indicated on the schedule below) in which you will respond to some aspect of the weekly readings.

**Analytical Paper:** You will write one short paper (5-7 pp) about a monument, memorial, or commemorative practice in the New Brunswick area. The paper is due on 4/28 at the beginning of class.

**Midterm Exam:** A combination of objective questions, identifications, and essay questions pertaining to the readings and lectures from the first half of the semester. Wednesday, March 12, in class.

**Final Exam:** A combination of objective questions and identifications from the second half and essay questions pertaining to the readings and lectures from the entire semester. Friday, May 9, 4:00-7:00.

### **Grading**

I will use the following percentages as guidelines in determining final grades.

Participation: 10%

Paper: 30%

Midterm: 25%

Final: 35%

### **Plagiarism**

Your work on papers and exams must be your own. The words and ideas of others (if used in any form) must receive proper citation. Cheating on an assignment will result in failure on that assignment and most likely in the class. I will report any such cases to the Dean's office. Carefully consult the American Studies department's guidelines on citing sources at [http://amerstudies.rutgers.edu/documents/AcknowledgingSources\\_000.pdf](http://amerstudies.rutgers.edu/documents/AcknowledgingSources_000.pdf). If you are uncertain at any time about what constitutes plagiarism or academic dishonesty, you must come talk with me.

## Schedule of Meetings and Topics

### **Part I: The Past**

#### **Week One: Introduction**

1/23: American Studies, American Identities, and Time

#### **Week Two: The Problem of the Past**

1/28: The Family Plot and the Colonial Past in the Age of Revolution

\*Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, "The Presence of the Past: Patterns of Popular History Making"

\*John Quincy Adams, *Oration Delivered at Plymouth, 1802*

\*Richard Rush, *An Oration, Delivered...on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1812*

1/30: Patriarchy, Gender, and Generations

\*John Bodnar, "Generational Memory in an American Town"

#### **Week Three: Ancestry, Tradition, and Conflict**

2/4: American Indian Culture and "Indian Affairs" in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century  
Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, pp. 3-64

2/6: Guest Lecture by Louise Barnett on N. Scott Momaday  
Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, pp. 65-98

#### **Week Four: Personal History**

2/11: Self-Making, Masculinity, and the Fight Against the Past

\*Brief selections from Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Fanny Fern, and Horatio Alger  
Morrison, *Beloved*, Part I

2/13: History, Memory, and Freedom in Morrison's *Beloved*  
Morrison, *Beloved*, Part II

**\*\*\*In class assignment on *Beloved*\*\*\***

#### **Week Five: The Past in Black and White**

2/18: African-American Culture and Erasure

\*W.E.B. DuBois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," from *The Souls of Black Folk*

2/20: Guest Lecture By Prof. Angus Gillespie: “Ancestry, Tradition, and Black Gospel Music”

\*Lawrence Levine, “Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness: An Exploration in Neglected Sources”

### **Week Six: Commemoration and Monument**

2/25: From Founding Fathers to Kneeling Slaves

Hass, *Carried to the Wall*, introduction and chaps. 1-3

\*Daniel Webster, from *The Bunker Hill Monument Orations*

2/27: Commemoration, Disaster, and Social Reform

Hass, *Carried to the Wall*, chaps. 4, 5, and epilogue

\*\*On the web: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>

### **Week Seven: Ethnicity and Assimilation**

3/3: Guest Lecture by Prof. Leslie Fishbein: “Jewish-American Immigrants: History, Fiction, and Memory in the Forging of New Identities”

\*Anzia Yezierska, "How I Found America"

Film: *The Godfather, Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1973)

-Screening time and location TBA

3/5: Ethnicity and Popular Culture

\*George Lipsitz, “The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television”

### **Week Eight: Nostalgia and Preservation**

3/10: Reenactment, Public History, and Nostalgia

Readings TBA

3/12: **Midterm Exam**

**Spring Break: No class 3/17, 3/19**

\*\*Sometime before the next class, watch *Gone With The Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939)

## **Part II: The Future**

### **Week Nine: The Birth of Progress**

3/24: Republicanism, Liberalism, and Change (Legacy)

Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*, chaps. 1 and 2  
\*\*James Madison, "Federalist #10." Print from  
<http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa10.htm>

3/26: Contested Progress: Populism, Feminism, and Anti-modernism  
Appleby, chaps. 3 and 4

### **Week Ten: Science, Technology, and Nature**

3/31: Nature's Nation? Technology, Expansion, and the Future  
\*Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"  
\*\*On the web: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/NATURE/cap2.html>

4/2: Guest Lecture by Prof. Michael Rockland: "The World is Round, but Do Americans Know It?"

### **Week Eleven: Utopia**

4/7: Utopian Communities and American Dreams  
Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, introduction and chaps. 1-16  
\*\*On the web: <http://expomuseum.com/1893/>

4/9: Utopian Fictions and Consumer Desire  
Bellamy, chaps. 17-28

**\*\*\*In class assignment on *Looking Backward*\*\*\***

### **Week Twelve: Dystopia**

4/14: Sci-fi and Cyberspace

Film: *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)  
-Screening time and location TBA

4/16: The Age of Diminishing Expectations  
\*Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, chap. 1

### **Week Thirteen: Prophecy and Apocalypse**

4/21: Millennialism  
Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It*, chaps. 1-3  
\*Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, chap. 4

In class video clip: Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream" (1963)

4/23: The Bomb and the Environment  
Wojcik, chaps. 5-7

**Week Fourteen: Fate and Fiction**

4/28: The Future is Written

Film: *Stranger than Fiction* (Marc Forster, 2006)  
-Screening in class

4/30: Free Will and the Fate of the Self in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
Reading TBA

5/5: Conclusions

**\*\*\*Final Exam, Friday 5/9, 4:00 PM\*\*\***