

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

American Studies 050:101
Fall 2008

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Office Hours: Tues. 3:30-5:30 (and by appt)
Office Location: RAB 205-E

“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.

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 questions and ideas about the readings. There will also be at least two quizzes or in-class assignments (indicated on the schedule below) in which you will respond to 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 November 25th 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. **October 24, in class. No make-up exams.**

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. **December 15, 12:00-3:00. No make-up exams.**

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. 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

9/2: American Studies, American Identities, and Time

9/5: The Problem of the Past

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

Week Two: Of Fathers, Founding and Otherwise

9/9: The Family Plot and the Colonial Past in the Age of Revolution

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

*Richard Rush, *An Oration, Delivered...on the 4th of July, 1812*

9/12: Patriarchy, Gender, and Generations

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

Week Three: Ancestry, Tradition, and Conflict

9/16: American Indian Culture and "Indian Affairs" in the 19th Century

Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, pp. 3-64

9/19: Guest Lecture by Prof. Louise Barnett on N. Scott Momaday

Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, pp. 65-98

Week Four: Personal History

9/23: Self-Making, Masculinity, and the Fight Against the Past

*Brief selections from Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Fanny Fern, and Horatio Alger

Morrison, *Beloved*, Part I

9/26: History, Memory, and Freedom in Morrison's *Beloved*

Morrison, *Beloved*, Parts II and III

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

Week Five: The Past in Black and White

9/30: African-American Culture and Erasure

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

10/3: Guest Lecture by Prof. Nicole Fleetwood
Reading TBA

Week Six: Ethnicity and Assimilation

10/7: Ethnicity and Popular Culture

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

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

-Screening time and location TBA

10/10: 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"

Week Seven: Commemoration and Monument

10/14: From Founding Fathers to Kneeling Slaves

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

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

10/17: Commemoration, Disaster, and Social Reform

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

**On the web: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/> (Just go to the site and look around. There is not a specific reading you must do.)

Week Eight: Nostalgia and Preservation

10/21: Reenactment, Public History, and Nostalgia
NO READING

10/24: **Midterm Exam**

Part II: The Future

Week Nine: The Birth of Progress

10/28: Republicanism, Liberalism, and Change

Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*, chaps. 1 and 2

**James Madison, "Federalist #10." Print from

<http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa10.htm>

10/31: Guest Lecture by Prof. Angus Gillespie: "A Critique of Progress"
Appleby, chaps. 3 and 4

Week Ten: Science, Technology, and Nature

11/4: 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> (Just look around. Check out the images. Read through the text.)

11/7: Guest Lecture by Prof. Michael Rockland: "The World is Round, but Do Americans Know It?"

Week Eleven: Utopia

11/11: Utopian Communities and American Dreams
Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, introduction and chaps. 1-16
**On the web: <http://expomuseum.com/1893/>

11/14: Utopian Fictions and Consumer Desire
Bellamy, chaps. 17-28

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

Week Twelve: Dystopia

11/18: The Age of Diminishing Expectations
*Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, chap. 1

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

11/21: Guest lecture by Prof. Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui

Week Thirteen: Prophecy and Apocalypse

11/25: Millennialism
Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It*, selections
*Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, chap. 4

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

*****Paper Due at beginning of class 11/25*****

11/28: **No Class**

Week Fourteen: Fate and Fiction

12/2: The Future is Written

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

12/5: Free Will and the Fate of the Self in the 21st Century
Reading TBA

12/9: Conclusions

*****Final Exam, Monday 12/15, 12:00-3:00*****