Introduction to American Studies:  
Interdisciplinary Methods in the Study of Nation, Culture, Power

American Studies 26:050:501  
History 26:510:551:01  
Fall 2016  
Conklin 447  
Meeting Time: Tuesday, 5:30-8 pm

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Summary:  
This graduate seminar is intended to introduce graduate students to scholarship in American Studies. We will be reading influential older articles and books; theoretical work that has had a particularly significant impact on American Studies; and more recent scholarship which highlights the issues with which scholars of American Studies are currently engaged.

Objectives and Goals:  
Students will explore and consider answers to the following questions:

- What IS interdisciplinary study? What are some of the different methods, approaches, and assumptions that scholars who identify with American Studies bring to interdisciplinary work?
- Where has the field of American Studies been, and where is it going? What are the debates animating the field-- particularly with regard to nation, culture and power--and why?
- How do we, as scholars of American Studies, read and write in the “language” of the field? What skills are necessary to analyze different kinds of primary and secondary sources, including written texts, material objects, visual, oral and aural cultures, and more?

Required Books:
McAlister, Melani. Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East Since 1945 (University of CA, SECOND EDITION, 2005; 2001)
Note: We will only be reading sections of Morrison, so purchase is optional.

Required Films:
Out in the Night (2014)
The Ten Commandments (1956)

Grading and Class Requirements:  
The requirements are designed to develop (and strengthen) reading, writing, and verbal skills. This course requires students to read books not only for content, but for how a given author forges an argument, interprets and uses evidence, and organizes the subject matter. The course requires students to write papers that not only summarize a subject in clear prose, but which grapple with how and why scholars have approached a subject in the ways that they have.
Finally, this course requires students to come together as a scholarly community; assignments are oriented toward learning how to work together as part of this larger community of scholars.

- Participation and Responses to Readings (25%)
- One article/book review essay, 5-6 pages (25%)
- One short essay/close reading of primary source, 3-4 pages (10%)
- Final Essay, approximately 15 pages, double spaced, (250 words pp), footnotes required, including paper proposal and draft (40%)

1. Participation. 25%
This crucial component of the class includes:
- Attendance, completing assignments by the designated dates, and thoughtful participation in class discussions. Your comments must suggest that you’ve done the reading thoughtfully and thoroughly (including attending to footnotes/endnotes). **Please let me know in advance if you will not be in class.** Because participation is so important, missing more than two classes will affect your final grade.

- Depending on class size and interest, we may include required oral presentations/starting questions. If so, 2-3 students each week will work together to start the seminar discussion. Students will offer a brief overview (10 minutes maximum) and three to four questions to the class as a starting point for our discussion. MORE TBA.

- Three short 1-page response papers. At any three points during the semester, you will submit a one-page response to any of the readings. Use these responses to test out ideas and ask questions, to react (pro or con) to what you’ve read, and to stretch your writing “muscles.” A first response is **required by September 20th:** you may submit the other two responses at any other point in the semester. You must submit the response on the week that we are discussing the material you write about. While I prefer to receive these responses before class via email, you may also bring hard copy to class. **Note:** you will not get a letter grade on these responses, but I will respond about content and style, and they will “count” toward your participation grade.

- Three sets of questions. At any three points in the semester, you must each post several questions on blackboard based on the weekly assignments. These questions must be posted by Tuesday at NOON; each week, you should all plan to check bb before class to see what questions have been posted (feel free to respond as well, but this is not required).

2. Short essays. 35%
- Book/article review essay (5-6 pages), 25%.
  With a focus on one book or article, write an essay in which you evaluate the required reading (secondary sources only), and offer your own thesis about this reading. To develop your thesis, consider the following questions:
  1. What questions does this book or article seek to answer? What are the author’s main concerns?
  2. What is the larger professional, intellectual, and political context in which the author developed these questions and approached this topic? With whom is the author in dialogue? What intervention is this author trying to make?
  3. What METHODS does the author employ? What are his/her sources? Why these and not others? How does the author use these sources and organize information to answer the main questions?
  4. What are the primary benefits and/or problems with this method of doing research? What is most and least convincing about HOW the author uses the evidence and develops the argument? What might a given approach allow, and/or disallow? (In other words, what do you like and not like about this book/article, and why?)

**Note:** You absolutely need not focus in depth on all 4 of those questions to write a successful review essay, but these are the types of questions you should have in mind as you write an essay that has a thesis and does not simply summarize the book or article; indeed, these are the questions you should be asking yourselves as you do the required reading each week.

- Close reading essay (3-4 pages), 10%.
  With a focus on one primary source, write an essay in which you develop a thesis about this source based on your close reading and contextualization of it.
ONE of these essays is due on October 11. While the other may be submitted at any point in the semester, I strongly encourage you to complete both essays by November 22. After November 22, we will be focusing more on the final essay.

3. Final essay. (40%)
Draw on 2-3 secondary sources to write a comparative book/article review essay. This essay should address the four questions above and consider them with a focus on several sources. All of the sources may come from the syllabus and the required readings we have done together, or you may write about one source from the syllabus and 1-2 sources that are not on the syllabus but relate in some way to the issues and themes that you want to consider. If you are going to look beyond the syllabus, you must plan ahead and discuss the options you are considering with me in advance. You may draw on the recommended readings to develop your comparative frameworks (many of which are by R-N faculty), but you are not restricted to that list.

• 1-2 pg. proposal: November 8.
• Draft: SATURDAY, December 10.
• Peer Review: December 13.
• Final essay: December 19

Finally, while I assume some familiarity with the events in the periods we will be discussing, we all have our gaps. If you are not familiar with events in a given period -- and that's okay! -- you may find it helpful to consult textbooks. (Textbooks have certain problems, but they can also be very useful). Options include (among others), Mari Jo Buhle et al., Out of Many, Mary Beth Norton, et al., A People and a Nation, and Jacqueline Jones, et al., Created Equal; for a useful collection of essays oriented toward political history Manisha Sinha, ed., Contested Democracy: Freedom, Race and Power in American History (2007).

A few other important points.
--Rutgers University treats cheating and plagiarism as serious offenses. In your papers, you must cite and provide a reference for all language and/or ideas that are not your own. While this should be understood in a graduate seminar, it is important to note that violations of the university honor code will be prosecuted to the full extent that is permitted. As graduate students, if you have any questions about what is or is not plagiarism, then you must take the initiative and ask questions about what and how to cite sources correctly.

--In this course, we will be reading and discussing material on which we may not all agree; some of the themes and imagery we encounter in the sources may seem offensive or otherwise controversial. In this context especially, it is crucial for us to combine the free expression of ideas with respect for each other. This is your community and your class; each one of you has a responsibility to that community.

--Please turn cell phones off and PUT PHONES (etc.), away before class begins. If you take notes on a laptop, please remember that only that document (or related required sources) may be open. Texting or emailing or otherwise using technology in an inappropriate way at any time during class is absolutely prohibited. Again, this should be a given in a graduate seminar, but it worth emphasizing.

--Food and drink are permissible as long as neither is disruptive. We will usually (though not always) have a 5-10-minute break.

--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.
Class Schedule

Tuesday, September 6. Introductions. What was/is American Studies?


Tuesday, September 13. Nation and Nationalism, I

- Anderson, Imagined Communities, excerpts


- Selected poetry by Gloria Anzaldua, Borderlands (1987)

Assignment: Please bring in a source (or link)—written, visual, aural, etc.—that illuminates, exemplifies, or engages with Anderson’s ideas about the production of nationalism.


Tuesday, September 20. Nation and Nationalism, II: Race, Nation, and Cities

• Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, excerpts.


• Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, excerpts.


**Tuesday, September 27. Race and Ethnicity, I**


**TBA:** • David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, excerpts; and/or • Marisa Fuentes, "Power and Historical Figuring: Rachael Pringle Polgreen’s Troubled Archive," *Gender & History* 22: 3 (November 2010): 564–584; and/or • Dwight Conquergood, “Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research,” *Drama Review* 46 (Summer 2002):145-156.

**Note:** Professor Holton will be with us for half of this class.


**Tuesday, October 4. Race and Ethnicity, II**

• Guest speaker: Samik Mallick, co-founder and director of the South Asian American Digital Archive (*https://www.saada.org/*) MORE TBA.

• Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, excerpts

**Tuesday, October 11. NO CLASS**

Paper Due—either the book/article review essay based on any secondary source we’ve read up to this point, OR the close reading/primary source essay. (If you submit your short primary source analysis on this date, and want to write about *Out in the Night* or *The Ten Commandments*, you may, but you will need to watch these in advance of our discussions about them).
**Tuesday, October 18.** Sexuality, I: Theorizing Sexuality


**Tuesday, October 25.** Sexuality, II: Producing and Policing Sexuality

- Chauncey, *Gay New York*, excerpts
- Film, *Out in the Night* (2014)


**Tuesday, November 8.** NO CLASS
Proposal for final essay due.

This brief proposal—1-2 pages—should identify the sources you will be writing about and the themes and questions you want to consider in your final essay.

**Tuesday, November 15.** Case Studies in Cultural History


Please choose ONE of the following two articles and visit EITHER the “Modern Heroics: 75 Years of African American Expressionism” exhibit at the Newark Museum, or “The Dinner Party” exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum:

OR

• TBA.


**Tuesday, November 22. NO CLASS**

Tuesday is Thursday at R-N

**Tuesday, November 29. Empire, I**

• Edward Said, *Orientalism*, excerpts
  • Matthew Jacobson, “Where We Stand: U.S. Empire at Street Level and in the Archive,” *American Quarterly* 65 (June 2013): 265-290.

• We will also have an opportunity for checking in on papers.


**Tuesday, December 6. Empire, II**

• McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, excerpts.
  • Film: *Ten Commandments*


**DRAFTS DUE: Saturday, December 10.**

**Tuesday, December 13. Peer Review**

Final Essays Due: Monday, December 19.