

New American Studies
key:
Fall 2013
Prof. Soltysik Monnet
Office: Anthropole 5133
Office hours: 3-5 Tuesday

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Introduction to New American Studies

Course description and objectives:

The aim of this course is to introduce students to the major themes and methods of New American Studies, a theoretically-informed, comparativist and socially engaged recent development within American Studies. We will examine the role of language, myth and ideology in American cultural politics, focusing on issues such as imperialism, religion, multiculturalism, feminism and race. The corpus will include films, literary texts and readings from the textbook, *American Cultural Studies* (available at Basta!). The readings for the course will be supplemented by four guest lectures (Maisha Wester, Donald Pease, Judith Butler, and Will Kaufman).

Required Text: Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*, 3rd edition. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Schedule of classes and readings:

Sept. 24: Introduction to New American studies (old, new, postnational and transnational): reading culture, tropes, myths, master narratives, ideology, and hegemony

Oct. 1: Defining America: Master Narratives and Key Tropes (Case Study: The Frontier)

Read: "Introduction" to *American Cultural Studies* & excerpt from Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Frontier" & Kennedy "New Frontier Speech" (1960) & John Hellman, "The Return of the Frontier Hero" (1986)

For further interest: Richard Slotkin, "Buffalo Bill's 'Wild West' and the Mythologization of the American Empire," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease

Oct. 8: Ethnicity and Immigration – melting pot, multiculturalism, identity politics, etc.

Read: Chapter 2 of *American Cultural Studies*, “Ethnicity and Immigration”

Watch: *Lone Star* (Dir. John Sayles, 1996)

Discussion Assignment: students present an issue or keyword from the chapter and discuss an example from literature, cinema, or the news to illustrate it OR discuss how *Lone Star* engages with issues of American history, memory, identity, hybridity, etc.

Oct. 15: African American culture

Read: Chapter 3 on African Americans & excerpt from Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, a Slave* (1845) and W.E.B. Dubois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

Discussion Assignment: students bring an example of a song or piece of music by an African American artist and explain how it relates to the readings and the issue of African American identity, history and survival

Oct. 16, 13:15: Guest Lecture on African American Gothic by Maisha Wester

Oct. 22: Critical Theory and American Master Tropes and Fantasies

Read: Don Pease, “From Virgin Land to Ground Zero” and “Introduction: United States of Fantasy”

Discussion Assignment: Prepare discussion questions for the two essays (to make sure we understand the arguments and moves of the essay, as well as thinking about their implications)

Oct. 24: Guest Lecture by Don Pease: "Between the Camp and the Commons: the Bio-Politics of Frederick Douglass and Walt Whitman"

Oct. 29: American Religion and Civil Religion

Read: Chapter on religion in *American Cultural Studies* & article on Civil Religion

Discussion assignment: students will find examples of religious themes (e.g. salvation, sacrifice, redemption, jeremiad) or Civil Religion (conflation of nation and religion) in contemporary American cinema

Nov. 5: Feminism in American Studies: The Cultural Politics of Melodrama

Read: Jane Tompkins, excerpt from *Sensational Designs* and Linda Williams, excerpt from *Playing the Race Card* & excerpt from Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, chapter on Eliza

Watch: *Winter's Bone* (2010) (other options for discussion: *Philadelphia*, *Frozen River*, *Bordertown*)

Discussion assignment: prepare questions for discussion on the film of your choice, engaging with the issue of how it organizes sympathy for the victim-hero, how it choreographs affective response, how it links affect to agency, how it represents female power, agency, solidarity, relations, etc)

Nov. 12: Queer Theory and Performative Identity:

Read: essay by Judith Butler

Discussion assignment: discuss Butler's performative theory of identity, focusing on ordinary identity (gender, race, class, region, etc.), using examples from other texts

for the class (e.g. movies we have watched) or other current examples from literature or media

Nov. 13, 17:15: Guest lecture by Judith Butler: “Is Gender (Un)Translatable?”

Nov. 19: Reading Week

Nov. 29: Border Theory and Decolonization

Read: Chapter on “New Beginnings,” and excerpt from Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1992)

Watch: *Bordertown* (Dir. Gregory Nava, 2006)

Dec. 3: Counterculture and resistance: the role of music in social critique (folk and rap)

Read: Chapter 10, “Transmission of American Culture”

Examples: Bob Dylan, “Masters of War” and “Ballad of Hollis Brown”

Watch: *Beat Street* (1984)

Discussion assignment: discuss how the Dylan songs work to create and channel politicized affect and/or discuss how *Beat Street* presents the relationship of hip-hop music to its environment, discuss why/how it has had a global impact and/or how the two musical traditions (folk and rap) could be linked

Dec. 10: Guest lecture and concert: Will Kaufman on Woody Guthrie

Dec. 17: presentation of final essay projects

Happy Holidays!

Course requirements and validation:

Five one-page critical reactions (typed, 1.5 line spacing), final essay of 10-12 pages, and leading of discussion for one day. SPEC students will do the critical reactions and write a 14-16 page essay.

Essay due date: January 6th, 2014 (SPEC students may take until Jan. 13th).

Critical reaction: a one-page, typed, written response to a topic or reading, engaging with that topic both critically and personally, exploring what you find interesting and/or problematic and/or important. You can choose any five topics (dates) to address.

Final essay questions: suggestions and ideas will be passed out later in the semester but you are invited to formulate your own essay topic, bringing a theory or key concept into dialogue with a specific text.

Bibliography:

DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. The most important work of cultural analysis by the most important African American intellectual of the 20th century.

Fluck, Winfried, Donald E. Pease and John Carlos Rowe. *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2011.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993. The foundational text of Atlantic Studies, which has re-oriented the study of the slave trade and the American colonies away from a nation-based history and towards an understanding of the Atlantic as a dynamic cultural and conceptual space.

-----, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Harvard UP, 2000. An important set of essays attempting to question the categories of race as they currently exist and to move beyond race-based identity politics.

-----, "Race and the Right to be Human." *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hellman, John. *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Focuses in particular on the role of the frontier thesis in Vietnam War discourse.

Kaplan, Amy and Donald Pease. *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993. A foundational text for the New American Studies, integrating the word "imperialism" as a key conceptual term for understanding American history and cultural narratives.

Lauter, Paul. *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park: Activism, Culture and American Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.

Pease, Donald. "Introduction: The United States of Fantasy." *The New American Exceptionalism*. U of Minnesota P, 2001.

-----, and Robyn Wiegman, eds. *The Futures of American Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002.

-----, "From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the master Fictions of the Homeland Security State." *A Companion to American Literature and Culture*. Ed. Paul Lauter. Blackwell-Wiley, 2010.

Radway, Janice A., Kevin K. Gaines, Barry Shank, and Penny von Eschen, eds. *American Studies: An Anthology*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Rowe, John Carlos. *The Cultural Politics of the New American Studies*. U of Michigan, 2012. Available online for free at the Open Humanities Press website. A set of theoretical and practical essays explaining and contextualizing the New American Studies paradigm.

Saldivar, José David. *Border Matters: Re-Mapping American Cultural Studies*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.

Slotkin, Richard. "Buffalo Bill's 'Wild West' and the Mythologization of the American Empire," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993.

----- . "Myth and the Production of History." *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.

Takaki, Ronald. *Debating Diversity: Clashing Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in the United States*. Oxford UP, 2002. A look at the frontier thesis and other master myths of American history by the pre-eminent historian of American race and ethnicity.

Tompkins, Jane. "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History." *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985. The foundational text of the move towards a new understanding of the cultural politics of sentiment and women's cultural agency in 19th century America.

Williams, Linda. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White*. Princeton, 2002.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999. The most important radical history of the United States, focusing on people and cultural politics rather than pretending towards a consensus-based liberal history.

Films to watch for class:

Lone Star (Dir. John Sayles, 1996)

Winter's Bone (Dir. Debra Granik, 2010)

Bordertown (Dir. Gregory Nava, 2006)

Beat Street (Dir. Stan Lathan, 1984)

Recommended Films (for essays and for class discussion):

Thunderheart (Dir. Michael Apted, 1992) – a contemporary Western murder mystery, loosed based on true events at Wounded Knee in 1973.

Philadelphia (Dir. Jonathan Demme, 1993) – a contemporary melodrama about AIDS, starring Tom Hanks and Antonio Banderas.

Bamboozled (Dir. Spike Lee, 2000) – a satire about the complexities of African American identities, focusing on the issue of 19th century minstrelsy and the idea that a contemporary television show would try to revive this extremely racist genre in a seemingly ironic way.

Frozen River (Dir. Courtney Hunt, 2008) – very powerful and haunting film about two women, one white, one Native American, struggling with poverty while trying to raise children on the Canadian border, who form an uneasy alliance smuggling illegal immigrants in order to make some quick but risky money. A good text for talking about the border, about immigration and ethnicity, women's solidarity and survival, and to complicate ideas about melodrama.

Lincoln (Dir. Steven Spielberg, 2012) – Spielberg and Kushner's film about the last three months of Lincoln's life is an excellent text for discussing civil religion, melodrama, and American self-definition and mythologizing. It is also a gripping, if highly simplistic, drama about the passing of the 14th Amendment.