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, comparative 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, exceptionalism, religion, multiculturalism, feminism and race, among others. The corpus will include films, literary texts and readings from the textbook, American Cultural Studies (available on Moodle). There will also be a guest lecture on Native American Studies by Cécile Heim (Oct. 21) and a music-accompanied talk on “Music and Gender” (Oct. 28).

Schedule of classes and readings:

Sept. 23: Introduction to New American studies

Sept. 30: Ideology, Myths, Master Narratives and Key Tropes (Key terms and concepts: the frontier, imperialism, American Dream, exceptionalism)


Sign-ups for class discussion
Oct. 7: Religion and Civil Religion (key terms and concepts: covenant, city upon a hill, manifest destiny, the flag)

Read: Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” and “2nd Inaugural Address” & Carolyn Marvin, excerpt from Blood Sacrifice and the Nation

Recommended: Chapter on religion in American Cultural Studies & Bellow, “American Civil Religion”

Discussion:

Oct. 14: Class: (key terms: ‘white trash’, throwaway people, wasteland and ‘wasted’ land)

Read: excerpt from Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States & excerpt from Nancy Isenberg’s White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America & short excerpt from Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye

Recommended reading: Greg Grandin, “The Safety Valve” from The End of the Myth

Oct. 21: Guest lecture by Cécile Heim on Native American Studies

Midterm passed out

Oct. 28: Guest lecture and concert by Zoe Boekbinder on Women and Music in the US

Nov. 4: Reading Week – NO CLASS

Nov. 11: Ethnicity and Immigration – melting pot, multiculturalism, identity politics, hybridity, contact zone

Read: Chapter 2 of American Cultural Studies, “Ethnicity and Immigration” & other excerpts to be specified

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

Recommended further reading: see moodle

Discussion:

Midterm due

Nov. 18: Border Theory and Decolonization

Read: chapters from Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera (1987)

Discussion leaders:

Recommended related film: Border Town

Nov. 25: African American culture, the Color Line & the New Jim Crow
Read: Chapter 3 of American Cultural Studies on African Americans & excerpts from W.E.B. Du Bois, Souls of Black Folk (1903) & Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow

Recommended Reading: excerpts from Howard Zinn, Ronald Takaki & Robin Diangelo & Black Lives Matter website

Recommended related film: American Violet

Discussion:

Dec. 2: Gender and the Cultural Politics of Melodrama

Read: Jane Tompkins, excerpt from Sensational Designs and Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revisited”

Watch: Philadelphia or Brokeback Mountain (to be decided)

Discussion leaders:

Dec. 9: War and the Cultural Politics of Adventure

Read: Chapter on “The Spread of Freedom” & excerpt from my chapter on adventure

Watch: American Sniper (Dir. Clint Eastwood, 2014)

Discussion leaders:

Dec. 16: The Future of America and American Studies? Also, presentation of final essay and exam topics

Course requirements and validation:
Like all MA classes, there are two ways to take this class: for a validation or for an exam. All students must lead a discussion group one day, and prepare questions, and send them to me on Sunday night for feedback. Everyone also needs to do a midterm written assignment.

For a validation you will need to write a final essay (10-12 pages). SPEC students write 12-14 pages.

For written or oral exams, you prepare two exam topics by the end of the semester, with an extended personal biography of 8 works on top of the class material. Essay due date: Jan. 8th

Final essay and exam topics: 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 one or two specific texts.
Bibliography (required and recommended):

An influential book arguing that laws targeting African Americans (such as excessively long sentences for minor drug offenses targeting only drugs used predominantly by African Americans) have created a de facto segregation system continuing the systemic exploitation of earlier Jim Crow laws. An excerpt is required reading for the session on African Americans.


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.


----------. *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.


----------. “From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the master Fictions of the Homeland Security State.” *A


**Films to watch for class:**

*Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1996)  
*American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014)

And one of these:  
*Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993)  
*Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005)

**Further Recommended Films (for essays and for class discussion):**

*American Violet* (Dir. Tim Disney, 2008) – very timely film about the racism of the supposedly colorblind judicial system, which uses plea bargaining as a tool to disenfranchise poor people and African Americans.

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

*Border Town* (Gregory Nava, 2006) – Murder mystery about the real murders in the border city of Juarez, with Jennifer Lopez and Antonio Banderas.

*Winter’s Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010)