

New American Studies
Autumn 2019
Prof. Soltysik Monnet
Office: Anthropole 5125
Office hours: 3-5 Tuesday & by appointment

Moodle password:
NAS2019



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)

Read: 1. Excerpt from Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Frontier” & 2. Richard Slotkin, Introduction to *Regeneration Through Violence* & 3. Greg Grandin, Introduction and “Outer Edge” from *The End of the Myth*, and have a look at 4. “Introduction” to *American Cultural Studies* (if you have time)

Recommended Further Reading: Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, introduction to *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*; and John Hellman, “The Return of the Frontier Hero” (1986) & Kennedy “New Frontier Speech” (1960)

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. Dubois, *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):

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2012.

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.

Anker, Elizabeth R. *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*. Durham: Duke, 2014.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.

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.

Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014.

----- *Loaded: A Disarming History of the 2nd Amendment*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2018.

Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*. Eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picado, 1997.

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.

Grandin, Greg. *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019.

- Grenier, John. *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- 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.
- Hixon, Walter L. *American Settler Colonialism: A History*. New York: Palgrave, 2013.
- Isenberg, Nancy. *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. New York: Viking, 2016.
- Johnson, Bob. *Carbon Nation: Fossil Fuels in the Making of American Culture*. University Press of Kansas, 2014.
- Johnson, Chalmers. *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004.
- 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.
- Leitch, Vincent B., General Editor, *The Norton Anthology of Theory Criticism*. 3rd edition.
- LeMenager, Stephanie. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View From the Future*. New York: Columbia UP, 2014.
- Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014.
- 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.

Singh, Nikhil Pal. "Rethinking Race and Nation." *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004.

----- . *Race and America's Longest War*. University of California Press, 2017.

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.

----- . *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1985.

----- . *Regeneration Through Violence*. Wesleyan UP, 1973.

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.

----- . *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1979.

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 (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)