

New American Studies

Zoom link for class:

<https://unil.zoom.us/j/94412090779>

Moodle password:

NAS2020

Autumn 2020

Prof. Soltysik Monnet

Office: Anthropole 5133

Office hours: 2-3 Tuesday & by appointment

Zoom link for office hours: <https://unil.zoom.us/j/5160799599>



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).

Schedule of classes and readings:

Sept. 14: Introduction to New American studies

Sept. 21: NO CLASS

Sept. 28: Ideology, Myths, Master Narratives and Tropes (Key term: The Frontier)

Read: 1. Excerpt from Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Frontier" & 2. Richard Slotkin, Introduction to *Regeneration Through Violence* for the concept of national "myth," and for the idea of the Indian Wars as foundational to the US; & 3. And "Introduction" to *American Cultural Studies* for methodology

Recommended Further Reading: Greg Grandin, Introduction and “Outer Edge” from *The End of the Myth*

Sign-ups for class discussion

Oct. 5: Class & The Myth of America as a Classless Society (Key terms: ‘white trash’, throwaway people, wasteland and ‘wasted’ land)

Read: excerpt from Nancy Isenberg’s *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*

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

Discussion leaders:

Oct. 12: Religion and Civil Religion (key terms and concepts: covenant, city upon a hill, manifest destiny, the flag)

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

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

Discussion leaders:

Oct. 19: Guest talk and discussion with Carolyn Marvin
Midterm passed out

Oct. 26: Native American Studies—Guest lecture with Cécile Heim

Nov. 2: Reading Week – NO CLASS

Nov. 9: Ethnicity and Immigration – melting pot, multiculturalism, hybridity, contact zone

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

Read: Chapter 1 of *American Culture Studies*

Recommended further reading:

Excerpt from Greg Grandin & Mary Louise Pratt; Chapter 2 of *American Cultural Studies*, “Ethnicity and Immigration”

Discussion leaders:

Midterm due

Nov. 16: Border Theory and Decolonization

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

Recommended reading: George Hartley article

Recommended related film: *Border Town*

Discussion leaders:

Nov. 23: African American culture, the Color Line & the New Jim Crow

Read: excerpts from W.E.B. Dubois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) & Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* & introduction to Wilkerson's *Caste*

Recommended Reading: Black Lives Matter website; Chapter 3 of *American Cultural Studies* on African Americans; Isabel Wilkerson's interview on her book *Caste*: <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/04/898574852/its-more-than-racism-isabel-wilkerson-explains-america-s-caste-system>

Recommended related film: *American Violet* (2008)

Discussion:

Nov. 30: The Cultural Politics of Melodrama

Read: Linda Williams, excerpt from *Playing the Race Card: Melodrama in American Culture*

Further Reading: Jane Tompkins, excerpt from *Sensational Designs* & Elizabeth Anker

Watch: *Winter's Bone*

Discussion leaders:

Dec. 7: American War Culture

Read: excerpt on war adventure

Background Reading: Chapter on "The Spread of Freedom" from *American Cultural Studies*

Watch: *American Sniper* (Dir. Clint Eastwood, 2014) OR *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949)

Discussion leaders:

Dec. 14: Wrapping up the class and 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. 15th**

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.

Anderson, Kurt. *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire, A 500 Year History*. New York: Random House, 2017.

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.

Black, Jeremy. *A Brief History of Slavery*. Philadelphia and London: Running Press, 2011. A concise history of slavery around the globe and how it shaped the Western world.

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 College 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.
- Hartley, George. "The Curandera of Conquest: Gloria Anzaldúa's Decolonial Remedy." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, v.35 n.1 (Spring 2010): 135-161.
- 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.
- Sirvent, Roberto and Danny Haiphong. *American Exceptionalism and American Innocence: A People's History of Fake News – From the Revolutionary War to the War on Terror*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2019.
- 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.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Lies that Divide Us*. New York: Penguin Books, 2020.

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

Woodard, Colin. *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Cultures of North America*. New York: Penguin, 2011.

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)

Winter’s Bone (Debra Granik, 2010)

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.

Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee, 2005)