AMST 601: Introduction to American Studies
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Required Texts


AMST 601 is a course designed to introduce all first-year American Studies Graduate Students to the history and evolution of the field. Course objectives include exploring themes and debates that have resulted in shifts in the field, seeking an answer to the question posed by Henry Nash Smith, namely, “Can American Studies Develop a Method?” and beginning the process of the student’s articulating an interdisciplinary American Studies approach to the subject of his/her scholarly interest. AMST 601 begins work that will continue in AMST 602, “Contemporary Issues in American Studies,” which all first-year students will take next semester.

Throughout the semester we will return again and again to some of the foundational questions that have shaped the field of American Studies:
• What are some of the ideological assumptions embedded in the history of American Studies as a field?
• Who does one develop a “method” of doing American Studies?
• What are some of the challenges, problems, and opportunities inherent in doing interdisciplinary studies?
• What is “American Exceptionalism,” and how do we explain its staying power in the American imagination?
• What is the relationship between the idea of “America” and the development of the non-U.S. world?
• What is “transnational” American Studies?
• How have economic globalism and America’s imperial power shaped the politics of doing American Studies?

The course is reading intensive and demanding. Attendance is crucial to your success in the course. You will be evaluated on your participation in class discussion, your leading of one class session, and on attendance. Please contact me in advance by phone or email if you know you will miss a seminar.

Assignments
1. Weekly Response Papers = 20%
Responses to the readings need not exceed three typewritten (double-spaced) pages. In your response identify the main point(s) made by the author(s) of that week’s assigned readings. Briefly explain how the week’s readings add to your understanding of American Studies as a field or of the history of American Studies as it developed in the twentieth century. In other words, what is each author trying to say about “America”?

2. Discussion Leader = 20%
Each student selects a week in which she/he wishes to serve as the discussion leader for the seminar. Responsibilities include preparing discussion questions to be made available electronically before the class meeting, identifying key points made by the author(s), exploring why those points mattered at the time they were made and why we should think about them today, and organizing seminar time in such a way to encourage discussion. This last responsibility might entail using audio or visual materials or introducing related cultural artifacts (objects, images, or material culture) or literature to amplify or illustrate issues raised in the readings. In any event, each student is encouraged to be creative in generating discussion.

3. Mid-Term Case Book Assignment = 20%
Everyone enrolled in this course has identified a subject of interest in either general or specific terms. AMST 601 provides students an opportunity to begin thinking about the subject in interdisciplinary ways. In order to begin thinking this way, the mid-term assignment is to prepare a Table of Contents for a Case Book on a text related to your subject of interest. Using Woman in the Nineteenth Century as your model, prepare a Table of Contents that includes...
three sections: 1) the text; 2) primary sources needed to make sense of it; and 3) scholarship on or related to the text or its creator. The goal is to locate both primary and secondary materials that illuminate your subject in new ways. Ideally, you will identify articles about your subject in more than one discipline to see how scholars in different disciplines study the same phenomenon. Due date: October 26.

4. Final Paper = 30%
The Final Paper should be between 10 and 15 pages. It will introduce your subject of interest as an American Studies project, which means that you will explore how the subject itself or your way of analyzing it sheds new light on the American experience or on American culture. You may align your work with some of the scholarship you read in the course, or you may explain how your work promises to build upon or diverge from some of the standard approaches to the study of American culture and experience. Due date: December 14.

5. Participation in the Discussion = 10%
Seminars are most valuable when all members take part. They are also most effective when all voices and perspectives are welcome. Your participation and respectful attention to others’ participation are the bases of this grade.

**Week 1**
**August 24**
Introduction to the syllabus, overview of course objectives and assignments, sign-up sheet for leading a seminar discussion.

**Week 2**
**August 31**
Keywords for American Studies
To get the course started, we will consider what we are talking about when we talk about “America.” The readings for this week are meant to stimulate your thinking on how America, Americans, and the United States of America map onto one another.

From Hendler and Burgett, *Keywords*, read the following essays:
Kirsten Silva Gruesz, “America”
Fred Moten, “Democracy”
Lauren Berlant, “Citizenship”
Alys Eve Weinbaum, “Nation”

From Maddox, *Locating American Studies*, read the following essay:
Henry Nash Smith, “Can ‘American Studies’ Develop a Method?”
Week 3
September 7
American Exceptionalism
The field of American studies emerged in the 1930s at a time when many Americans wondered how the country would make it through the economic collapse of the Great Depression. One argument for America’s eventually success was that America was an “exceptional” nation—unlike any other in the world. This concept of “exceptionalism” intensified after World War II. What, however, did scholars think made America exceptional? That question should inform your reading of today’s assignment:

Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*
Donald Pease, “Exceptionalism” in H&B, *Keywords*

Week 4
September 14
American Exceptionalism and Empire
While Perry Miller wrote about America as part of the British Empire, and eventually about its shift from colony to province (read “backwater”), his work—even his preface to this volume—seems completely tone-deaf on the question of American Empire. Today’s reading will explore how more recent scholars have pushed the question of empire further than Miller could or wanted to do. As you read the assignment, consider how Kaplan engages Miller:

Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire*
Shelley Streeby, “Empire” in H&B, *Keywords*

Week 5
September 21
Myth and Symbol
One of the major contributions of early American studies scholars was the recognition that “reality” was more capacious than just “what happened.” Beliefs, values, ideals, and symbolism also play a role in a people’s concept of themselves and of the meaning of their country. Today’s readings explore American identity through people’s relationship to the natural world and what the natural world symbolized to them. The week’s reading is a classic in the field.

Henry Nash Smith, *The Virgin Land: The American West and Symbol and Myth*
Bruce Kuklick, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies,” in Maddox, *Locating American Studies*

Week 6
September 28
Whose Myths/Whose Symbols?
This week’s readings focus on more recent scholarship that recognizes that the land of America was in fact occupied before Euro-Americans arrived and settled it. The main text argues that American identity does lie in the encounter with the land and people of the New World, but in ways that are different from Smith.
Jill Lepore, *The Name of War*

**Week 7**  
**October 12**  
Becoming Interdisciplinary  
This week’s reading is considered an important piece of American literature. The Case Book produced by Larry Reynolds, who edited Margaret Fuller’s work, provides us a good model for the “anatomy” of an interdisciplinary project. The seminar will be devoted to a discussion of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and to a progress report on your mid-term Case Book Table of Contents project, which is due on October 26.

Larry Reynolds, ed., *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*  

**Week 8**  
**October 19**  
The Evolution of American Studies  
At least two versions of the history of the field have been offered at different times. We will consider how each history anticipates a slightly different present moment for us, as practitioners of American Studies scholarship. Consider also how the moment in which each author was writing affected his interpretation of the field.

George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*  
Gene Wise, “‘Paradigm Dramas’ in American Cultural Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement,” in Maddox, *Locating American Studies*

**Week 9**  
**October 26**  
Race and Class in America  
Early work in American Studies, from the 1930s through the 1950s, sought the elements that unified America. With the explosion of social tension, unrest, and outright rebellion of the 1960s, however, scholars turned their attention to the sources of social division and the generative power of conflict. MID-TERM ASSIGNMENT IS DUE IN CLASS.

David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*  
Alexander Saxton, “Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology,” in Maddox, *Locating American Studies*  
Eric Lott, “Class” and Roderick Ferguson, “Race,” in H & B, *Keywords*
Week 10
November 2
Race and Sexuality in America
Interest in the history of sexuality is relatively recent in origin. Important work in this area has shown how the discourses surrounding race and sexuality were mutually reinforcing. Both race and sexuality have inflected American culture and experience.

Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*
Judith Halberstram, “Gender” and Bruce Burgett, “Sex” in H & B, *Keywords*

Week 11
November 9
Land and Culture
Early practitioners of American Studies—like Perry Miller, Leo Marx, Henry Nash Smith, and a host of others—assumed without question that the only “colonial” experience that mattered in shaping American culture was the one brought about by England. England, however, was not the only European country that established colonies in North America. If we believe that the colonial experience shaped America, then in what ways did Spanish colonization affect American culture and experience? This week’s readings explore these issues.

José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*

Week 12
November 16
Common Ground
The American experience is unquestionably varied, because of the race, class, gender, ethnic, and sexual differences among Americans. While the excellent work of exploring these differences continues apace, some scholars have tried to figure out how to tell a new American story. Our reading for this week is one such effort. As you read, think about how the story is different from the traditional American narratives, and how it retains parts of older interpretations.

Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror*

THANKSGIVING BREAK
Week 13  
November 30  
The Serious Business of Amusement  
Almost from the beginning, scholars in American Studies believed that important insights about American culture could be derived not from serious intellectuals and theologians but from the most frivolous of activities—pop culture. This week’s reading focuses on a famous amusement park and on how it reveals a process of profound social and cultural transformation.

John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million*

Week 14  
December 7  
No Class Today—use this period to work on your final paper, which will be due next week.

Week 15  
December 14—Final Papers are due