American Studies 601: Introduction to American Studies
Mondays, 3:30-6:20, BRNG B-212
Professor Schneider
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Office Hours: By appointment (HEAV 310 B)

Description
American Studies 601 is a reading-and-research seminar driven by in-class discussion of selected texts and topics. Its main goals are to provide an overview of the history of American Studies; to establish the beginnings of a shared vocabulary of critical and theoretical terms; to enhance students’ abilities to read analytically; and to offer an introduction to some of the questions, issues, and tensions that shape and determine past and present scholarship in the field. Few areas of study have undergone more radical shifts and transformations over the past few decades than American Studies, and tracking those changes is a necessary and productive endeavor--not only for purposes of general knowledge but also to help you recognize and critique the kinds of assumptions and arguments that characterize work in our field. By the close of the semester, you will have a better sense of which critical approaches and methodologies may be most compelling and useful for your own development as a scholar.

Readings
The readings for this course are diverse in terms of content, critical orientation, and disciplinary range. They also demonstrate, in a more general way, the different phases of American Studies: its origins in the 1930s and 40s as a response to anxiety about the durability of American democracy; its initial phase of development in 1950s and early 60s as an expression of national pride and cultural vitality during the Cold War; its belated (and, many would say, still largely unfinished) reckoning with the social and cultural shifts of the late 60s and 70s; its conflicted views of the U.S. as a sole superpower in the late 80s and 90s; and its current state of self-examination and reevaluation in light of new anxieties about globalization, the notion of a world economy, terrorism, and potentially disastrous changes in environmental quality and stability.

As you read, prepare responses to the following general questions—they will be the basis for our discussions:

1) What issues, topics, or questions does the text examine--and why does the author believe them to be significant or worth examining?
2) What is the author’s thesis (or theses)?
3) How does the text go about investigating or examining its subject matter--what evidence does it draw upon and what methods does it employ?
4) What aspects of the text do you find most useful or persuasive? Why?
5) What aspects of the text do you find least useful or persuasive? Why?

Requirements (each worth 1/3 of your overall grade)
1) Attendance and class participation
2) Weekly response papers
3) Casebooks

Attendance
You are allowed one absence without penalty. If you miss more than one class, your final grade will be dropped one full letter (example: a “B” becomes a “C”). Also, while I am very sympathetic to both the problems of chronic illness and the pressures of outside commitments (family, job, etc.), I will not make exceptions to the attendance policy for these reasons. If you know in advance that you are going to miss a class, email me. You don’t need to tell me why—just let me know. Sometimes I make minor adjustments to the reading schedule or pass around additional material. If you email me, I'll send you this information. Also, please do not make a habit of arriving late to class. I can accept a late arrival once or perhaps twice
during the semester, but anything more than that suggests either that you are not taking the class seriously or that you are not fully ready for graduate level coursework.

**Class Participation**

I expect you to contribute consistently and substantially to discussions of the texts. If you are able to offer a comment or insight—or ask a worthwhile question—at least four to five times during each of our meetings, you likely will receive the equivalent of an “A” or a “B” for this requirement. If you are largely silent or you offer only one or two comments per class, you likely will receive the equivalent of a “C” or lower. You should feel free to ask me at any point during the semester for an estimate of how well or how poorly you are doing in this regard.

**Response papers**

Beginning with our first class meeting, you are required to respond in writing to the text or texts we’re discussing. Response papers should be four or more pages in length (typed, double-spaced, one-inch margins). They do not have to be highly polished, but they should be coherent and readable. Feel free to use the "I" format if you wish--as in, "I argue" or "My view of"--but please avoid overly general or superficial observations. The most effective responses generally offer some form of argument by analyzing specific passages from the reading to support points about the text that, in your view, are worth making or exploring further.

Bring your response papers with you to class; they will serve as a kind of informal resource--a bank of your own ideas--to draw upon as you contribute to discussion. I will collect and read them after each class session. I won't give them a formal grade at that time, but if I see any omissions or inadequate responses, you and I will arrange a meeting to discuss the problem. You are allowed to skip one response paper at any point during the semester (save this for when you really need it).

With regard to grades: in most cases, response papers turn out to be an all-or-nothing assignment. The quality of individual responses matters less than their capacity, taken as a whole, to demonstrate consistent engagement with the readings over the course of the entire semester. In other words, if you turn in all the required entries and show that you are engaging with the texts at something more than a superficial level, you likely will receive an A. Alternately, if you do not submit all the required entries, if one or more is less than four full pages, or if they are simply too general or under-developed in an analytical sense, you are likely to receive an F. Only in rare instances would some other grade be appropriate for this assignment.

**Casebooks**

Interdisciplinary research is one of the foundations of American Studies--and one of the most difficult aspects of scholarship to master. To help you begin to think and write across disciplinary boundaries, I am asking you to prepare a proposal for an original casebook and present this proposal to the class at the end of the semester. Your task is to select a text, document, material artifact, or other form of cultural production and provide a context to help your audience understand and interpret its significance.

Casebook proposals must provide rationales--detailed arguments--for why the text, document, or material you’ve chosen deserves consideration from an academic audience. In other words, you must be able to explain why it is important for other scholars to think and talk about your subject. Just because you think something is interesting doesn’t automatically guarantee that it has scholarly validity. You have to demonstrate why it matters (i.e. You have to answer the “So What?” question).

Proposals must include summaries of work other scholars have produced that may be directly or indirectly related to the text, document, artifact, or form of cultural production you’ve chosen. Such summaries often take the form of annotated bibliographies, which we will discuss in more detail as the semester progresses.

Proposals must show evidence of two disciplinary perspectives, if not more. Again, we will discuss different approaches to demonstrating interdisciplinary work as the semester unfolds.

Proposal presentations will be made during our final class meeting and should be designed to last no more than 15 minutes. Because the content of individual projects will vary widely, you should consult with me.
and with other faculty members who may help you identify material and information that would be useful to examine or include. At the very least, you must discuss and confirm your casebook topic with me no later than Mon. Nov. 3 (preferably before that); if you fail to do this, you fail the assignment.

**Texts (all ordered through Von's)**

-- *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*  
   edited by Lucy Maddox

-- *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*  
   by Henry Nash Smith

-- *The American Jeremiad*  
   by Sacvan Bercovitch

   by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

-- *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900*  
   by John F. Kasson

-- *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, Revised Edition*  
   by David R. Roediger  (Note: Please purchase the Revised Edition)

-- *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*  
   by Cornel West

-- *Masculinities*  
   by R.W. Connell

-- *The Queen of American Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*  
   by Laren Berlant

-- *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*  
   by Lawrence Buell

**Schedule of Readings**

Aug. 25:  
*Locating American Studies*, ed. Lucy Maddox. Read the Preface as well as the essays by Smith, Susman, and Kuklick, (also read the commentaries that accompany each essay). **You may write your response paper on any one of the essays and its commentary.

Sept. 1: No class—Labor Day Holiday

Sept. 8:  
*Locating American Studies*, ed. Lucy Maddox. Read the essays by Kelly, Wise, Berghof, Lipsitz, and Kessler-Harris (also read the commentaries). **You may write your response paper on any one of the essays and its commentary.

Sept. 15:  
*Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith
Sept. 22:
The American Jeremiad, Sacvan Bercovitch

Sept. 29:
Good Wives, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

Oct. 6:
Civilizing the Machine, John F. Kasson

Oct. 13:
No class--Fall Break

Oct. 20:
The Wages of Whiteness, David R. Roediger

Oct. 27:
The American Evasion of Philosophy, Cornel West

Nov. 3:
Masculinities, R.W. Connell

Nov. 10:
The Queen of America Goes to Washington City, Lauren Berlant

Nov. 17:
The Future of Environmental Criticism, Lawrence Buell

Nov. 24:
No Class: work on your casebooks.

Dec. 1:
No Class: work on your casebooks.

Dec. 8:
Casebook Presentations. **Note: our final meeting likely will need to be extended for an extra 30 minutes or so to accommodate all the presentations. Please plan your schedule to allow for this additional class time.