AMST 602
Contemporary Issues in American Studies
BRNG B202

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Office Hours: Wednesdays, 10:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.; 12:30 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Required Readings available for purchase at Von's Book Shop:
Paul Lauter, *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park*
Gregory S. Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness*
Stephen Pyne, *Year of the Fires*
Jeffrey Melnick, *9/11 Culture*
John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln*
Marita Sturken, *Tourists in History*
Anne E. Boyd, *Writing for Immortality*
Jill Lepore, *The Name of War*
José Ramón Sánchez, *Boricua Power*

I encourage you all to join the American Studies Association at the student rate and get a one-year subscription to *American Quarterly*. This is not a requirement—access to readings from *American Quarterly* can be obtained through Purdue Libraries' subscription to J-Stor.

**Course Description and Goals**

You have taken AMST 601, where you learned about the history of the field of American Studies, read key texts, and explored how the field has evolved. In this course, we focus on the contemporary moment. What are the current debates and relevant issues? How do American Studies scholars today see the field and practice American Studies scholarship? What kinds of interdisciplinary models do they provide? This is the scholarly community of which you will become a part. This course aims to introduce you to that community, its current conversations, and awareness of what you can add to future conversations in the field.

Course goals include:

- Gaining familiarity with current debates in the field
- Learning how to identify the conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary forces that shape a work of American Studies scholarship
• Learning how to situate your work in ongoing scholarly debates/conversations
• Developing your own interdisciplinary approach
All assignments are designed to help reach these goals.

Seminar Schedule

January 12
Introductions and syllabus
   We will begin by getting to know one another—what do you care about, what are your scholarly interests, and what do you most want to gain from this seminar?
   We will spend some time discussing a particular approach to reading texts in this class—strategies for getting something valuable from each of the reading assignments (without losing your eyesight!). I also want to preview each of the course assignments so we all have a clear understanding of the expectations for the course. Finally, we will spend some time thinking about the difference between the “subject” of a book/article and the “larger insight” the scholar is offering.

January 19
   Paul Lauter, From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park, 2001
   Scholars who gravitate to American Studies often do so because they find the conventional practices of a single discipline are not quite adequate to answer the questions they pose. In the essays in his book, Paul Lauter offers readers a window into the choices he has made and why he made them and examples of how he “does” American Studies analysis.
   The book is divided into three parts. While I expect that you will read the entire volume, I ask that you choose one of the parts of this book for your 2-3 page response paper. In your paper, discuss what you learned about American Studies scholarship, why you chose the part you chose, and why you did not choose the other two.

January 26
   Marita Sturken, Tourists of History, 2007—Conceptualizing a Project
   The subtitle of this book links kitsch, memory, and consumerism. How does Sturken make the connections? What are some of the assumptions she makes as she chooses her “archive” and reaches her conclusions?
   In your response paper, 2-3 pages, identify Sturken’s “subject,” “main insight,” and “archive.” Also address the questions raised above. In the seminar, we will discuss how Sturken conceptualized her project.
February 2
Jeffrey Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 2009—Comparison and Conversation
Melnick’s book take the same subject as Sturken’s—9/11—but moves the conversation in a different direction. How did Melnick construct his archive? How would you compare his conclusions with Sturken’s? This book came about as a result of a course—how did the classroom experience affect the final product?

This week, instead of a response paper, practice putting books into conversation with one another. Prepare a short review essay 2-4 pages in length. I leave it to each of you to identify points of comparison and common concern to structure your comments on the two books.

February 9
Jill Lepore, The Name of War, 1998—Reading Back to Front
Lepore explicitly names scholars with whom she agrees and disagrees, but unless you read the discursive notes at the back of the book, you might not know who they are. This exercise is meant to help you see how this scholar situates her work in the existing scholarship and to provide tips on how to do this as you conceptualize your work. Unlike Sturken and Melnick, Lepore’s focus is on an event from the colonial past, one that is not always well remembered. Still, she intends for this work to speak in some way to the present. In seminar we will discuss how subjects from the distant past may nevertheless shed light on the contemporary culture.

In your response paper, 1-2 pages, reconstruct Lepore’s intellectual influences by commenting on her discursive endnotes. How does she both build upon the work of others and diverge from the assumptions and conclusions of others?

February 16
Gregory S. Jackson, The Word and Its Witness, 2009—Scholarly Process
Some scholars use the Preface or Acknowledgements to explain how/why they came to a particular project; Gregory S. Jackson is not one of them. As you read this book, try to imagine how the scholarly process unfolded for Jackson. The blurb on the cover says, “With remarkable scope and insights into the interplay between religion, secularism, and politics, The Word and Its Witness will transform the way we understand American realism and American religion.” How did Jackson’s scholarly practice and process lead to his pathbreaking conclusions?

In your response paper, 2-3 pages, imagine how this project was sparked. Obviously, there is no right answer (I reviewed the book for American Religion, but otherwise, I don’t know Jackson!)—but this exercise in imaginative reconstruction is meant to stimulate your thinking about what might fire your conceiving of a project.
February 23

*American Quarterly* (December 2009) — Finding your Intellectual Circle

The December 2009 issue of *American Quarterly* includes articles, an event review, book review essays, an essay in memory of Emory Elliott, and a call for papers on sound. Given your scholarly interests, how would you begin to place your work in conversation with one of these pieces? What does the author care about (not limited to “subject”) that you also care about and hope to explore (or already have explored) in your research? How might your approach, archive, assumptions, and knowledge shift the discussion? Your response paper, 1-2 pages, should explain why you chose a particular piece of the AQ and how you connected your work to it. Feel free to imagine yourself at a dinner party seated next to the author you want to engage.

In the seminar, we will begin a discussion about the relationship between *American Quarterly* and the state of the field of American Studies in the early twenty-first century, and each student will share the conversation s/he imagined in this exercise.

At this point in the semester, I want you to have identified at least three scholars and their work that you will find meaningful in your field of interest. We will spend part of the seminar organizing the last three weeks of the semester. Bring to seminar the title of an article or book chapter (full citations, please!) that you would like to assign in one of the final meetings of the seminar. The challenge will be for you as a group to decide how to cluster the readings for as coherent a seminar meeting as possible.

March 2

John Stauffer, *Giants*, 2008 — American Studies and Biography

Biography maintains a tenuous hold on legitimacy in academic scholarship—it is wildly popular among the reading public, but it is often perceived as too narrowly focused to shed light on much else besides its subject. Of course, cultural biographies and biographical vignettes have become increasingly popular over the past four decades, especially since David Brion Davis posited the need for biography in cultural history to make explicit the individual interface with culture. As you read this innovative study, consider how this “parallel” biography sheds light on American culture? What is the significance of the parallels?

In your response paper, 1-2 pages, consider this question: What would be lost if Stauffer had simply written two separate biographies, one of Douglass and one of Lincoln? In other words, what is gained by placing the two lives alongside one another?

March 9


For many years, nature as a trope was central to American Studies—think Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx for starters. But nature qua nature has only recently found a place in American Studies, and it represents an opportunity to cross
disciplinary lines between the sciences and the humanities. What are the stakes and effects of such a crossing? This will be the focus of your 1-3-page response paper.

March 16 – NO SEMINAR!!  S P R I N G   B R E A K

March 23
José Ramón Sánchez, Boricua Power, 2007—Politics, Culture, and American Studies
The social sciences have historically been underrepresented in American Studies, although social theory, political significance, and more recently, international relations have been readily incorporated into American Studies scholarship. Sánchez is a political scientist—how does this discipline shape his work? What does he see in the process of ethnic formation that ethnic studies scholars, literary scholars, and historians may have missed? Your 1-2 page response paper will focus on political scientists' understanding of “power.”

March 30
Anne E. Boyd, Writing for Immortality, 2004—Inspiration
Anne Boyd earned her Ph.D. in AMST in 2000 at Purdue University. I’ve included her book partly to inspire you—there is life after graduate school and what you learn here can become part of the scholarly conversation! This book reflects a classic combination of history and literature, and it grapples with a moment when gender roles were being contested and in the process of change. How does the focus on women change the conventional understanding of “American literature”? Response papers, 1-2 pages, should discuss how Boyd’s book contributes both to Literary Studies and History.

April 6
The Seminar will not meet today—use class time to work on your final paper

April 13
Students' Choice
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________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

April 20
Students' Choice
________________________________________________________________
Assignments

Assignments in the course include:

- Lauter Essay = learning about American Studies today (7%)
- Sturken Essay = conceptualizing scholarship (7%)
- Review Essay = placing works into conversation (7%)
- Lepore Essay = situating one’s work in existing scholarship (7%)
- Jackson Essay = the scholarly process (7%)
- American Quarterly Essay = entering the current discussion (7%)
- Stauffer Essay = recognizing an original contribution (7%)
- Pyne Essay = bridging sciences and humanities (7%)
- Sanchez Essay = political science and American Studies (7%)
- Boyd Essay = discussing disciplinary contributions in interdisciplinary work (7%)
Final Paper = Towards interdisciplinary American Studies practice (30%)

Final Paper Description
The readings assigned in this course were selected with specific exercises and practices in mind. Probably for most of you, they are outside of the area of your particular interests. As a way of applying the various aspects of interdisciplinary scholarly production to your own work, your final paper will be an opportunity to articulate the issues that matter to you, the approaches you find most compelling and satisfying, and the scholars with whom you imagine your work will be in conversation. Include a discussion of both the subject you plan to study and the larger issue with which you wish to grapple. Discuss the work of scholars—either discipline-based or American Studies-based—who have addressed the subject and issue, and explain how you envision your work to build upon and/or stand apart from theirs. Do you consult a different archive? Do you plan to bring a different combination of disciplines together? Do those who study the same subject as you do so with the same larger issue in mind? Do those who address the same larger issue investigate the same subject?

The paper should be between 10 and 15 double-spaced pages in length. You should place your work in conversation with at least three scholars who work in your area of interest. The final paper is due on Tuesday, May 4, by 5:00 p.m. Please submit your paper to Susan Curtis either in UNIV 329 or in her mailbox in the main office of the Department of History (second floor of University Hall).

Assessment
Below you will find my standards for assessing student work. Grades range from A to F with pluses and minuses. The final grade in the course will be calculated by multiplying the number value of each grade by the percentage it represents in the overall course grade and adding the weighted grades together.
A+ = 12
A  = 11
A-  = 10
B+  = 9
What do grades reflect?

A = Your essay reflects careful reading and accurate reporting. Your essay is coherent and grammatically correct. When applicable, you have correctly identified the author’s thesis or main point and you have considered how the author has assembled evidence to support the thesis or main point. You have clearly addressed the task at the center of the assignment. For an A+ you have done all of this and added a particularly original insight or analysis of your own.

A- or B+ = Your work is very good, generally displaying a careful reading, accurate reporting, and linkages between different kinds of material. Your essay is well-written and contains relatively few grammatical mistakes. When applicable, you have correctly identified the author’s thesis or main point and you have considered the author’s use of evidence to support the thesis or main point. Your essay is not quite as polished as an “A” essay, and you have not discussed quite as many aspects of the issue, and it is clearly better than a “B” essay.

B = Your essay is good, but somewhat incomplete—either you are not reading carefully and thoroughly, or your essay does not make many linkages among course materials. When applicable you have identified the author’s main point, but your discussion of the evidence or the thesis is a bit vague. Your essay has grammatical and organizational problems, which makes it less compelling. You have not quite addressed the issue specified in the assignment.

B- or C+ = Your work is OK—better than average—but not quite as carefully and accurately done as “B” work. Your work makes some linkages among course materials and some of the time you place specific information in the proper context. You may have some difficulty identifying the author’s main point, although you do recognize some of the subpoints. Your discussion of the book—its thesis and evidence—is a bit vague. Your essay has grammatical and organizational problems. Overall, your work is not quite at the “B” level, but it is better than “C” work.
C = Your essay is clearly “passable,” but it shows lack of attention to specific details and makes few linkages among course materials. You tend to “report” rather than “analyze” materials, so most of what appears in your essay is not incorrect, but it does not perform some of the basic work scholars do as they encounter the interpretive work of others. You have difficulty identifying the author’s main point, some of your information is inaccurate, and you do not demonstrate that you have read the assigned readings carefully or, perhaps, you have not understood what you read. Your discussions are vague, and grammatical and organizational problems make it difficult to discern what you are trying to get across.

C- or D+ = Your work is not in the passing range for graduate students; it is marked by numerous problems that demonstrate a lack of effort, care, and/or understanding. Some of your references are incorrect, and you make even fewer linkages among course materials than a “C” paper. Grammatical and organizational problems mar your work. You miss the main point of an author’s work when you are asked to identify it, and you neglect discussions of specific issues or evidence.

D/D-/F = Your work indicates that you are not devoting much time to this course. You include inaccurate information, offer little specific detail, and/or write essays that reflect next to nothing from course readings. You do not understand the author’s main point and do not discuss the evidence used to support it. Your writing contains numerous grammatical and organizational problems, and it is difficult to see what you are trying to say. You rely on your own uninformed opinions rather than making it your business to be accurate in your assertions. You are in trouble in this course.

Academic Honesty

Every student in the seminar will be working with secondary materials for the final project. Citing the work of other scholars shows that you have done your homework, so to speak. Even if you do provide a citation, remember to enclose in quotation marks all passages composed by another writer and provide information about your source that will lead your readers directly to that passage; some readers like to see the quoted material in its larger context. Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course—it is considered a form of academic dishonesty. All scholars depend on the work of others before them, and it is a sign of academic honesty that you credit those on whom you have relied for information. Often plagiarism happens when a student inadvertently fails to enclose the words of others in quotation marks or paraphrases another author’s ideas without giving him/her credit. When it happens purposefully, it means that you are taking someone else’s work and passing it off as your own; such intellectual thievery is unacceptable. Penalties for intentional plagiarism
may range from the failure of an assignment to failure of the class and notification of the Dean.

If you have a question about how to use the work of others, when to quote, when to paraphrase, or how to cite previous scholarship, please consult me.

**Pandemic Policy**

In the event of a major campus emergency, course requirements, deadlines and grading percentages are subject to changes that may be necessitated by a revised semester calendar or other circumstances beyond the instructor’s control. Here are ways to get information about changes in this course.

See the Blackboard page for this course.
Contact Professor Curtis via email: curtis@purdue.edu
Contact Professor Curtis via telephone: Office: 494-4159

**Course and Instructor Evaluation**

During the last two weeks of the semester, you will be provided an opportunity to evaluate this course and your instructor. To this end, Purdue has transitioned to online course evaluations. On Monday of the fifteenth week of classes, you will receive an official email from evaluation administrators with a link to the online evaluation site. You will have two weeks to complete this evaluation. Your participation in this evaluation is an integral part of this course. Your feedback is vital to improving education at Purdue University. I strongly urge you to participate in the evaluation system.