American Studies 602
Methods for Reading Contemporary America
Dr. Bill Mullen
Thursday 3-5:50
Recitation Hall 123

Office 315 Heavilon Hall
Office Hours: Tues. 2-4 p.m.  
Th. 1:30-3 p.m. and by appointment

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Course Prerequisites: AMST 601

Course Description:

American Studies 602 has traditionally been titled “Contemporary Issues in American Society.” The new title, “Methods for Reading Contemporary America,” reflects a new purpose and location for the course in the American Studies curriculum. The course is designed to provide students a variety of disciplinary tools and methods for the *practice* of American Studies. The subject of the course will remain primarily contemporary America, but the intention of the course is to figure out how scholars do the work of producing American Studies scholarship.

Towards this end, the course will be driven by five fundamental questions. We will ask these questions of every text we study, including the work we do ourselves in seminar. To wit:

1) What is the purpose of the work? What are its implicit questions, aims and intentions? What academic or social problem does the work respond to and attempt to resolve?
2) What sources have been used in carrying out the work? What is the organizing principal behind the use of sources? Are there sources missing? How has the researcher used the resources?
3) What is the primary argument of the research? Is the argument clear? Well-developed? Sustained? What are some possible criticisms that might be made of the argument?
4) Does the research reveal biases of any kind? Ideological biases? Methodological biases? Disciplinary biases?
5) What contribution does the work make to the field of American Studies? Does the work challenge the boundaries of the field in any way? Can the research also be described as activist? If so, in what ways?
Course Requirements:

Because the purpose of the course is to develop ideas about the practice of American Studies, ‘hands on’ participation will be a key to your success and happiness in the course. All assignments will be devised to foster methods of doing American Studies.

1) **In-class presentation I.** Choose a reading for any week of the semester. Be prepared to lead discussion about the reading for that week. You must in your presentation respond to the five questions (above) about the work. You may also and should also provide an independent critical interpretation of the text. The interpretation should offer some original critical argument that explains how the reading does or does not advance your understanding of either scholarly methodology, or the field of American Studies. The presentation should come with a 1 page handout which helps to illustrate ideas in the presentation. You must also submit a 2-3 page written summary of your findings. 20 percent of grade.

2) **In-class presentation II.** Choose a second week of the semester. Prepare a presentation on a problem or idea related to the week’s reading. The presentation may use any sources you choose (academic, non-academic, printed, non-printed, public domain, private). The presentation should make an argument as to how and why the problem or idea you have chosen merits the attention of American Studies scholars and students. The presentation should include a 1 page handout that helps to illustrate ideas in your presentation. You must also submit a 2-3 page essay which presents a compelling argument for the study of the subject of your report, as well as a preliminary suggestion for methods of study. 20 percent of grade.

3) **Annotated Bibliography.** You must compile an annotated bibliography on a minimum of 10 sources not on the reading list of the class. The bibliography should be thematic organized a subject, problem or idea of your choosing. The bibliography must include a 2-3 page essay providing an argument for importance of the theme around which your Bibliography is organized. It should also provide a preliminary argument about how a researcher might use the Bibliography to conduct research on the theme you’ve chosen. 20 percent of grade.

For bibliography formatting instructions see the OWL website at Purdue:

4) **Critical Essay.** Choose a subject for an extended research essay. The essay will be written in three stages. Each stage will account as 33 percent of your total grade.

**Stage I:** 500 word abstract due in Week VI. The abstract must provide a description of the research problem, the aims and objectives of your research, and a brief description of the methodology you intend to use in the research.
**Stage II:** 6-8 page conference length essay due Week X. This essay must present a preliminary and focused argument on the essay. The thesis of the essay must make explicit the methodology to be used in the essay.

**Stage III:** 15-20 page essay due last day of class Thursday April 26.

Critical essays must use MLA or Chicago citation form as appropriate to the subject and methodology. Final essay will count as 40 percent of your final grade.

**Attendance:** Course attendance is mandatory. You are allowed one unexcused absence per semester. Any unexcused absences beyond one will result in a 10 percent reduction in your final grade.

**Plagiarism:** May be grounds for failing the course.

**Books:** All books for the course are available at Von’s Bookstore on State St.

**Course Schedule:**

Jan. 11 Week I: Introduction: How do you do American Studies?

Jan. 18 Week II: *Playing Indian* by Philip Deloria.


Feb. 2 Week IV: Read *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* by E. Patrick Johnson.


March 1 Week VIII: Read *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros.
Spring Break March 12-17

March 15 Week IX: Read Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945 by Melani McAlister.

March 22 Week X: Read The Possessive Investment in Whiteness by George Lipsitz. Read also in CUIS “White Love: Surveillance and Nationalist Resistance in the U.S. Colonization of the Philippines” by Vicente L. Rafael pp. 185-218.

March 29 Week XI: Read Susan Douglass Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media. Watch TV program to be selected by the class.

April 5 Week XII: Read Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich.

April 12 Week XIII: Read Race Rebels by Robin D.G. Kelley.

April 19 Week XIV: Read Vijay Prashad Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity.

April 26 Week XV: Final in-class reports on projects.