# Introduction to American Studies

AMS/HIS 201

Connecticut College

Department of History

Spring 2018

Tuesdays 7:00 p.m. – 9:45 p.m.

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Office hours: Tuesday 6-7 and by appointment

This course provides an introduction to American Studies. The course focuses on two major goals. The first goal is thematic. We will interrogate the meaning of America, the popular and often mythological understandings of its origin, paying, at times, attention to how immigrants conceptualized the United States. To that end, the first part of the course will draw on both historical and contemporary examples to investigate these themes.

The second goal of the course, while still adhering to the aforementioned themes, moves toward a broader discussion of method and the meaning of interdisciplinary studies. In short, we will grapple with the question: What is American Studies? In an effort to answer this question, we will examine a number of different disciplinary approaches to the study of America. From history to sociology to anthropology to art history, we will explore how scholars in various fields construct their arguments; evaluate evidence; and contribute to the field of American Studies.

A dynamic copy of this syllabus with live links to the readings you can find online, as well as any other assigned readings for the course, are all available on the class LMS, Moodle.

\*Content/Trigger Warnings: This class contains readings and materials that may be difficult to encounter. If at any point you have concerns about how the class materials might affect you, please do not hesitate to be in touch with me.

**Texts**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*

Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days*

Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness*

Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion*

Sudhir Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets*

George Chauncey, *Gay New York*

Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*

## Course Assignments

Final Exam: 25%

Two Response Papers (2-3 pages): 30%

Digital Autoethnography 20%

Group Project: 10%

Primary Object Report: 5%

Class Room Participation and Attendance: 10%

**Final Exam: 25%** This exam will be a combination of 5 term definitions, 5 object IDs, 2 short essay questions, and 1 longer essay question. It will be closed book/computer, but I will provide a study guide well in advance. More information will be shared about the final exam later in the semester.

**Two Response Papers (1000-1500 words): 30%** Two reading responses, turned in any weeks of your choosing, and due by 10 p.m. the Monday night before class. Your responses should begin by asking a question that arose for you during the week’s readings, which you will post at the top of your response. You should attempt to answer that question over the course of the paper, which means including a thesis statement and providing evidence from the readings—properly cited, Chicago style—to back up your claims. I am not looking for mastery of the topic or subject matter, but for you to demonstrate a thoughtful, considered, and *unrushed* engagement with the readings and course materials.

**Digital Autoethnography (1500 words + 5 images, objects, music videos, film clips, or other media types) 20%** If an autobiography is a story narrating *the events* of your life, an autoethnography is a story narrating *the context* of your life. This assignment will examine what it’s like to be “x” -- a multi-racial teen in your hometown, the first person in your family to attend college, a female basketball player, the child of a musician or a musician yourself, an aspiring mortician, etc. Think about and examine how this feature of your identity has shaped you, but also what cultural products or historical events have shaped your sense of what it means to be this particular thing, as well. To ground this project, frame your analysis around a **specific memory/experience** you have or had related to this identity. Lastly, not only will you look at this identity/experience and its impact on you, but you will try to draw larger conclusions through research and analysis about your location in American culture or history, more generally.

This project will be an exercise in writing for a public audience in a non-academic tone— it should read more like a well-written, researched, and edited blog post or online magazine article than a formal paper, and indeed, you will create and post your autoethnographies on a class website. I will provide more information about this project early in the semester.

**Group Project: 10%**Over the first half of the semester we will have small group presentations each week. Your group will be responsible for opening the class session (so don’t be late) with a short presentation (15-20 mins) that engages the week’s materials. To begin, groups will be expected to summarize the main arguments and ideas in the readings. Second, groups should think about the readings as points in a spectrum or constellation of history and contemporary culture. In other words, if a reading deals with a historical topic, a group should bring into discussion ways that topic or issue still appears in American culture today (or if not, why); if the reading deals with a contemporary topic, your group should work to provide some historical framing or a hypothesis for why it might have developed the way it has. Visual aids are fine and encouraged (PowerPoint, Google Slides, etc.). Lastly, your group should have at least three discussion questions prepared to launch our larger class discussion. You will be asked to rate each other’s contributions to this project (confidentially, to me) as part of your grade on this assignment, so pull your weight!!!

**Primary Object/Text Report (~750 words): 5%** Please choose a single object or text that pre-dates your date of birth, and analyze how it might have shaped and/or reflected ideas about America/Americanness to its users, readers, or viewers. Your study should describe the object or text the same way you would describe a piece of art—do a close reading of it, in other words. Wherever possible, give background information on the object, such as production information, how it would have been used/is used, and so on.

**Classroom Participation and Attendance: 10%**

1. You are expected to be in class (and awake). We will have a short break half way through, and you are expected to be here for both halves.
2. You are expected to do all of the readings *and* to come prepared to discuss them.
3. Some, or even most, of the reading and materials are contentious and/or contain sensitive material. Please be respectful of each other. “Respect” (and its equally slippery sibling, “free speech,”) is often thrown around as a cover for “all opinions or statements deserve equal airtime,” but that is not the meaning of respect (or free speech, for that matter). Respect means understanding your place in a conversation and how the things you say and do affect others. I am committed to fostering discussions that are lively, but I will not abide demeaning, racist, homophobic, classist, ableist, or sexist remarks in class. If you have any concerns about this at any point over the semester, or want to talk more about how I define these things, please schedule a time to meet with me personally.
4. Put your phones away.
5. Yes, I know you’re messaging over your laptop instead of on your phones. I reserve the right to and will execute a ban on laptops at any point if class discussion is shallow or slow.
6. If you do not show up to class, I will not assume you are in the hospital or dealing with a family emergency. I will assume it was cold and you were tired and heading home to watch Netflix in bed was more appealing than being in class.
7. Therefore, please let me know if you have an emergency that prevents you from being in class.
8. More than 2 absences=half a letter grade off your final grade for each absence, emergency or not.

### **Weekly Assignments**

**Introduction**

Week 1: January 23: What is American Studies?

Read:

* Whitman, **“**[I Hear America Singing](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46480/i-hear-america-singing)**”**
* Langston Hughes, “[I, Too, Sing America](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47558/i-too)”
* Allen Ginsberg, “[America](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49305/america-56d22b41f119f)”
* Adrian C. Louis, “[Elegy for the Forgotten Oldsmobile](https://poetryontherun.com/2013/10/19/adrian-c-louis/)”
* Sherman Alexie, “[How to Write the Great American Indian Novel](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52775/how-to-write-the-great-american-indian-novel)”

\*Group Selections: A (Feb 13), B (Feb 20), C (Feb 27), D (Mar 6), E (Mar 20), F (Apr 3)

**Part I: American Mythologies**

Week 2: January 30:The Meaning and Memory of America

Read:

* Interview with David Hackett Fischer: “[The Power of Regionalism](https://www.neh.gov/humanities/1999/julyaugust/conversation/the-power-regionalism),” *Humanities*
* Henry Nash Smith, “Book 1,” *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*
* Jill Lepore on “[The Origins of the Tea Party](https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-exchange-jill-lepore-on-the-tea-partys-dangerous-anti-pluralism),” *New Yorker*

Listen:

* Interview with Dinesh D’Souza, “[America: Imagine a World Without Her](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-L8ORbj9C6g),” *Viewpoints*
* Listen:Stephen Colbert, [“Truthiness,”](http://www.cc.com/video-clips/63ite2/the-colbert-report-the-word---truthiness) *The Colbert Report*

Week 3: February 6: The Politics of American Memory

Read:

* Annnette-Gordon Reed, [**“**Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson and the Ways We Talk About Our Past,”](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/books/review/sally-hemings-thomas-jefferson-annette-gordon-reed.html?_r=0) *New York Times*
* Karen L. Cox, [“Why Confederate Memorials Must Fall,”](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/opinion/confederate-monuments-white-supremacy-charlottesville.html) *New York Times*
* Jane Dailey, [“The Confederate General Who Was Erased,”](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-confederate-general-who-was-erased-from-history_us_599b3747e4b06a788a2af43e) *Huffington Post*
* David Gonzalez, [An Antebellum Hero, but to Whom?,](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/nyregion/j-marion-sims-statue-removal.html) *New York Times*
* Leah Donnela, [The Standing Rock Resistance Is Unprecedented (It's Also Centuries Old)](http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/11/22/502068751/the-standing-rock-resistance-is-unprecedented-it-s-also-centuries-old?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=2049) *NPR*
* Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. Ch 4: “Tourism and ‘Sacred Ground’: The Space of Ground Zero.s”

**Part II: American Identity**

Week 4: February 13: Immigration Part I (Group A)

Read:

* Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, “Introduction: The Fabrication of Race.”
* Rebecca Harding Davis, [*Life in the Iron Mills*](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/876/876-h/876-h.htm)

Week 5: February 20: Immigration Part II (Group B)

Read:

* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*

Week 6: February 27: Who is America Part I: Capitalism & You (Group C)

Read:

* Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days* Chapters 1-4; skim the remainder

Week 7: March 6: Who is America? Part II: Gender & Sexuality (Group D)

Read:

* [Combahee River Collective Statement](http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html)
* Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness*

Week 8: March 27: Who is America? Part III: Community (Group E)

Read:

* Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*, “The Days and Nights of the Festa” and “Italian Harlem.”
* Virginia E. Sánchez Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City,* “Introduction,” “Background of the Puerto Rican Migration to New York City,” and “Settlement Patterns and Community Development.”
* William Finnegan, “Letter from Maine: New in Town,” *The New Yorker*, December 11, 2006.
* **Due: Autoethnography**

Week 9: April 3: What is America Part IV: Places & Spaces: Cities (Group F)

Read:

* Tim Cresswell, “Defining Place,” *Place: A Short Introduction*
* Diana diZerega Wall, Nan A. Rothschild, Cynthia Copeland, “Seneca Village and Little Africa: Two African American Communities in Antebellum New York City,” *Historical Archaeology* 2008, 42(1): 97-107.
* Jane Jacobs, *The Death & Life of Great American Cities*, “Introduction” and “22: The Kind of Problem a City Is.”
* Ta-Nehisi Coates: “[The Case for Reparations](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/),” *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2014.

**Part III: Methods and Disciplinary Approaches in American Studies**

Week 10: April 10: Religious Studies

Read:

* Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion*

Week 11: April 17: Sociology

Read:

* Sudhir Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets*

Week 12: April 24: History

Read:

* George Chauncey, *Gay New York*. Ch 1- 6; skim the remainder
* **Due: Primary Object Report**

Week 13: May 1: Literature

Read:

* Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*

Week 14: May 8: Art History

Read:

* Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*. Intro-Ch 2.