

New American Studies  
Spring 2015  
Prof. Soltysik Monnet  
Office: Anthropole 5133  
Office hours: 3-5 Tuesday  
Date of this syllabus: Feb. 16

Moodle password:  
turtle island



## Introduction to New American Studies

### Course description and objectives:

The aim of this course is to introduce students to the major themes and methods of New American Studies, a theoretically-informed, comparativist and socially engaged recent development within American Studies. We will examine the role of language, myth and ideology in American cultural politics, focusing on issues such as imperialism, religion, multiculturalism, feminism and race. The corpus will include films, literary texts and readings from the textbook, *American Cultural Studies* (available at Basta!). The readings for the course will be supplemented by three guest lectures (Matilde Martin, Tomasz Basiuk, and Will Kaufman).

Required Text: Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. New York: Routledge, 2006.

### Schedule of classes and readings:

**February 17: Introduction to New American studies** (old, new, postnational and transnational): reading culture, tropes, myths, master narratives, ideology, and hegemony

**Feb. 24: Defining America: Ideology, Myths, Master Narratives and Key Tropes (Key Terms: The Frontier, exceptionalism, imperialism, adventure, American Dream)**

**Read:** "Introduction" to *American Cultural Studies* & excerpt from Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Frontier" & Kennedy "New Frontier Speech" (1960) & John Hellman, "The Return of the Frontier Hero" (1986)

**Recommended Reading:** Richard Slotkin, Introduction to *Regeneration Through Violence*

**March 3: American Religion and Civil Religion (key terms: the covenant, city upon a hill, exceptionalism)**

**Read:** Chapter on religion in *American Cultural Studies* & article on Civil Religion & Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and "2<sup>nd</sup> Inaugural Address"

**Discussion leaders:**

**March 10: African American culture & the Color Line**

**Read:** Chapter 3 of *American Cultural Studies* on African Americans & excerpts from W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

Recommended Reading: Shamoan Zamir, "The Souls of Black Folk: Thought and After-Thought" in the *Cambridge Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois*

For the discussion: focus on slavery and music, negro spirituals

**Discussion leaders:**

**March 17: Ethnicity and Immigration** – melting pot, multiculturalism, identity politics, mestizaje

**Read:** Chapter 2 of *American Cultural Studies*, "Ethnicity and Immigration"

**Watch:** *Lone Star* (Dir. John Sayles, 1996)

**Discussion leaders:**

**March 24 (Anthropole 4129): Guest Lecture by Matilde Martin, Asian American Literature**

**April 14: Queer Theory and Gendered Nationality**

**Read:** Eve Sedgwick from *Touching Feeling* (2003) & "The Epistemology of the Closet" (1990)

**Discussion leaders:**

**April 21: Guest lecture by Tomasz Basiuk**

**Read:** excerpt from Andreas Tobias, *The Best Little Boy in the World* (1973) & Michael Warner, "The Ethics of Sexual Shame," from *The Trouble With Normal*

**April 28: Feminism in American Studies: The Cultural Politics of Melodrama**

**Read:** Jane Tompkins, excerpt from *Sensational Designs* and Linda Williams,

**Watch:** *Philadelphia* (1993)

**Discussion leaders:**

**May 5: Counterculture and resistance: protest songs**

**Read:** Introduction to *Woody Guthrie, American Radical* by Will Kaufman & essay on Bob Dylan

**Listen:** Bob Dylan, "Masters of War" & "Ballad of Hollis Brown" & "Ballad of Emmet Till"

**Watch:** *Bound for Glory* (Dir. Hal Ashby, 1976)

**Discussion leaders:**

**May 7 (Anthropole 4030): Will Kaufman, "The Road to Peekskill" (concert and guest lecture)**

**May 12: Border Theory and Decolonization**

**Read:** Chapter on "New Beginnings," and excerpt from Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1992)

**Watch:** *Bordertown* (Dir. Gregory Nava, 2007)

## **Discussion leaders:**

### **May 19: Warrior Nation, Frontier Violence and the Adventure Genre**

Read: Chapter on “The Spread of Freedom” & critical text on adventure

Watch: *American Sniper* (Dir. Clint Eastwood, 2014)

## **Discussion leaders:**

**May 26:** presentation of final essays

## **Course requirements and validation:**

Five one-page critical reactions (typed, 1.5 line spacing, approximately 350-400 words), final essay of 8-10 pages (max 3000 words), and leading of discussion for one day. SPEC students will do the critical reactions and write a 14-16 page essay (4000-5000 words).

Essay due date: June 8 (for SPEC students June 19<sup>th</sup>)

**Critical reaction:** a one-page, typed, written response to a topic or reading, engaging with that topic both critically and personally, exploring what you find interesting and/or problematic and/or important. You can choose any five topics (dates) to address.

**Final essay questions:** suggestions and ideas will be passed out later in the semester but you are invited to formulate your own essay topic, bringing a theory or key concept into dialogue with a specific text.

## **Bibliography:**

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco: spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.

DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. The most important work of cultural analysis by the most important African American intellectual of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Fluck, Winfried, Donald E. Pease and John Carlos Rowe. *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2011.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993. The foundational text of Atlantic Studies, which has re-oriented the study of the slave trade and the American colonies away from a nation-based history and towards an understanding of the Atlantic as a dynamic cultural and conceptual space.

----- *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Harvard UP, 2000. An important set of essays attempting to question the categories of race as they currently exist and to move beyond race-based identity politics.

- . "Race and the Right to be Human." *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hellman, John. *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Focuses in particular on the role of the frontier thesis in Vietnam War discourse.
- Kaplan, Amy and Donald Pease. *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993. A foundational text for the New American Studies, integrating the word "imperialism" as a key conceptual term for understanding American history and cultural narratives.
- Lauter, Paul. *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park: Activism, Culture and American Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.
- Pease, Donald. "Introduction: The United States of Fantasy." *The New American Exceptionalism*. U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- , and Robyn Wiegman, eds. *The Futures of American Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002.
- . "From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the master Fictions of the Homeland Security State." *A Companion to American Literature and Culture*. Ed. Paul Lauter. Blackwell-Wiley, 2010.
- Radway, Janice A., Kevin K. Gaines, Barry Shank, and Penny von Eschen, eds. *American Studies: An Anthology*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Rowe, John Carlos. *The Cultural Politics of the New American Studies*. U of Michigan, 2012. Available online for free at the Open Humanities Press website. A set of theoretical and practical essays explaining and contextualizing the New American Studies paradigm.
- Saldívar, José David. *Border Matters: Re-Mapping American Cultural Studies*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.
- Slotkin, Richard. "Buffalo Bill's 'Wild West' and the Mythologization of the American Empire," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993.
- . "Myth and the Production of History." *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- Takaki, Ronald. *Debating Diversity: Clashing Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in the United States*. Oxford UP, 2002. A look at the frontier thesis and other

master myths of American history by the pre-eminent historian of American race and ethnicity.

Tompkins, Jane. "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History." *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985. The foundational text of the move towards a new understanding of the cultural politics of sentiment and women's cultural agency in 19<sup>th</sup> century America.

Williams, Linda. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White*. Princeton, 2002.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999. The most important radical history of the United States, focusing on people and cultural politics rather than pretending towards a consensus-based liberal history.

### **Films to watch for class:**

*Bound for Glory* (Hal Ashby, 1976)

*Lone Star* (John Sayles, 1996)

*Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993)

*Bordertown* (Gregory Nava, 2007)

*American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014)

### **Recommended Films (for essays and for class discussion):**

*Thunderheart* (Dir. Michael Apted, 1992) – a contemporary Western murder mystery, loosed based on true events at Wounded Knee in 1973.

*Bamboozled* (Dir. Spike Lee, 2000) – a satire about the complexities of African American identities, focusing on the issue of 19<sup>th</sup> century minstrelsy and the idea that a contemporary television show would try to revive this extremely racist genre in a seemingly ironic way.

*Frozen River* (Dir. Courtney Hunt, 2008) – very powerful and haunting film about two women, one white, one Native American, struggling with poverty while trying to raise children on the Canadian border, who form an uneasy alliance smuggling illegal immigrants in order to make some quick but risky money. A good text for talking about the border, about immigration and ethnicity, women's solidarity and survival, and to complicate ideas about melodrama.

*Lincoln* (Dir. Steven Spielberg, 2012) – Spielberg and Kushner's film about the last three months of Lincoln's life is an excellent text for discussing civil religion, melodrama, and American self-definition and mythologizing. It is also a gripping, if highly simplistic, drama about the passing of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.