

## American Studies 101

### INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN CULTURE STUDIES

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This course introduces interdisciplinary theories of American Studies and demonstrates how these theories can be applied to the study of society in the past and present. To do this, we will analyze two related case studies: the historic myth of the American frontier and the contemporary prevalence of the American fast food industry. We will approach each case study from multiple angles in order to consider different approaches to understanding the lives of ordinary Americans.

#### **Learning Goals**

This course fulfills the university requirements of General Education Category III.C.1, Introduction to the Social Sciences. As such, our goals will be to reflect on what it means to be a social being; to consider issues of cultural diversity and cultural change in our society; to compare the distinctive methods, concepts, and theories of two or more of the social sciences; to apply these methods, perspectives, and concepts to everyday situations; and to analyze and evaluate particular problems and themes using these social-science concepts.

Like many courses in American Studies, this course aims to help you learn to think critically about your own culture by analyzing and interpreting a wide spectrum of cultural artifacts, ranging from popular to folk to elite expressions. This course also seeks to deepen your skills of reading, synthesis, critical thinking, and analysis, and to guide you to clearly communicate your own conclusions in writing.

#### **Course Requirements**

Because this is an online course, you must have access to a computer with a reasonably fast, reliable Internet connection and the ability to read documents in Microsoft Word (version 2003 or later), Microsoft PowerPoint, and Adobe Acrobat. You should be comfortable navigating the Internet, sending emails with attachments, and viewing PowerPoint documents. If you are not familiar with BlackBoard, then you will need to review CSUF's BlackBoard support page for students: <http://blackboard.fullerton.edu/student/default.htm>

Whenever possible, course readings and materials will be online.

This course requires one packet of readings, available at CopyCo, 2438 Chapman Avenue, near the intersection of Chapman Avenue and State College Boulevard.

This course also requires one paperback book: Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, available at the Little Professor Bookstore, 725 N. Placentia Avenue, near the corner of Nutwood and Placentia.

## **Course Structure and Assignments**

There will be no on-campus class meetings.

Every week, by Sunday evening, I will post a guide to that week's reading, usually in the form of an extensively annotated PowerPoint document of images, background information, and questions to think about. This reading guide will be available on Blackboard under "Course Documents."

Every week in which there is assigned reading, you must participate in an online discussion through BlackBoard's discussion board. You can do this in one of two ways:

1. Post a question by Monday evening. Write a paragraph on our BlackBoard discussion board reacting to that week's reading. Your paragraph should demonstrate that you have thoughtfully done that week's reading and considered that week's reading guide. Your paragraph may identify important themes, quote key passages, consider connections to other week's readings, and/or express your own personal response. Your paragraph should contain a question for your classmates.
2. Post a response to one of your classmate's questions, by Wednesday evening. Your response should also demonstrate that you have thoughtfully done that week's reading and considered that week's reading guide. You may respond to a question that others have also responded to: the goal is to create a robust online conversation.

You may choose which weeks to post a question and which weeks to post a response, but over the twelve weeks, you must post at least 6 questions and at least 6 responses. This online discussion will take the place of in-class discussion. Please follow basic netiquette: be as respectful as you would be in a face-to-face encounter; do not waste your readers' time by repeating something that others have already posted; and, of course, be sure to maintain academic integrity by clearly citing your sources whenever you use the words or ideas of another.

In assessing these postings, I will assign an "A" to postings that are specific, cite the reading, and clearly demonstrate understanding of key issues. "B" postings show a partial understanding of the reading, but miss some key issues. "C" postings are poorly written, unclear, vague, and/or repetitive of other's postings. "D" postings show no evidence of having done the reading. "F" postings violate netiquette.

These discussion-board postings are due for twelve of the fifteen weeks of classes. The other three weeks will have exams or exam reviews, as indicated on the course schedule. Each exam will be posted by 5pm Monday and due by 5pm Wednesday. Each exam will have short identification questions about key terms, documents, and ideas, as well as a take-home essay which you will submit through the "Turnitin" function on BlackBoard. In case of technical

difficulties, you may drop off your essay in my on-campus mailbox in UH-313 or you may send your essay as an email attachment. The final exam will be cumulative, considering all fifteen weeks of class.

Students with technical difficulties should first contact the instructor and, if that fails to resolve the problem, then contact the CSUF BlackBoard administrator, Shariq Ahmed, [sahmed@fullerton.edu](mailto:sahmed@fullerton.edu)

## **Grading**

Your final grade will consider:

Discussion Board postings 4% each: 48% total  
Midterm 1: 10%  
Midterm 2: 20%  
Final Exam: 22%

Grades will be calculated using a standard scale. An A+ is 98-100, A is 93-97, A- is 90-92, B+ is 87-89, B is 83-86, B- is 80-82, C+ is 77-79, C is 73-76, C- is 70-82, D+ is 67-69, D is 63-66, D- is 60-62, and F is anything 59 or below.

## **Policies**

I will communicate with you by email throughout the semester, so you need to regularly check whatever email account BlackBoard has on record for you. Please keep all graded assignments so that any discrepancies can be easily and fairly straightened out. Plus and minus grades will be used. Late work will be penalized one letter grade for each week late, unless you have made arrangements with me beforehand. This course does not include an extra-credit option. Incompletes will be granted only due to exceptional circumstances. Plagiarism – using the words of another author without citing your source – will lead to an F on the assignment and a report to the campus Judicial Affairs Officer. If you have a disability or special need for which you may be requesting an accommodation, please inform me as well as the Disabled Student Services Office as early as possible in the semester.

Whenever you have questions, I encourage you to talk to me by email, phone, or in my office hours. I will respond to all email or phone messages within one business day. I look forward to a thoughtful semester exploring American Studies.

## **Course Schedule and Assignments**

All readings for weeks 1 - 11 are contained in our course packet, except for those that are online.

Week 1: Introduction

No Blackboard discussion this week. Read the syllabus, purchase the packet and book, and – perhaps – get started on next week's discussion.

Week 2: An Early Perspective on American Character

Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), available online at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/TURNER/> (read only chapter I)  
John Mack Faragher, "Introduction" and "Afterword" from *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner* (Yale University Press, 1998)

Week 3: Race on the Frontier

Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Introduction," "Racialism on the Run," and "The Burdens of Western American History" from *Legacies of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1987)

Week 4: Gender on the Frontier

Susan Lee Johnson, "'Domestic' Life in the Diggings: The Southern Mines in the California Gold Rush" and  
Valerie Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger, "Introduction" from Matsumoto and Allmendinger, ed.s, *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West* (Univ. of California Press, 1999)

Week 5: Environmental Frontiers

Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher, "Plunder and Preservation," from *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* (Yale University Press, 2007)

Week 6: Midterm 1

No BlackBoard discussion this week. Instead, there will be several short-answer questions posted on BlackBoard's "Assignments" page.

Week 7: Using Visual Documents to Interpret History

"Photographs of the American West" (1861-1912)

<http://www.archives.gov/research/american-west/> Be sure to click through at least half the images in each sub-section.

"Lure of the American West: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art Museum" (Museum Exhibit, 2000) <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/exhibits/t2go/11w/image-frame.html>

As you view these photos and paintings, consider: do they verify Turner's frontier thesis or modify it?

Week 8: The Frontier in Popular Culture

Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher, "The Myth of the Frontier" from *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* (Yale University Press, 2007)

Michael Steiner, "Frontierland as Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Architectural Packaging of the Mythic West," *Montana, The Magazine of Western History* 48 (Spring 1998), 2-17.

Week 9: The Cultural Politics of Frontier Memory

Joan Brubick, "Breakout," "Rodeo Queen Lament," "A Perfect Image," and "The Last Rodeo" from *Rodeo Queens: On the Circuit with America's Cowgirls* (New York: Perseus Books, 2002)

Week 10: The Frontier and the Vietnam War

Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, excerpts in our course packet

Week 11: Midterm 2

No BlackBoard discussion this week. Instead, choose one work of art that either supports or challenges Turner's frontier thesis. You may choose a painting, photograph, poem, advertisement, movie, amusement-park ride, song, short story, or any other work of art. You may choose a

primary-source produced in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century west or a secondary source that was produced more recently and memorializes that artist's interpretation of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century west. Write a 3-page essay explaining your choice and considering how Turner and the other authors on our syllabus would assess your chosen piece evidence. Consider issues of race, gender, environmental attitudes, and the politics of this particular piece of culture. This essay is due by Wednesday, 5pm, through BlackBoard's "Turnitin" function.

In assessing essays, an "A" essay is one that responds thoughtfully to the assignment and meets four criteria to a very high standard:

- Clear and specific writing that
- thoughtfully analyzes your chosen cultural source,
- articulates connections to course readings,
- and includes your own original ideas.

A "B" essay also does those four things, yet one is not to a high standard. The writing may be vague, repetitive, or overly-general; the primary sources may be shallowly analyzed; the connections to course readings may be skimpy; or the ideas may only reiterate class discussions. A "C" essay lacks a high standard in two areas; C essays are often logically inconsistent. A "D" essay lacks a high standard in three areas. An "F" essay does not respond to the assignment.

Week 12: The Automobile in the West

Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, chapters 1-3

Week 13: Economics and Culture

Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, chapters 4-5

Week 14: Old and New Frontiers

Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, chapters 6-8

Week 15: Government and Culture

Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, chapters 9, 10, and Epilogue

Week 16: Final Exam

This cumulative exam will challenge you to make connections between all fifteen weeks of the course. It will be posted on BlackBoard by 5pm Monday and it is due by 5pm on Wednesday.