

American Studies 350
Theories and Methods of American Studies
Fall 2008
TTh, 1-2:15, H-126

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This course introduces key theorists and model practitioners of American Studies. It centers on several questions: How do we study American culture? Why do we study culture? And how does culture have power?

“Theory” is an abstract term. To make it concrete, consider: if you were asked to study the coffee shop Starbucks, how would you do it? What sources would you use? What questions would you ask? Why would you even care about the coffee shop Starbucks? One goal of this course is to deepen the ways that you might study any cultural object. How would you study Starbucks if you were an economist? An anthropologist? An architect? A historian? An art historian? A labor historian? An expert in gender studies? An activist opposed to globalization? Because American Studies is interdisciplinary, an American-Studies-style approach to Starbucks might include aspects of all those disciplines. In this class, with each author we read, we will ask how that author would study Starbucks. This is one way to think about their theories and methods.

Course Objectives

Students in AMST 350 will become familiar with diverse theorists, developing skills at reading complex works while exploring why and how we study American culture. Students will enhance their own skills of independent research: analyzing evidence, applying theories, synthesizing ideas, developing original conclusions, and communicating their thoughts, especially in writing.

The prerequisites for this class are American Studies 201 and 301 or permission of the instructor. This course fulfills the university upper-division baccalaureate writing requirement for American studies majors for any student who receives a final grade of C or better.

Assignments and Evaluation

All course readings are articles or excerpts from books, so all readings are in a course packet available at CopyCo, 2438 Chapman Avenue. Every week, before Tuesday’s class, you must complete a reading journal of two paragraphs:

1. Précis: Summarize the article. What does the title mean? How is this essay organized? What are the keywords, memorable phrases, intriguing uses of sources, and/or important questions that this work raises? What is this author’s thesis? What do you want to remember? Do not try to mechanically answer every question listed here; instead, focus on the questions that seem pertinent to this week’s essay. The only question that you must answer every week is the first question, what does the title mean. In your précis, be sure

to consider the entire essay, not just parts. Be careful, too, to use quotes whenever you use another author's phrases.

2. Evaluation: What is your opinion of this reading? How does it connect to other readings or course themes? What seems portable? What questions do you want to raise in class discussion?

Your reading journal should be no longer than one typed page. Reading journals will be collected during Tuesday's class every week.

Throughout the semester, you will also write five brief two-three page reflection papers in which you apply theories to Starbucks. Specific assignments and due-dates are explained in the course outline, below. In every reflection assignment, you must explicitly use the theorists we have read in the weeks before the assignment is due. 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 primary sources,
- articulates connections to the 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. An "F" essay does not respond to the assignment.

Your final grade will consist of your reading journal (15%), each reflection paper (10% each; 50% total), your final essay (20%), and class participation (15%). To receive an A in class participation, you should plan on speaking at least once each week in class and you should miss no more than one class all semester.

Policies

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, in class, after class, by email, or in my office hours. I look forward to a thoughtful semester exploring theories and methods of cultural studies.

COURSE OUTLINE

Introduction

Week 1 (Aug 26): What is “culture” and why do we study it?

Week 2 (Sept 2): How did we get here and where are we going?

Gene Wise, “Paradigm Dramas in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement,” *American Quarterly* 31:3 (1979), pp 293-337.

Amy Kaplan, “Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Duke UP, 2003)

Reflection assignment due Sept 4: What is American Studies in your opinion?

Part One: Identities and Culture

Week 3 (Sept 9): Imagined Communities – Theory

Benedict Anderson, “Introduction,” “Cultural Roots,” and “Census, Map, Museum” in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983).

Week 4 (Sept 16): Imagined Communities – Practice

Melani McAlister, “Introduction” and “Conclusion: 9/11 and After: Snapshots on the Road to Empire” in *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Univ. of California Press, 2001)

Week 5 (Sept 23): Intersectional Identities – Theory

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17:2 (1992), pp 251-274.

Week 6 (Sept 30): Intersectional Identities – Practice

Gail Bederman, “Remaking Manhood through Race and ‘Civilization’” from *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995)

Reflection assignment due Oct 2: Select a piece of Starbucks culture and analyze the way that it reflects and affects the construction of identities of either race, class, gender, nation, region, sexuality, generation, or some other cultural category. Consider what imagined community Starbucks helps to create.

Part Two: Discourses and Culture

Week 7 (Oct 7): Weapons of the Weak – Theory
James Scott, “Preface,” “Behind the Official Story,” and “Domination, Acting, and Fantasy” in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale UP, 1990)

Week 8 (Oct 14): Weapons of the Weak – Practice
Robin Kelley, “The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics during World War II” from *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (The Free Press, 1994)

Reflection assignment due Oct 16: Identify “weapons of the weak” at Starbucks. Consider who performs these cultural acts of resistance and how effective they may be.

Week 9 (Oct 21): Ethnography and Semiotics – Theory
Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973)

Week 10 (Oct 28): Ethnography – Practice
Jan Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (University of North Carolina Press, 1984/1991), chapter 3, conclusion, and preface

Reflection assignment due Oct 30: Write your own ethnography of Starbucks. First, observe Starbucks for several hours, conducting interviews as you feel necessary. Analyze the semiotics of Starbucks culture. What webs of significance help explain this culture?

Part Three: Money, Culture, and Power

Week 11 (Nov 4): Hegemony – Theory
Selections from David Forgacs, ed., *The Gramsci Reader*. “Glossary of Key Terms,” “Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical Bloc,” and “The Art and Science of Politics.”
Kate Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture, and Anthropology* (Univ. of California Press, 2002), chapter 2.

Week 12 (Nov 11): Hegemony – Practice
Nov 11: Campus closed for Veteran’s Day
Nov. 13: George Lipsitz, “Cruising Around the Historical Bloc: Postmodernism and Popular Music in Los Angeles” *Cultural Critique* (Winter 1986-7), pp. 157-177.

Reflection assignment due Nov 18: Choose one aspect of Starbucks and analyze its base and superstructure. Consider how base affects superstructure and how superstructure affects base. Who is in power: the corporation, consumers, employees, or some other bloc?

Conclusions

Week 13 (Nov 18): Pulling it all Together
Norma Mendoza-Denton, “‘Muy Macha:’ Gender and Ideology in Gang-Girls’ Discourse about Makeup,” *Ethnos* 61:1-2 (1996), pp 47-63.

Nov 24-30 is Thanksgiving Vacation.

Week 14 (Dec 2): Revisiting Paradigm Dramas

Michael Denning, "The Socioanalysis of Culture: Rethinking the Cultural Turn," in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (Verso, 2004)

Week 15 (Dec 9): What is American Studies good for?

Catherine Lavender, "What Can I Do with an American Studies Major" (circa 2005)

John Ibson, "What's the Use? American Studies after Graduation" (circa 1975)

Anonymous graduates of CSUF's American Studies Department, "Alumni Questionnaire Responses: Program Performance Review" (2007)

Final Essay due Dec 16 by 1 pm: Write a lecture for first-year college students, using a single case study – other than Starbucks – to introduce students to theory and methods of American Studies. Former students have chosen Coney Island, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and a local dog-park for this exercise. Explain how specific theories help you think more deeply about your chosen case study. You do not need to use every theorist whom we have studied, but you should consider every subtitle in this syllabus: what is culture and why do we study it, imagined communities, intersectional identities, weapons of the weak, ethnography and/or semiotics, and issues of hegemony – if only to explain that this theoretical approach does not apply to your chosen case study. Your lecture/essay should be approximately eight pages long.