

Seminar in Theory and Methods of American Studies

Fall 2004

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(open from 8 a.m.-5 p.m.)

Learning Goals

This class is an important component of the major in American Studies. It has multiple learning goals, all of which aim to clarify the nature of the major you have chosen. This course should help you:

- develop and refine your skills of cultural analysis, synthesis, and interpretation
- probe the concept of culture and strengthen your comprehension of cultural processes
- learn and apply common methods of historical and contemporary research in American Studies
- conceptualize pluralism and subculture and understand the workings of a multicultural society
- sharpen your expressive skills and the art of revision
- increase your ability to judge the soundness of particular American culture studies and to measure excellence in research and writing
- appreciate and participate in the passion and satisfaction of interdisciplinary scholarship

Please note that this course satisfies the University's Upper Division Writing Requirement. Earning a grade of C or better is necessary to meet this requirement.

Required Texts--available at Little Professor Book Center 725 Placentia Ave., Fullerton

H.L. Goodall, Jr. Writing the New Ethnography

Anne Fadiman, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down

Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures

William Strunk and E.B. White, The Elements of Style

Articles--Available at the CSUF Library Reserve Book Room (Circulation Desk) Xerox a copy of each for your convenience

Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement"

George Lipsitz, "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory and American Studies"
Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, Forward plus chapter 3 "We Don't Wrap Herring in a Printed Page" 79-112
Karen Lystra, "Clifford Geertz and the Concept of Culture"
Andrea Tone, "Black Market Birth Control: Contraceptive Entrepreneurship and Criminality in the Gilded Age"

Course Outline

I. What Is American Studies?

- "What is American Studies?" Observations and reactions
- The challenges and frustrations of answering that question!
- Why did you become a major?
- Opportunities, satisfactions, and difficulties of the discipline
- Making the Familiar Seem Strange
- Shifting Frames: The Interdisciplinary Style of Thinking

Assignment: Lecture and Discussion

Approximate Time: Aug. 24-26

II. American Studies: History, Scholarship, and Philosophy

- Defining the field
- Founding Fathers: Vernon Louis Parrington and the Intellectual History Synthesis, 1920-1965
- Characteristic Structures of a Discipline: Paradigms, Community, and Communication Structures
- Coming Apart in the 1960s: The Politics of Diversity
- Minority cultures and subordinate groups
- Anthropological Influences in American studies
- The Culture concept and ethnography
- European cultural theory, Poststructuralism, and American Studies

Assignment: Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies" and George Lipsitz, "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory and American Studies"

Approximate Time: Aug. 31- Sept. 9

IV. Studying American Culture: The First Exemplar

- Ethnic identity and dominant culture
- Jewish religion, family ritual, and local community
- *Homo narrans*: humankind as storytellers
- Making meaning out of memory and experience
- Cultural dramas and the rituals of everyday life
- Definitional ceremonies and the functions of rituals

-Compassionate objectivity

Assignment: Barbara Myerhoff, Number Our Days, Forward plus chapter 3

Approximate Time: Sept. 14

III. Studying American Culture: The Second Exemplar

- Cross-cultural encounters: the Hmong in America
- Misunderstanding the “other”
- Empathy vs. distance
- A cycle of adjustment: Immigration, assimilation, and loss
- Resistance to change: cultural separation and autonomy
- Hmong ethnicity: the group vs. the self
- Healing rituals: western medicine vs. Hmong ceremony
- Guardians of Identity: the Shaman vs. the Doctor

Assignment: Anne Fadiman, The Spirit Catches You And You Fall Down (begin at chapter 8-19)

Approximate Time: Sept. 16- Sept. 23

Due Sept. 23: Choose a topic for your own ethnography that includes a specific site(s) for your fieldwork and write a two paragraph summary of your research design. This will involve some experimentation BEFORE this assignment is due to ensure that you can actually gain access to your fieldwork site. You must include a one-paragraph summary of the leg-work you have done to ascertain that your topic is feasible. Please note that your own family or religion is off-limits. I also think your specific work environment is an unwise choice.

IV. Studying American Culture: A Practical and Theoretical Guide to Going Into the Field and Representing Ethnographic Experiences

- Fieldwork and Contemporary Methods of Cultural Study
- What is ethnography?
- Research Design: Problems, cases, and samples
- Gaining Access: Gatekeepers and Field Relations
- Interviews in the field: Informants and Conversation
- Recording Fieldwork Data
- The Process of Analysis: Questions, Questions, Questions!
- From Fieldwork to Fieldnotes to Stories
- Becoming Cultural Critics: Voice, Reflexivity, and Character
- Finding the Story in Ethnographic Experience

Assignment: H.L. Goodall, Jr., Writing the New Ethnography

Approximate Time: Sept. 28-Oct. 7

V. American Studies and the Concept of Culture: Developing a Theoretical Framework

- Competing Definitions of Culture: Behavioral, Holistic, Structural, Material and Interpretive
- Human nature, biology, and evolution
- Culture and the non-human physical environment
- Culture and social structure
- Culture and the psychological: Individual uniqueness and commonalities
- Basic Building Blocks: Symbols and their Characteristics
- Cultural Repertoires
- Levels of culture (covert/overt, deep/surface)
- Deep culture: Space, Time, and Body movement

Assignment: Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (Chapters 2 (skip part II, pp. 37-43) 4, 6 (and possibly 15) and Karen Lystra, "Clifford Geertz and the Concept of Culture"

Approximate Time: Oct. 12-Oct. 26

Midterm: Oct. 28 (in-class, closed books and notes)

VI. Conceptualizing Cultural Pluralism: A Theory of Multiculturalism

- Non-specialized cultural knowledge
- Cultural segmentation: Understanding subcultures
- Specialized cultural knowledge
- Cultural addition and substitution
- Cultural innovation as cultural addition
- Cultural substitution as transmission across generations
- Social and geographical location: The boundaries of social interaction
- Subcultural Construction: Socializing and group identity
- The Language of a subculture

Assignment: Lectures plus return to Number Our Days and The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down for illustrations and application of the theory of multiculturalism

Approximate Time: Nov. 2-9

VIII. Historical Culture Study: Theory and Practice

- Imagination, Puzzles, and Facts
- Why Do Historical Research? Passion, Curiosity, and Training
- What is a primary source? What is a secondary source?
- Interpreting Texts: Finding Patterns and Making Connections
- Documents in Context
- Historical Sources on the Internet

- Problems of Historical Explanation
- Finding Evidence and Choosing Texts: Pattern and Representative Sources
- Standard References and Bibliographic Guides: Finding your Way Around A Library
- Doing Historical Culture Studies: Focus on the Primary Source
- Footnotes are your friends

Assignment: Andrea Tone, “Black Market Birth Control: Contraceptive Entrepreneurship and Criminality in the Guilded Age” plus hand-out on “Documentation Basics”

Approximate Time: Nov. 11-18

Nov. 11: Complete research and turn in fieldwork journal

NOVEMBER 22-28 THANKSGIVING BREAK

VI. An Approach to Style: Usage, Composition, and Writing

- Elementary Rules of Composition
- Principles of Composition
- Words and Expressions Commonly Misused
- Clarity, Power, and Precision

Assignment: Strunk and White, The Elements of Style

Approximate Time: Nov. 30-Dec. 9 (Last Day of Class)

Xerox the first page of your research paper (you will have to finish at least two pages to make this work) for everyone in the class. We will correct and revise one paragraph according to the precepts and principles gleaned from Strunk and White. Be prepared to read one of your paragraphs aloud to the class, which we will collectively try to improve in class. This is not meant to torture you but rather to help train your ear to stylistic subtleties.

Ethnography Due on Friday, December 17

Course Requirements and Assessments:

Testing your knowledge and understanding of course material in lectures, discussion, and reading assignments will be done through one midterm, a fieldwork journal and a research paper. The latter is a hands-on approach to contemporary cultural research that will require you to demonstrate a mastery of the skills of research design, contemporary fieldwork, cultural analysis, and presentation (organization and style.) The parameters of the fieldwork journal assignment as well as the ethnographic research paper that is based on your fieldwork journal will be discussed in class. You are responsible for this

information regardless of your attendance pattern.

The course is structured so that the heaviest reading load occurs in the first half of the semester. This will allow more time for work on your research paper in the last half of the semester.

The relative weight given to each assignment is indicated below through a point system. (I reserve the prerogative to revise these point allotments during the semester. They are a guideline, not the holy grail.) From experience I can tell you that Incompletes are a very bad idea in this course and should not be taken except in extreme emergencies such as incapacitating illness or bodily injury.

Research design	20 points
Fieldwork notes (minimum 20 pages)	100 points
Contemporary Research Paper	150 points
The midterm	130 points
Class participation (includes any in-class assignment, attendance, questions asked and answered, and the one-page practice revision)	50 points

Students should take note of the fact that attendance and diligence in completing assignments is crucial in a class of this kind. Not only does the class build upon prior meetings and assignments, but current lecture and discussion assumes and depends upon familiarity with the assigned reading. There are no short cuts. The required level of abstraction is not the coin of everyday reality, and, consequently, this class necessitates a steady level of concentration. Though you should not expect to be entertained, I hope you will learn a great deal. Questions are encouraged. Best wishes for an intellectually rewarding semester.

Reminder: The syllabus is only an approximation of course topics and reading due dates. Specific assignments will be made according to class needs and lecture requirements. Students are responsible for modifications to the syllabus which are made during the course of the semester.