

American Studies 301
The American Character/Fall 2008
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1-2:15 PM in
UH-250.
Teaching assistant: Matt Glassman

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Office hours: M, 11-12; T & Th, 4-5 PM;
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This American Character course explores the meaning of national identity within an increasingly diverse nation-state and an ever-globalizing yet ever-fragmenting world. This issue has become increasingly insistent eight years into a new century as we continue to react to the shock of September 11th and move into an historic presidential election seven years later. The so-called “war on terror,” the rise of China, India, and Russia as challengers to our world power, the possibility of electing an African-American President during this very semester, the ongoing turmoil in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Georgia, Russia, and other places, even the recent Beijing Olympics—all challenge how we think of ourselves as a people, both within our national borders and upon the larger global stage. Much of this tumultuous questioning about what it means to be an American and our image as the most powerful and envied people on earth is rooted in our past as well as in recent events. Quick declarations of “God Bless America” and “United We Stand,” images of “red” versus “blue” America, polarized passions about immigration north from Mexico and military efforts in the Middle East—these and other slogans and issues inspire profound questions about the essential quality of our national identity and our role within a world that is swiftly coming together at the same time that it rapidly breaks apart.

For more than 500 years, North America has been a testing ground for the cultural interactions that grip the world today. The 16th and 17th century contacts and collisions between invading Europeans, enslaved Africans, and a mosaic of Native American cultures set the stage for subsequent interactions in the Americas and throughout the world. From the onset, North American culture has been richly various and ever changing: racial, ethnic, religious, regional, class, political, age, and gender-based differences among Americans have stitched together a vivid cultural quilt. And our region--Southern California--has become the most vital and volatile part of that cultural quilt and the probable testing ground for the nation's and perhaps the world's multicultural future.

Yet at the same time that Americans delight in cultural diversity they also struggle with questions of national unity. The sheer complexity of American culture provokes questions about our identity as a whole. Given the pluralistic nature of our culture, what, then, do Americans have in common? What does it mean to be an American? How does "American" identity, for example, compare with Israeli or Palestinian, Kurdish or Iraqi, Shiite or Sunni, Georgian or Ossentian identity? Which is most significant--the unity of the diversity of American culture? How do the parts relate to the whole? What might be the "glue" that holds the parts together? Is there such a thing as a "national character"--a common "core" of attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors--that distinguishes Americans from other groups of people? If such a "core" exists, what causes it? How is it learned? How has it changed over time? How does it influence people throughout the United States and the rest of the world? How important, indeed, is national identity in our post modern, globalizing world? Does globalization ultimately mean Americanization? Or does it inspire narrower forces of localism or larger impulses of cosmopolitanism?

These are some of the questions addressed in this course. In addition to exploring issues of cultural diversity and unity, this course also encourages students to understand themselves as participants in their own culture--as contributors to and critics of the national character or characters. Some of the concepts developed throughout the semester include and understanding of: ethnocentrism, cosmopolitanism, enculturation, subculture, dominant culture, and various theories of cultural pluralism, multiculturalism, assimilation, acculturation, the frontier, urbanization, mobility, regionalism, and environmentalism.

Beyond the specific issues, American Studies 301 is designed to encourage the following goals for student learning in General Education at CSU Fullerton: To understand broad unifying themes in the social sciences from cross-disciplinary perspectives; to solve complex problems that require social scientific reasoning; to relate the social sciences to significant social problems or to related disciplines; to understand that culture is socially constructed and fundamental to social interaction; to appreciate the complex

relationships that gender, ethnicity, and class bring to the discussion of society and culture; to understand that because we live in an interconnected world, we need to understand the diversity and relationships within and among cultures; to recognize and evaluate how one's cultural history affects one's sense of self and relationship to others.

Readings:

Collected Readings: 22 required or recommended essays available at **Copyco**, 2438 East Chapman Ave., Fullerton 714 680-9800. (Buy this right away.)

The three required books are available at the **Little Professor Bookstore**, 725 N. Placentia Ave. (near Nutwood) 714 996-3133. They are:

Ole Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth

Michael Gold, Jews Without Money

Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness

In addition to these readings, I will offer a wide range of visual and musical materials and artifacts that are an integral part of the course

Course Requirements and Assessment:

It is important to complete the assigned readings as they come up for class discussion, and our Collected Readings contains a list of study questions that should sharpen your understanding of the materials. Although I will lecture at times, I always welcome your participation and relish learning that occurs as we exchange ideas based upon our common readings and personal backgrounds.

You will do at least five pieces of writing of varying lengths and significance. These include **several brief quizzes**, **two in-class midterm exams**, and an **in class final**. The brief (20 minute) **quizzes** will be given at several points of the semester simply to see your immediate understanding of specific readings and what you've gathered from our discussions. The **midterms**--taken by the sixth and twelfth weeks--are designed to measure your deeper understanding of important issues and concepts from the readings, lectures, and discussions. The **final** will provide an opportunity to look back over the course and bring these issues and concepts together in a more analytical and comprehensive manner. I will also try to squeeze in a **10-15 point extra credit take home response paper** toward the end of the semester. Although there will be a relatively small short answer component to each midterm, the focus of each exam will be the writing of brief, substantive essays anchored to the course materials. Make up exams and extensions will be given only due to difficult and unforeseen circumstances.

I will prepare you for the midterms and final as they approach with brief study guides and sample questions several days before hand. As mentioned, your Collected Readings also contain a series of study questions for the materials throughout the semester, and I will emphasize them at the beginning of each class. I will schedule group study sessions for the week before each exam, and I encourage you to see me during office hours or by appointment for further understanding of themes developed in class. My teaching assistant, **Matt Glassman**, will be an important resource throughout the semester.

The written exams will assess your ability to understand, critique, and analyze assigned material; to synthesize complex ideas; and to organize brief and extended essays that are grounded in evidence and express your individual viewpoint. Active use of study guides and attended review sessions with Matt Nelson should prepare you for writing effective exams and papers. *I will provide detailed written feedback on each piece of writing—praise and constructive criticism to improve your next quiz or essay.*

Grading:

Each midterm will constitute 25% of your grade; the final will determine 40% of your grade; the quizzes will make up 10%. Should your grade fall on a borderline at the end of the semester, the quality of your class participation and the consistency of your attendance will directly influence the final evaluation.

Two Quizzes:	10%	(40 possible points—20 points each)
Midterm # 1:	25%	(100 possible points)
Midterm # 2:	25%	(100 possible points)
Final exam:	40%	(160 possible points)
(400 possible total points for the course)		

Possible extra credit take home response paper: 10-20 points.

Final grades for this course will include pluses and minuses; I grade on a standard 10% scale; the final 400-point grade spread, then, is as follows:

400-360=A+-A-
359-320=B+-B-
319-280=C+-C-
279-240=D+-D-
239 and below=F

Your written work must demonstrate an understanding of all the relevant course materials, including the assigned readings, lectures, multi-media materials, and discussions. It is vital, in other words, to come to every class meeting and to listen to the ideas presented and the discussions generated. Even in a class as large as this one, I look forward to student participation and the learning that happens during intensive discussion of ideas found in our readings or sparked by my questions. I also encourage you to continue these conversations outside the classroom--with me or with each other.

A few ground rules: 1) Strive mightily to be in class on time—by 1 PM—and stay until 2:15. Coming to class late on occasion is understandable; what is not acceptable is walking out in the middle of class—unless there's some uncontrollable and unplanned emergency. If you have to leave early it is important that you let me know about this before hand. 2) Be sure to give this course and its reading materials your full attention when you're here. Don't come to class and read books and materials from other classes. 3) Be sure to turn off your cell phones while you're in class. Text messaging is not a classroom activity, and I will not allow any use of cell phones during class. 4) I also am asking you not to use laptops in class--unless you have a writing disability that requires a laptop. Open laptops are an obstacle to discussion and a distraction from the dynamic interchange and learning that hope to generate during our time together. If you have a dire need to use a laptop, then I'd like you to sit toward the front of the class. I will stress a few more ground rules in class, but in general I expect you to be there with your full and undivided attention.

Student Accommodations:

CSUF complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act by providing a process for disclosing disabilities and arranging for reasonable accommodations. On the CSUF campus, the Office of Disabled Student Services has been delegated the authority to certify disabilities and to prescribe specific accommodations for students with documented disabilities. DSS provides support services for students with mobility limitations, learning disabilities, hearing or visual impairments, and other disabilities. Counselors are available to help students plan a CSUF experience to meet their individual needs. Prior to receiving this assistance, documentation from a qualified professional source must be submitted to DSS. For more information, please contact DSS in UH 101; phone 714-278-3117.

Academic Integrity:

Integrity is an essential component of all students' academic experience. Students who violate university standards of academic integrity are subject to disciplinary sanctions, including failure in the course and suspension from the university. Since dishonesty in any form harms the individual, other students, and the university, policies on academic integrity are strictly enforced. I expect that you will familiarize yourself with the academic integrity guidelines found in the current student handbook.

[<http://www.fullerton.edu/handbook/>]

Cheating is defined as obtaining or attempting to obtain credit for work by the use of any dishonest, deceptive, fraudulent, or unauthorized means, or helping someone commit an act of academic dishonesty. (UPS 300.021). Examples include, but are not limited to:

Unacceptable examination behavior: communicating with fellow students, copying material from another student's exam or allowing another student to copy from an exam, possessing or using unauthorized materials, or any behavior that defeats the intent of an exam.

Plagiarism: taking the work of another and offering it as one's own without giving credit to that source, whether that material is paraphrased or copied in verbatim or near-verbatim form.

Unauthorized collaboration on a project, homework or other assignment where an instructor expressly forbids such collaboration.

Documentary falsification, including forgery, altering of campus documents or records, tampering with grading procedures, fabricating lab assignments, or altering medical excuses.

Course Outline:

I. APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF NATIONAL CHARACTER: UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN CULTURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT (Three weeks)

“Of all historical problems, the nature of national character is the most difficult and the most important.”

Henry Adams

“You cannot spill a drop of American blood without spilling the blood of the whole world...we are not a nation as much as a world.... we are the heirs of all time and with all nations we divide our inheritance.”

Herman Melville, 1850s

“We are the most perfect society now existing under the sun. Here man is free as he ought to be.”
Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, 1780

“America, why are your libraries full of tears?”

Allen Ginsberg, 1955

T, August 26: **Introduction to the course and a self survey.**

Th, August 28: **Generalizing About Americans: As Others See Us:**

Read: Horace Miner and Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (Collected Readings) and discuss, if possible, the results of self survey.

T, September 2: **As Others See Us, continued:**

Read: Simone de Beauvoir, Carl Jung, and Fei Xiaotong (Collected Readings) We may also see and parts of a film, “Talk To Me.”

Th, September 4: **As Others See Us, concluded:**

Read: Octavio Paz, Alistair Cooke, and Paul Starobin. (Collected Readings)

T, September 9: **Searching for Patterns of Belief and Behavior:** complete our discussion of the foreign observers and try to find a “figure in the carpet.”

As We See Ourselves: Patriotism and Nationalism; American Identity Since

September 11th and the 2008 Election: Read: Mark Slouka, “A Year After,” David Brooks, “On the Playing Fields of Suburbia,” Michael Moore “A Patriot’s Act” (Collected Readings.)

Th, September 11: **Searching For Patterns of Belief and Behavior & the Multiculturalism Debate.**
 Conclude our discussion of Paz, Cooke, and Starobin, and others; look briefly at Jay Walljasper, Arthur Schlesinger, & Lewis Menand on the strengths and weaknesses of multiculturalism (Collected Readings)
Possible quiz #1 (20 points)

II. FROM OLD WORLDS TO NEW: ETHNIC AND RACIAL IDENTITY, MIGRATION AND SENSE OF PLACE IN A NEW LAND (Twelve weeks)

“Once I thought to write the history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history.”

Oscar Handlin

“We built America and the process made us Americans--a new breed, rooted in all races, stained and tinted with all colors....a steaming ethnic anarchy. Then, in a bit of time, we became more alike than we were different...a new society...fitted by our very thoughts for greatness.”

John Steinbeck

A. The Open Land: Norwegians on the Agrarian Frontier

“This vast stretch of beautiful land was to be his—yes, his!—and no ghost of a dead Indian would drive him away!... ‘Good God!’ he panted. ‘This kingdom is going to be mine!’”

Per Hansa in Giants in the Earth

“The problem is that one people’s frontier is another people’s homeland.”

Kathleen Norris, Dakota: A Spiritual Geography

T, September 16: **Frontier theory and lived experience: sacred and profane versions of the “F” word: Read:** Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier thesis and Susan Faludi's 2007 essay “America’s Guardian Myths” (Collected Readings). We will see portions of a reality show, “Frontier House.”

Th, September 18: **Begin Ole Rolvaag's Giants in the Earth (1927);** continue to discuss Turner.

T, September 23: Over the next few weeks will see a smorgasbord of slides, listen to some frontier folk and popular music, and see two brief documentaries "America Fever" and "Letters From America"

Th, September 25:

T, September 30:

Th, October 2: **Conclude Giants in the Earth as well as E.V. Smalley's account of life on the prairies (1893),** numerous slides and examples of folk music regarding the last agrarian frontier, and perhaps a classic documentary film, "The Plow That Broke the Plains" or a snippet from “The Grapes of Wrath” (1935).

T, October 7: **FIRST MIDTERM (100 points)**

B. The Urban Frontier: Jews on the Lower East Side

“The city, I think, is the tool with which God made man.”

Joseph Hudnut

“The modern city is good for prostitution, banking, and very little else.”

Frank Lloyd Wright

Th, October 9: Opening words about immigration, ethnicity, and the city.

T, October 14: **Begin to discuss Michael Gold's Jews Without Money (1930).** We will also see and discuss a myriad of images of Eastern European ethnicity and immigration to the city.

Th, October 16: **Continue discussing Jews Without Money;** also see and discuss a film, "The Inheritance."

T, October 21: **Continue discussing Jews Without Money** and read James Loewen "The Land of Opportunity" and Irving Howe, "The Limits of Ethnicity" (Collected Readings). Focus on issues of poverty, class, ethnicity, and the American Dream.

Th, October 23: **Final issues regarding Gold's novel;** see "Sacco and Vanzetti," a powerful new documentary on radicalism and American character.

T, October 28: **Possible 10-20 point extra credit paper is due; quiz #2 (20 points)**

C. The African-American Experience: The Sacred World of Black Slaves and Beyond

"We are the first fruits of this new nation, the harbinger of that black tomorrow that is yet destined to soften the whiteness of the Teutonic today."

W.E.B. DuBois

"Whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black."

Ralph Ellison

Th, October 30: **Begin Lawrence Levine's Black Culture and Black Consciousness,** "Preface" and opening pages of Chapter One: "Sacred World of Black Slaves."

T, November 4: **Continue discussing Black Culture and Black Consciousness;** focusing on "The Sacred World of Black Slaves." Possible snippet of "White Man's Burden" and all of the documentary, "Ethnic Notions."

Th, November 6: **Further reading and discussion from Levine's book.** "Sacred World" as well Chapter Three, "Freedom, Culture, and Religion."

T, November 11: **No class: Veterans' Day.**

Th, November 13: **Continue discussing Levine's Black Culture;** During these two meetings we will cover parts of chapter four on "The Rise of Secular Song," and listen to a variety of music: spirituals, gospels, work songs, blues, rhythm and blues and the film, "Give My Poor Heart Ease."

T, November 18: **Toward the end of our discussion, we will compare folk heroes, John Henry and Charles Lindbergh through Levine's analysis and John William Ward's essay, "The Meaning of Lindbergh's Flight." (Collected Readings).**

Th, November 20: **SECOND MIDTERM (100 points)**

THANKSGIVING BREAK

D. Translation Nation: Latinos, Blacks, Asians and the "Browning" of America in our Region:

"The future is brown."

Richard Rodriguez

- T, December 2:** **Four film visions: utopian, dystopian, exploitative, apocalyptic:** snippets from “What’s Cooking?” “Crash,” “Rancho California (Por Favor),” and “The Blade Runner” as well as open discussion of present and future race relations in our region and by implication throughout the nation.
- Th, December 4:** **Two dark views of race relations:** Read: Jack Miles, “Blacks vs. Browns” on the meaning of the Rodney King Rebellion of 1992 (Collected Readings) and Samuel Huntington’s hugely controversial, “The Hispanic Challenge” (Class handout). We will discuss and compare these essays to the four films.
- T, December 9:** **Three hopeful visions of the “browning” of America:** Read: Gregory Rodriguez’s “Mongrel America” (Collected Readings), Rosa Brooks’s “How Immigrants Improve the Curve,” and short excerpt from Richard Rodriguez’s Brown—both Class Handouts.
- Th, December 11:** Over view of the course looking toward the final exam.
- T, December 16:** **FINAL EXAM (160 points)—12-1:50 PM—and a well-earned Winter Break.**

Some important dates: (The exact dates may change; this is a close approximation): **20 point quizzes: September 11 & October 28; 100 point midterms: October 1 and November 20; extra credit paper: November 20; 160 point final exam: December 16. I wish you all the best throughout the semester.**