

**THEORIES AND METHODS OF AMERICAN STUDIES**

**American Studies 350  
Seminar in Theory and Method  
Fall, 2001**

**Thursday, 4-6:45 PM  
University Hall—204**

**Professor Michael Steiner  
Office hours: Tuesdays & Thurs days, 10-  
11 AM; Thursdays, 7-8 PM; & by  
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Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun....We are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who finish and complete ourselves through culture--and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it...

Clifford Geertz

Disparate streams of knowledge lead, ideally, to fruitful marriage in a capacious mind; at the other extreme they share a common bed only through the bookbinder's art.

Yi-Fu Tuan

Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which in fact is willing to let itself go). To do something interdisciplinary it's not enough to choose a "subject" (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object which belongs to no one.

Roland Barthes

We must never cease from thinking—what is this civilization in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are the professions and why should we make money out of them? Where, in short, is leading us?

Virginia Woolf

Geertz, Tuan, Barthes, and Woolf underscore the primary purposes of this seminar: to foster an understanding of culture, and to develop specific theories and methods necessary for the interdisciplinary study of our own multitudinous, crazy quilt culture. Although a particular theme, namely the changing relationship between rural and urban America, unites many of our readings, the seminar is primarily concerned with the theories and methods that scholars in various disciplines have used to understand this theme and how American Studies--as a discipline in its own right--can make use of this variety of insights to generate a vision of its own.

The seminar breaks into two basic parts. The first month and a half or so is devoted to building a firm understanding of the meaning of culture and sub culture, the history of American Studies, and the nature of cultural artifacts. Building upon this theoretical foundation, the rest of the course investigates the nature of interdisciplinary cultural/historical analysis. While considering a variety of disciplines, including the study of creative literature,

folklore, history, sociology, geography, and others, we will be concerned with two levels of analysis: in how each scholar reached his or her conclusions and in how these insights contribute to our grasp of the problem in its entirety. After developing an understanding of culture, in other words, American Studies students must be prepared to read intelligently and critically in several disciplines and also be able to bring these disciplines together to form a more comprehensive picture of the whole. In the process, we might strive toward Barthes's ambitious ideal of "creating a new object that belongs to no one."

Throughout the semester, we will be exploring such questions as: What method or procedure did this scholar use? What are the underlying assumptions of his or her argument? How can we know that we've come upon a cultural "truth"? How do the insights of a novel, for example, compare with the conclusions of a sociological or historical study? How do Americans from the past "speak" most clearly to us--through their words or their things? How do the insights of a photograph, for example, compare with messages of a folksong, a story, a piece of architecture, or a bit of material culture? What is the relationship between the products of so-called "high," "popular," and "folk" culture? What is the relationship between the so-called "dominant" culture and "sub" cultures? Which is more significant—the unity or the diversity of American culture? How do the "parts" relate to the "whole"? How can we relate issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity, region, and religion to our understanding of American identity? Our serious consideration of such questions--as well as a host of others--will heighten your critical awareness and understanding of the interdisciplinary study of American culture as a complex whole in the past and the present.

### **Readings:**

The books are available at the Titan Bookstore; multiple copies of the Collected Readings (with 27 articles used throughout the semester) are available at the CSUF Library Reserve Reading Room (Circulation Desk). I will place copies of the more expensive books on closed reserve.

Collected Readings (Four copies are on closed reserve: two for 2 hour; two for 2 days)

Michael Lesy, Wisconsin Death Trip

Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory City

Stephen Crane, Maggie, A Girl of the Streets

L. Frank Baum, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

Anne Fadiman, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures.

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

## **I. THE NATURE OF CULTURE AND STUDYING ONE'S OWN CULTURE**

Now I will tell you about culture. Culture is that garden. This is not a thing of nations. It is not about Goethe and yeshivas. It is children playing. Culture is the simple grass through which the wind blows and each grass blade bends softly to the caress of the wind. It is like a mother who would pick up a child and kiss it, with her tenderness that she gave birth to it...

Shmuel, a retired tailor in Barbara  
Myerhoff's Number Our Days

In the beginning, God gave to every people a cup, a cup of clay, and from that cup they drank their life. They all dipped in the water, but their cups were different. Our cup is broken now. It has passed away.

Ramon, a Southern California Indian  
in Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture

**August 23:** Opening remarks: the purpose of the seminar

**August 30:** Theories and methods in American Studies: an overview of the discipline and what it means to be an "American Scholar":

What is American Studies? What is a theory? What is a method? What is interdisciplinarity? What is the basic impulse behind American Studies and being an "American Scholar"? What are the strengths and weakness of this "wholistic" impulse? In what way might Emerson and Turner be described as early voices in American Studies? How do their messages compare? **Read:** Ralph Waldo Emerson's classic clarion call, "The American Scholar" (1837) and Frederick Jackson Turner's "the Significance of History" (1891) (Collected Readings)

Knowing the self and others—the Nacirema & the Lantern Bearers:

**Read:** Horace Miner's brief "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema" and William James's "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (1893) (Collected Readings)

**September 6:** An approach to the study of humanity, culture, and individuals

**Read:** Yi-Fu Tuan's Topophilia (1974), chapters 1-5 (Collected Readings).

A classic definition of culture: **Read:** excerpts from Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture (1934) (Collected Readings).

Refinements of the culture concept: Robin Fox's "The Cultural Animal" (1968) and Clifford Geertz's "The Impact of the Concept of Culture Upon the Concept of Man" (1973) (Collected Readings)

\*\*Possible report: Geertz and Fox in light of Karen Lystra's "Clifford Geertz and the Concept of Culture" (1983) (I will hand out a copy of this article)

**September 13:** The American Studies movement, culture theory, & pluralism:

**Read:** Gene Wise's "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies" (1979) and Linda Kerber's "Diversity and the Transformation of American Studies" (1989) (Collected Readings)

**Into the new century:: American Studies, transnationalism, and globalism:**

**Read:** George Lipsitz, "No Shining City on a Hill" (1999) and Michael Steiner "Knowing the Place for the First Time" (2000) (Collected Readings).

\*\*Possible reports: Henry Nash Smith, "Can American Studies develop a Method?" (1957); Robert Berkhofer "A New Context for a New American Studies" (1989), and/or Leo Marx, "Reflections on American Studies, Minnesota, and the (1950s" (1999) (I will provide copies to interested students)

September 20:

**Final words on culture theory & the history of American Studies.**

**Writing workshop:** discuss issues of form, style, documentation, common mistakes **Read:** excerpts from The Elements of Style and Patricia Limerick's "Dancing With Professors: The Trouble With Academic Prose" (1993) (Collected Readings) (We will continue this periodically throughout the semester)

September 27::

**Sources: The nature of cultural artifacts:** Words, things, ideas behavior; elite, popular, mass, and folk expressions

**Read:** Yi-Fu Tuan's "The Significance of the Artifact" 1980) and Henry Glassie's "The Artifact's Place in American Studies" (1977) (Collected Readings).

**Symbols and myths:** An early American Studies theory and method. **Read:** Leo Marx's "The Machine in the Garden" (1956) (Collected Essays).

**The uses of primary materials:** **Read:** Daniel Webster's remarks on the railroad (1847), Herman Melville's "The Tartarus of Maids" (1855), Mary Paul's letters (1845-49) (Collected Readings)

\*\* Possible reports: : John Kouwenhoven, "Am.Studies: Words or Things?," and/or Wm. Hesselstine on the limits of material artifacts (I will provide copies for interested students)

October 4::

**Sources and the uses of primary sources, continued**

**First response paper option is due**

**Introduction to the uses of electronic and computer based sources:**—Guest lecture, Professor Wayne Hobson

**II. THE NATURE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY CULTURAL ANALYSIS**

Who are you indeed who would talk or sing to America?  
 Have you studied out the land, its idioms and men?  
 Have you learned the physiology, phrenology, politics, geography, pride, freedom,  
 friendship of the land? its substratums and objects?....  
 Are you faithful to things? do you teach what the land and sea, the bodies of men,  
 womanhood, amativeness, heroic angers teach?....  
 Have you sped through fleeting customs, popularities?....  
 Are you really of the whole People?  
 Are you not of some coterie? some school or mere religion?  
 Walt Whitman, 1865

The program I entered...set before us an intriguing mix of projects....which were typically American Studies projects in their experimentation, their impatience with disciplinary boundaries--involving not only poetry and prose but architecture and art history, technology and design, Freud and Crazy Kat.  
 Linda Kerber, 1989

We are undeniably a single, creolized people—not separate Native-, African-, Euro-, Latin-, or Asian-descended people.  
 Russell Banks, 2000

**A. The Recovery of the Past: Three Approaches**

**October 11:** Frederick Jackson Turner on the “F” (Frontier) Word and Robert Platt on environmentalism (Collected Readings)

\*\*Possible reports: Michael Steiner, “From Frontier to Region: Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Western History” (1995); Patricia Limerick, “Turnereans All” (1996); and/or Larry McMurtry, “How the West Was Won or Lost” (1990) (I will give copies to interested students)

**October 18:** History as Alchemy: Michael Lesy’s Vision of the Rural Midwest:  
**Read:** Wisconsin Death Trip

**October 25:** History through folklore, photography, and personal Testimony: Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach’s View of a New England Mill Town. **Begin:** Amoskeag.

**\*\*Possible reports:** : John Nuenschwander and Hareven on the strengths and weaknesses of oral history (I will provide copies.)

**November 1:**        **Finish Amoskeag**

**Half a century of historiographical debate:** Charles Beard's "Written History As an Act of Faith" (1933); Carl Becker's "Every Man His Own His Historian" 1931); Gertrude Himmelfarb's "Denigrating the Rule of Reason" (1984) and her critics (Collected Readings).

**Second response paper option is due:**

**B. The Uses and Abuses Of Imaginative Literature**

**November 8:**        **The city in "high" literature:**

Stephen Crane's Maggie, A Girl of the Streets (1893)

**November 15:**    **The country and the city in popular and children's literature:**

**L. Frank Baum's The Wonderful Wizard of Oz** (1901) as well as Bowron, Marx, & Rose's "Literature and Covert Culture" (1960) (Collected Readings)

**Third response paper option is due:**

**\*\*Possible Reports:** Laura Bohannan "Shakespeare in the Bush" (Collected Readings); Leo Marx, "American Studies: Defense of an Unscientific Method"; R. Gordon Kelly, "Literature and the Historian"; and/or Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors" (from Locating American Studies—and other sources provided by your teacher)

**THANKSGIVING VACATION: NO CLASS**

**C. Contemporary Cultural Collision: A Hmong Family in Merced**

**November 29:**    **The pleasures and perils of ethnography:** Anne Fadiman's participant-observation of a Hmong child, her family, and the collision of two culture: **Begin:** portions of **The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down**

**December 6: Finish discussing selected portions of The Spirit Catches You**

**\*\*Possible reports:** David Holinger, “Post Ethnic America” (Collected Readings); Eric Liu. “The Accidental Asian”; Renato Resaldo, “Subjectivity in Social Analysis”; and/or Russell Banks, “Who Will Tell the People?” (I will provide copies.)

**December 13: Final in-class essay exam**—open book, open note.

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**Some important dates:**

October 4—first response paper (do at least two of three)

November 1—second response paper

November 15—third response paper

December 13—final exam

And a well-earned Winter Break.