

American Studies 405
Spring 2009
Mondays 7-9:45 p.m.

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Images of Crime & Violence in American Culture

This is a vast subject, one that, frankly, has to be approached with a certain amount of fear and trembling. There is more to know about crime and punishment in this society than any human being can possibly know....Moreover, there is no way to tell it all, no way to make the story complete. The author is forced to make choices, to throw the spotlight on some parts of the subject while others are left in the shadows....The beginnings of this story took place more than three centuries ago. The end of it—if it has an end—is only yesterday. This last is the delicate, dangerous part. As we get closer to our own times, the material swells obscenely in bulk. And the bodies are not all dead and buried....The subject is fascinating—but also baffling and immense; fragmented into a thousand pieces; unwieldy, stubborn; hidden in dark places and inaccessible corners....History does not give us answers; but it does sometimes dispel myths, and it can be like a flashlight shining in dark and deserted corners.

Lawrence Friedman, *Crime and Punishment in American History*

Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out.”

John Webster (playwright), *The Duchess of Malfi*, 1623

One of the ways in which the study of murder fits into the study of history is that writing history is really a form of detective work. The object for both detectives and historians is to reconstruct a version of some past event or events as accurately as possible, to make a convincing story out of whatever clues have been left behind. A good historian, or detective, needs imagination, logic, and experience to make the case, but ultimately it must be based on the evidence—whether interviews, fingerprints, official documents, private papers, or physical remains. And while good clues make a tight case, some can be read in more than one way, and scattered, ambiguous, or absent clues leave us with mysteries difficult or impossible to crack.

Roger Lane, *Murder in America*

Hence the story of crime and punishment over the years is a story of social changes, character changes, personality changes; changes in culture; changes in the structure of society; and, ultimately, changes in the economic, technological, and social orders....

Whatever else it does, the criminal code reflects, though perhaps at times as crudely as a funhouse mirror, some notion of the moral sense of a community—or to be more accurate, the moral sense of the people who count, and who speak out, in the community.

Lawrence Friedman, *Crime and Punishment in American History*

Course Intent

In this seminar, we will track the emergence of a distinctly American culture across enactments and representations of crime and violence. Beginning with the understanding that definitions of crime and violence—what constitutes a crime; what is recognized as violence---are socially constructed categories of culturally-specific meaning and, hence, liable to change over time, we will examine events of crime and violence as well as corresponding actions of justice—and violence—among social communities in the contexts of their specific historical moment and in public memory. In this way, working as “cultural detectives,” we will become familiar with as we seek to understand the nature of American culture as expressed in real acts as well as fictional and non-fiction representations of crime and violence. Course materials have been selected to give a sense of the shifting historical and cultural conceptualizations of crime and violence (and, focally, of murder) across diverse categories of cultural participation (religion, race, class, gender, urban and rural life, and technologically-mediated experience) and diverse forms of cultural representation (sermons, print media, literary fiction, and documentary as well as fictive film).

*One caveat: Course readings are moderate to heavy at times. Recognize this and plan accordingly: ***timely completion of reading assignments is crucial to meaningful participation in class discussions.***

Required Course Texts

Capote, Truman: In Cold Blood (1965)
Halttunen, Karen: Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination (1998)
Lane, Roger: Murder in America: A History (1997)
Neiwert, David: Death on the 4th of July: Story of a Killing, a Trial, & a Hate Crime (2005)

Reprint: excerpted selection: Hall, David: Witch-hunting in 17th Century New England (1991/1999)

In addition to the readings, six films will be shown in class (*in-class viewing & discussion of all films is required for full participation credit*): *Bowling for Columbine* (documentary), *The Crucible* (historical fiction), *The Strange Case of Lizzie Borden* (historical docudrama), *In Cold Blood* (“nonfiction fiction” to commercial film), and commercial films *Seven* and *Crash*.

Course Assignments and Assessment

The course requires that you write two 6-8 page comparative response papers as well as five 1-2 page reading response papers which will generate informed participation in class discussions. Additional requirements and expectations of Master’s students enrolled in the course for graduate credit are stated at the end of the syllabus.

Assessment

140 points	Comparative response papers (two @ 70 points each)
10 points	Informed participation (thoughtful discussion reflecting grasp of class materials & concepts)
<u>50 points</u>	Reading response papers (five @ 10 points each)
200 points	Total possible *No final examination in this seminar*

Grading is based on a 10% scale -- a "grading curve" will not apply. In the case of a borderline final grade score (i.e., 1 point from the grade cut-off), my decision to either raise or lower the score will further reflect the thoughtfulness of your class participation--or the lack thereof. One absence is allowed without penalty: subsequent absences will earn -10 pt. penalty each/per absence from your earned course point total. Late papers will be penalized 10% of the earned score. Email documents are not acceptable for assignments: if your assignment is not finished in time to be turned in when due in class, it is late and will be penalized. "Incomplete" course grades must be arranged in advance and will forfeit the possibility of an A for the course.

Explanation of Assignments

Comparative Response Papers: Two at 70 points each

First Response Paper due in class on 3/9:

At the end of the class meeting on March 2nd, you will be given a set of questions to consider and apply to both our readings and discussion of the Salem witch trials in contrast and comparison to the course readings on lynching as well as your own study of the *Without Sanctuary* web site.

Second/Final Response Paper due not later than 5/18:

At the end of the class meeting on May 4th, you will be given a set of questions to consider and apply to both our reading of Neiwert's *Death on the Fourth of July* & our in-class viewing of *Crash* on 5/11.

Reading Response Papers: Five at 10 points each

These papers will respond to reading prompts given in class on weeks 3/9-4/20 and in each case due in class at the next class meeting on weeks 3/16-4/27

"The University requires students with disabilities to register with the Office of Disabled Student Services (DSS), located in UH-101 and at (714) 278 – 3112, in order to receive prescribed accommodations appropriate to their disability. Students requesting accommodations should inform the instructor during the first week of classes about any disability or special needs that may require specific arrangements/accommodations related to attending class sessions, completing course assignments, writing papers or quizzes/tests/examinations."

A note to undergraduate students in this course

The success of this seminar depends on your commitment to your own work as well as to the work and ideas of your classmates. The most important action you can take is to do the reading, completely and on time: this will help you feel prepared to comment and to raise and/or respond to questions in discussion—which will in turn deepen your own understanding. If you have thoughtfully prepared for class and something comes up in discussion that you do not understand, *please* ask (me or the student/speaker) for clarification: this seminar includes AMST majors and non-majors as well AMST graduate students, so I expect that discussion may range widely at times...and *the only "dumb question" is the one that doesn't get asked.*

... & further expectations/requirements for Master's degree students

In keeping with university-wide requirements for graduate study, graduate students enrolled in this 400-level course will be expected to:

- 1) demonstrate, in both written and oral performance, quality higher than that expected of an undergraduate.
- 2) demonstrate competence (in verbal participation and written coursework) in the identification, investigation, and application of theories of cultural practice as evident in course readings.

These criteria (1&2) should be intrinsically evident in class discussions, analytical summaries, and research papers as well as research presentations by graduate students.

Additional work requirements:

Graduate student **comparative response papers should be 8-10 pages** in length. Graduate students will **prepare an additional brief paper** comparing *In Cold Blood* and any one of the three film adaptations of this book/crime, and then give a **20 minute in-class presentation** including video clips on April 20th. *This paper and presentation will be valued at 20 points total: these points will be awarded in lieu of the 5th reading response paper (10pts) AND in lieu of Participation points (10pts) as active & informed participation is expected of graduate students.

Non-jargon rule for graduate students: *do not engage in intellectual "name-dropping" or use terminology that you are not prepared to clarify/explain in 3 sentences or less.* If I think a reference or a term is unclear to all students, I may well ask you to pause and explain what you mean. This is actually good training for intellectual discourse at all levels.

AMST 405 COURSE OUTLINE

- 1/26 Introduction to AMST 405: Images of Crime & Violence in America
Fear and Control: Defining Crime and Violence
Where do we look: social institutions
In class viewing of documentary *Bowling for Columbine*
- 2/2 Criminal (or normative?) Minds: The School Shootings as Cultural Ritual
The relationship between violent images and social actions.
Reading: Lane, Murder in America, Intro (pp 1-7)
- 2/9 The Devil Among Us: the Salem Witch Trials as Case Study
Reading: Lane, Murder in America, Chapter 2
Halttunen, Murder Most Foul, Preface and Chapter 1
- 2/16 President's Day Holiday: class will not meet
- 2/23 The Past in the Present: Visual Re-presentations of Crime and Violence
Reading: Hall, Witch-hunting in 17th Century New England (excerpt)
In-class viewing: *The Crucible*
- 3/2 Criminal Other(ing) Part 1: the Extra-Legal Violence of Vigilantism and Lynching
Reading: Lane, Murder in America, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 (stop at p. 181)
Neiwert, Death on the 4th of July, pp. 63-81
1st comparative response paper questions given out in class
- 3/9 Criminal Other(ing) Part 2: Execution as Cultural Spectacle
Where do we look: vernacular photography
In-class discussion of your comparative response papers
Assignment: 1) Visit/immerse: *Without Sanctuary*
<http://www.withoutsanctuary.org/main.html>
2) write 1st comparative response paper. *due in class*
- 3/16 Becoming Modern: The Horror (and fascination) of Murder
Where do we look: print narratives
Reading: Halttunen, Murder Most Foul, Chapters 2, 3, and 4
Assignment: write #1 reading response paper due in class for discussion
- 3/23 Crimes of Passion: Lizzie Borden as Case Study and in Public Memory
Reading: Halttunen, Murder Most Foul, Chapters 5,6, and (skim) 7
Lane, Murder in America, pp. 181-213
In-class viewing: *The Strange Case of Lizzie Borden*
Assignment: write #2 reading response paper due in class for discussion
- 3/30 SPRING BREAK: chill by reading ahead in In Cold Blood
- 4/6 It's a Cold (War) World: The "Cold-blooded Killer"
Where do we look: popular media
Reading: Lane, Murder in America, Chapters 7 and 8
Capote, In Cold Blood, up to the first half of the book
Assignment: write #3 reading response paper due in class for discussion

AMST 405 COURSE OUTLINE (continued)

- 4/13 The Killer as/of Everyman
Where do we look: “Real” Fiction/Fictional Journalism
Reading: finish Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood
Assignment: write #4 reading response paper due in class for discussion
- 4/20 In Cold Blood: “Real” Fiction to Commercial Film
Graduate student presentations
*undergraduate reading holiday!
- 4/27 Thrilling to Violence in Late Modernity: Spiraling Out of Control or Full Circle?
Where do we look: commercial film
Reading: Lane, Murder in America, Chapter 9 (final)
 Halttunen, Murder Most Foul, Epilogue
In-class viewing: *Seven*
Assignment: write #5 reading/presentation response paper due in class
- 5/4 Race and Place: Crimes of Hatred: Ocean Shores, WA 2000 as Case Study
Reading: Neiwert, David: Death on the 4th of July (all)
*2nd **FINAL comparative response paper questions given out in class***
- 5/11 Violence as Cultural Terrorism: “Can’t we all just get along?”
In-class viewing: *Crash*
Reading: review Neiwert
- 5/18 **2nd/FINAL comparative response papers due:**
may be turned in to my mailbox in the American Studies Dept Office (UH-313)
clearly marked Pam Steinle/AMST 405
OR
slid under my office door (UH-418) at any time but
not later than 10 p.m. on Monday, 5/18