

**AMERICAN STUDIES 501**  
**THEORIES AND METHODS IN AMERICAN STUDIES**

PAMELA STEINLE  
FALL 2007  
Tuesdays, 7-9:45pm  
UH-333

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course is intended to provide you with a complex understanding of the practice of scholarship in American Studies. We will begin with an overview of the history and evolution of American Studies as an interdisciplinary field of study which takes American culture as its subject. We will then “backtrack” to the mid-19th century and move gradually forward to our own time as we consider arguments on the study of society and culture from various theoretical and philosophical perspectives which have and continue to ground and influence scholarship in American Studies. We will all read and discuss these theoretical texts and their methodological implications. These theory readings and discussions will be alternated with “enrichment” weeks in which four members of the seminar will independently read and evaluate related contemporary scholarly works in American Studies and will lead seminar discussion of the theory and methods they employ in relation to the preceding week’s theoretical text.

By the end of the seminar, you will be able to address questions of “what is American Studies as an intellectual enterprise” and “what is (has been) the character of American experience and cultural participation” with some scholarly sophistication and reflecting some determination of your own intellectual commitment. I expect that you will not only have gained a familiar grasp of central theories in the study of culture and exposure to the variety of methods available to you, but that you will have developed your own evaluation of which theory(s) and method(s) makes the most sense and/or will be most useful to you in light of your own pursuits and interests in studying American culture. I look forward to a semester of intellectual demand, stimulation, and rewarding growth.

**REQUIRED COURSE READINGS (in order of assignment)**

\*All required books are available @ Little Professor Bookstore\*

Gene Wise, “Paradigm Dramas in American Studies”  
Linda Kerber, “Diversity and the Transformation of American Studies”  
Karl Marx, selected readings from The Marx-Engels Reader (ed. R. Tucker)  
Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism  
Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions  
Clifford Geertz, selected readings from The Interpretation of Cultures  
Stanley Fish, selected readings from Is There a Text in This Class?  
Yi-Fu Tuan, “The Significance of the Artifact”  
John Caughey, “Artificial Relations in Modern America”  
Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation  
Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination

## **ENRICHMENT READINGS (in order of assignment)**

### **Classic AMST/Symbol-Myth approach:**

1. Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land and/or R.W.B. Lewis, American Adam
2. Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation

### **Consider in relation to Marx:**

3. Donald Worster, Dust Bowl
4. Elliott West, The Contested Plains

### **Consider in relation to Weber:**

5. David Stannard, The Puritan Way of Death
6. Edmund Morgan, American Slavery, American Freedom

### **Consider in relation to Kuhn:**

7. Paul Boyer, By the Bomb's Early Light
8. Tom Englehardt, The End of Victory Culture

### **Consider in relation to Geertz:**

9. Robert Orsi, Thank You, St. Jude
10. George Chauncey, Gay New York

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

It should come as no surprise that reading assignments for this seminar are challenging and must be read on time. I strongly recommend that during the "enrichment" weeks (when you are not the presenter), you read ahead in the following week's theory text. For each theory text, you are required to prepare a typewritten 1-2 page precis paper. A précis is an abbreviated summary of a work which includes the author's thesis, type/body of evidence, research method, argument structure and conclusions (a sample précis is attached). You must have your print précis in hand each week: you may make additional hand-written notes/revisions during class as appropriate in response to seminar discussion, and must turn them at the end of class discussion.

On enrichment weeks, each student presenting/leading discussion of the enrichment texts for the week must prepare a précis for their chosen text and a 3-5 page outline of your discussion. Your presentation should not exceed 20 minutes in length and you must provide your classmates with copies of both précis and outline of your presentation. You will be assigned books in partners and while your precis should be complete and independent of one another, your discussion outlines may divide discussion of the text in complementary fashion.

The final requirement for the seminar is a position paper (est. 12-16 pages with endnotes and full bibliography) due **not later than 4:00 p.m. on Friday, December 14th**. Incorporating at least 3 theory readings and 3 enrichment texts in your discussion, you will be asked to determine and explain your understanding of American Studies as an intellectual enterprise (theorys and methods) and to discuss what you identify as primary or significant characteristics of American experience and cultural participation (noting commonalties and differences across time and place) -- and why you believe this is so, based on the course texts you've chosen to discuss.

## GRADING

Your grade in the seminar will be determined as follows:

Reading and preparation for seminar discussion (précis papers) 70 pts.  
(7pts each of 10 précis: -1pt any/each lacking area)

Seminar participation (discussion: esp. enrichment weeks) 30 pts.

\*prepared, thoughtful engagement in discussion is expected of everyone in AMST 501: 15 of these points will be given automatically for steady participation as expected but the remaining 15 will reflect contributions to discussion that help to engage and/or clarify understanding for your fellow seminar participants.

Seminar presentation/leading discussion of alternate text 50 pts.

10 pts to complete précis; 10 pts to clear outline; 20 pts to quality of subject content representation, including connection to theory/methods of preceding week; 10 pts to evidence of preparation intended to inspire discussion.

Position paper 100 pts.

75 points to fulfillment of all required elements of assignment; up to 10 points for strong, effective development; up to 10 points for particularly strong, effective clarity and critical thinking; up to 5 points for strong evidence of intellectual independence and insight.

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Total points possible 250 pts.

Semester grades for the seminar will be determined on a 10% scale (no curve). I will assign letter grades using the +/- enhanced grading system as follows:

|         |    |         |   |         |    |
|---------|----|---------|---|---------|----|
| 226-232 | A- | 233-243 | A | 244-250 | A+ |
| 201-207 | B- | 208-218 | B | 219-225 | B+ |
| 176-182 | C- | 183-193 | C | 194-200 | C+ |

and so on....

Late assignments will be accepted but penalized 10% of the earned score.

As a graduate seminar, regular attendance is expected: absence from one class meeting is allowed with no participation penalty, however each additional absence will cost -10 points from your total course points (40% of a grade break).

Incompletes in this course must be discussed with me in advance and for other than extreme circumstances will automatically forfeit the possibility of an "A" in the course.

## COURSE OUTLINE

- 8/21 **AMST 501 Introduction & Grad Program Orientation**
- 8/28 **Overview:** What is American Studies?  
G. Wise, "Paradigm Dramas;"  
L. Kerber, "Diversity and the Transformation of American Studies"
- 9/4 **Enrichment texts:** H. N. Smith, Virgin Land and/or R.W.B. Lewis, American Adam; Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation
- 9/11 **Theory:** K. Marx and F. Engels, selected readings
- 9/18 **Enrichment texts:** D. Worster, Dust Bowl;  
E. West, The Contested Plains
- 9/25 **Theory:** Weber, The Prot. Ethic & the Spirit of Capitalism
- 10/2 **Enrichment texts:** D. Stannard, The Puritan Way of Death;  
E. Morgan, American Slavery, American Freedom
- 10/9 **Theory:** Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions
- 10/16 **Enrichment texts:** P. Boyer, By the Bomb's Early Light  
T. Englehardt, The End of Victory Culture
- 10/23 **Theory:** Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures  
Chapters 1, 4, and 15
- 10/30 **Enrichment texts:** R. Orsi, Thank You, St. Jude  
G. Chauncey, Gay New York
- 11/6 **Theory:** Fish, Is There a Text in This Class?;  
Yi FuTuan, "The Significance of the Artifact"  
\*Reconsider enrichment texts already presented in regard to these theoreticians.
- 11/13 **Theory:** Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation  
J. Caughey, "Artificial Relations in Modern America"  
\*Reconsider enrichment texts already presented in regard to these theoreticians.
- 11/20 FALL BREAK
- 11/27 **Theory:** Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters, selected sections  
\*Reconsider enrichment texts already presented in regard to these theoreticians.
- 12/4 Final Position Paper discussion  
**\*Position papers are due to my mailbox in UH-313 by 4 p.m. on Friday, 12/14\***