

**American Studies 502T**  
Spring 2005  
Mondays, 7-9:45 p.m.  
EC-11

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**Contemporary American Culture:**  
**Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Post-WWII America**

That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance.  
Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 1991

This seminar provides the opportunity for advanced analysis of the beliefs, practices, and implications of membership in communities of contemporary cultural participation: real as well as fictive; demographic, geographic, and spatial as well as virtual. For the purposes of this course, “contemporary” will refer to roughly the last fifty years following America’s nearly simultaneous introduction of atomic warfare and commercial television -- two central or competing causal forces in most definitions of postmodernity. Together, we will read and consider the diverse theoretical and methodological approaches (as well as the arguments) of several scholars who have taken contemporary America, in broad outline, as their subject. In seminar discussions and written responses to their work, we will identify, consider, and seek to understand the meaning(s) and significance of cultural narratives (familiar and/or mythic storylines) as they are sustained from earlier periods, revised, appear for the first time, or disappear altogether as Americans attempt to give structure and meaning to their contemporary experience--all amidst the increasingly mediated nature of contemporary American life (evidenced in post-WWII technology, architecture, communications, and social organization), “in the shadow of two towers” (as Art Spiegelman has titled his recent work), and in the twilight zone encompassing America’s wars in Vietnam and Iraq. In addition to discussion preparation notes and a few reading response assignments, this seminar requires the production of a primary research paper or project, on an aspect of contemporary American culture of your own choice but grounded in explicit discussion of both the historical context(s) and secondary literature surrounding your focal subject. Your paper or project (with accompanying paper) is to be presented to your peers during the final weeks of the semester.

**Required Readings**

Susan Bordo, Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to OJ (1999)  
Henry Giroux, The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear (2003)  
Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination (2001)  
John Leland, Hip: The History (2004)  
Art Spiegelman, In the Shadow of No Towers (2004)  
Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (1997)

Timely as well as thoughtful reading will be crucial to your participation in this seminar, so please purchase all of the course readings without delay and begin!

## Course Requirements and Expectations

As a graduate seminar, course meetings will be devoted to your discussion of the required course readings, course issues and concepts. Your preparation notes and occasional reading response assignments will either provide a starting point for or be incorporated into the flow of this discussion. I will not “lecture” after the first class meeting however I will comment to provoke, mediate, and otherwise foster your engagement in discussions. Consequently, your course grade will reflect 50% value given to reading preparation as evident in your prep notes and response writings as well as your discussion participation, and 50% value given to your research paper/project, including your seminar presentation.

Course grades will therefore be determined as follows:

- 40 pts. Typed responses to weekly reading discussion prompts, due at end of class (8 x 5 pts each).
  - 50 pts. Occasional reading response assignments, due at the end of class (5 x 10 pts each).
  - 10 pts. Preliminary research project statement.
  - 100 pts. Research project on a contemporary subject of your choice, based on both primary and secondary research, responding to at least one of the required course texts, and culminating in a 20-25 page (5000+ word) traditional research paper with an annotated bibliography of at least 5 books beyond the course readings which locate your subject in both historical context and scholarly discourse  
OR  
an alternative research product (a documentary film, set of comic strips, photographic essay, a short story, an outline plus one chapter of a novel...talk with me about your ideas!) accompanied by an 8-10 page (2000+ word) paper discussing your choice of presentation medium, your method of primary evidence collection, the location of your subject in both historical context and scholarship, and including an annotated bibliography of at least 5 books beyond the course readings. \*more info about the research projects/papers at end of syllabus\*
- 200 pts. Total

Per university policy, one absence is excused in a class that meets once a week. You will be penalized 10 points for each subsequent absence (deducted from your total points earned in the course). If absent from class, you may still turn in discussion preparation sheets and any response assignment for that night but at half-credit.

Final course grades will be assigned using the "plus/minus" grade option on the following scale:

196-200 A+	176-180 B+	156-160 C+	136-140 D+	126/lower = F
188-195 A	168-175 B	148-155 C	128-135 D	
181-187 A-	161-167 B-	141-147 C-	121-127 D-	

Final grades of “Incomplete” will be given with reluctance and will forfeit the possibility of an “A” in the course upon the completion of work. Plagiarism of any sort will result in an “F” in the course.

## Course Outline

1/31 Introduction to the course, introduction to your 502 peers

### Unit One. The Practices of Radical Contemporary Criticism: Has Post-9/11 Replaced Post-WWII?

2/7 **Read:** Henry Giroux, The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear

**Discussion prep questions:** What is Giroux's thesis and what is his take on post-9/11 America? What evidence does he offer to ground or prove his argument? How effective is the "smart rant" for you: why/why not and how so?

2/14 **Read:** Art Spiegelman, In the Shadow of No Towers

**Discussion prep questions:** What is Giroux's thesis and what is his take on post-9/11 America? What evidence does he offer to ground or prove his argument? How effective is the comic strip for you: why/why not and how so?

**\*Response Assignment:** Write your own two page rant or make your own comic strip (you can "borrow" images if you can't draw) on any aspect of American life, post-9/11. In an additional page, reflect on what you found challenging or difficult about this assignment.

### Unit Two. There Really is a "There" There: The Necessity of the Past in Comprehending the Present

2/21 Presidents' Holiday: Read Leland at your leisure.

2/28 **Read:** John Leland, Hip: The History

**Discussion prep questions:** What is Leland's thesis and what methods does he use to ground and evidence his work? Does he convince you of the importance of historical contextualization in understanding contemporary cultural practice? Why/why not and how so?

**\*Response Assignment:** Historical narratives (like ethnographies) are always "intrinsically incomplete." Write two pages in which you identify an aspect of "hip" that you think Leland has missed--either entirely or in his understanding of it--and why you think this is so, including at least one source of evidence for "contribution" to this history.

3/7 **Read:** Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, Chpts. 1-3

**Discussion prep questions:** What does Gordon mean by "haunting?" What is her answer to her own theoretical and methodological questions: "How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?" and "What methods and forms of writing can foreground the conditions under which a ghostly presence or matter emerges?" Why does Gordon believe that hauntings are urgent matters for consideration in the present?

3/14 "Your absence from Nahant will leave a gap like that made in the street when a house is pulled down."  
As attributed to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in Michael Pearl's 2003 novel *The Dante Club*

**Read:** Finish Gordon, Chpts. 4 & 5; Michael Pearl, "Historical Note" (*Dante Club* excerpt)

Recommended Read: The Dante Club

**Discussion prep questions:** Reconsidering questions from the previous week, are you convinced (more so, or less) of Gordon's answers?

**\*Response Assignment:** Write two pages on a "ghostly matter" in American experience that you might choose to investigate: why this "matter;" where would you look for evidence of "the shape of absence" and "the presence of force" for your ghost story?

Unit Three. The Past in Present Future Perfect, Part One: Negotiating Loss, Creating Meaning

- 3/21 Read:** Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering, Introduction through Chpt. 4  
**Discussion prep questions:** What is Sturken's thesis? What methods does she employ to ground and evidence her work? What importance do you give to cultural memory in the study of contemporary America--why/why not and how so?
- 3/28 Spring Break. Finish reading Sturken at leisure (and maybe read ahead in Bordo). Seek inspiration and definition for your own research project...and get started.
- 4/4 Read:** Finish Sturken.  
**Discussion prep questions:** reconsider the questions from the last class meeting--and your answers to them.  
**\*Response assignment:** Tangled Memories was published in 1997. Write two pages identifying a site of cultural memory that has emerged since that time, including your speculations as to what it tells about American culture and what politics are involved in this remembering.
- \*\*Research project topic statement--including your "cultural question," tentative research methods, & your decision re: traditional paper or alternative project/paper--due in class\*\***

Unit Four: The Past in Present Future Perfect, Part Two: Re-Presentations

- 4/11 Read:** Susan Bordo, Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to OJ  
**Discussion prep questions:** What is Bordo's thesis? What methods does she employ to ground and evidence her work? How does her work add to your understanding of visual images?  
**\*Response Assignment:** Write two pages using one or two images to respond to Bordo's question, "If they asked you where you were from, what would you say?"

Unit Five: Contemporary American Culture 502: Seminar Presentations of Research Projects

- 4/18** Open and informal discussion of your progress on your research projects. Bring your annotated bibliography--at least in draft--to class.

**4/25 through 5/23:**

Class presentations of research papers and alternative projects--and, yes, the last class meeting will be during finals week. Polished papers and projects in final form are due in class, 5/23.

## About the Research Project...

Topic. Your choice of topic/subject should be determined using two criteria:

- (1) You must address a (or a set of) contemporary American event(s), action(s) or artifact(s) that has engaged your interest and curiosity sufficient to generate a cultural question or to make a cultural statement.
- (2) Accessibility of evidence. You must collect both primary evidence and secondary sources within a 4-6 week research period. *Be realistic.*

Approach. Three questions to answer for yourself in deciding your research subject:

- (1) What is your question about this subject in relation to contemporary American culture?
- (2) What method of research will you use and why?
- (3) What are the limits of your study and why?

Historical Context/Secondary Grounding.

What have others written on your subject?

- (1) Begin reading in your subject area.
- (2) Determine the relationship of your study to these works.
- (3) Prepare an annotated\* bibliography of at least 5 secondary sources.

\*This means that each bibliographic citation should be followed by an abbreviated summary and a statement as to the connection or usefulness of the work to your study.

## Paper Structure

Your research paper should incorporate the following five components (presented here in a readily workable order, however you are welcome to reorder them to an order/organizational style that you think best suits your work):

- A. Introduce your topic by explaining why you chose this topic/what you anticipated you might find, your research boundaries (method and data base) and the rationale behind them, as well your definition of culture and/or any other key theoretical terms you may be using.
- B. Next present the historical context for and secondary literature surrounding your subject focus to ground for your study.
- C. Then present and analyze your data -- please use your data, sufficiently describing and quoting from qualitative primary sources to make them truly evident to your reader--and to give yourself enough in evidence to give rise to your interpretation(s) and argument(s). Alongside your analyses, explain what you understand your data to mean/signify; why and how so.
- D. In conclusion, interpret the cultural significance of your study: what does your research tell us, specifically and in broader speculation, about cultural participation in contemporary America? Please also include some comment on the relative challenges and rewards of the theory and method(s) you employed.

\* Provide endnotes, using either *Chicago* (see the *Chicago Manual of Style*) or Turabian (see Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*) notation style but you must be consistent throughout your paper.

**All of the above applies equally to the short papers accompanying alternative format projects, except the 3rd component ("C" above) which will be encompassed within your alternative format, and your interpretation of cultural significance may be as well (the first half of "D" above)--whether you need to make this clear in paper as well as project is up to you.**

