

American Studies 216.01
AmSt/Engl/Hist/WSt 216: Introduction to American Cultures
July 2015
CUE 416
M/T/W/Th/F 3:00 – 5:00

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Office hours:
 T/W 1:30 – 2:30
 and by appointment

Required texts

Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II, by Thomas Doherty (Columbia, 1999).

Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear, by John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats (Verso, 2014).

We may also be reading and viewing various handouts and Web sites, and we will be viewing all or parts of several films. And I hope to bring a guest speaker or two to class. You are responsible for knowing all of this course material as well as the texts.

Overview

The WSU catalogue describes this course as an “introduction to the interdisciplinary studies of American cultures and the field of American Studies.” This section of the Introduction to American Cultures will examine aspects of American racial culture, particularly as they have concerned Asians and Asian Americans. In your written work, you may compare these phenomena to related topics of your choosing.

The word “American” itself is problematic, as it refers inclusively to all of the Americas, even though in this course we will apply it to the United States. Still, you should bear in mind the crucial distinction between “American” and “U.S.”

Objectives/Learning “outcomes”

At the end of the term, students should achieve the following:

- Articulation of a few key concepts in the interdisciplinary field of American Studies and application of those concepts to particular events and issues as well as to cultural productions
- Basic understanding of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation
- Skill and practice in the close reading of culture
- Skill and practice in basic research
- Skill in publicly presenting ideas and information

Methods

The following skills should produce the desired outcomes:

- Close reading of texts: By “texts” I mean any cultural production, including written texts, visual or aural images, historical and/or “natural” phenomena, personal experience and observation, etc
- Discussion and analysis of texts and contexts
- Contextualization: situating a text in its historical moment

Requirements

Reading journals: You will write two short journals on our readings, films, and class discussions. Each journal should be roughly two pages (500 to 600 words). In your journals, simply write your impressions of the materials and issues we discuss and read about. But mostly, explain *why*, for example, you disagree with one of our authors on wartime propaganda. It is important to know the difference between opinions and ideas. This assignment requires your ideas—not your opinions—based on the readings, films, and discussions.

Midterm examination: This will be a take-home essay requiring a response of two or three pages to a question on the material. Because it is a formal assignment, your writing (style, mechanics, form, etc) will factor into the grade. (See Note on Writing below.)

Final examination: There will be no final examination in this class.

Final paper: At the end of the semester you will submit a formal paper of four to five pages on a topic in U.S. popular culture. A detailed assignment sheet will be distributed early in the semester.

Text presentation: You will lead a ten-minute discussion of one of our readings. This will involve your discussing the author's ideas and argument, offering your own ideas, and asking classmates for their ideas.

Paper presentation: Late in the semester you will present your final paper to the class, in partnership with a classmate, who will also present his or her final paper. This presentation may be informal, and it may include audiovisual aids, but you will be given a time limit, which will be announced in the assignment sheet. I will give you detailed instructions later.

Attendance and participation: You must attend every day, arrive on time, and participate. Anything less will result in a reduced grade. After two unexcused absences, each missed class will reduce your course grade by one-fourth of a letter. **More than five absences will result in failure in the course.** If you arrive late or leave early, you will count as absent for the day. After an absence, you are responsible for checking on announcements and assignments made while you were out.

Come to class prepared to discuss the material. This requires more than simply reading. Think about what you read: Question and challenge it. Don't assume that I assign the books because I agree with everything their authors say—I certainly do not. You can participate in different ways. But you need to make your participation evident to me, so that you may receive credit for it. Participation options include e-mailing me comments or questions prior to class and keeping up with current events. Outside of class, read newspapers, listen to broadcast news, read alternative news sources. Your responses will count toward your participation grade.

Grades (based on a 400-point scale)

Reading journals	20 percent (10 percent each)	80 points
Midterm examination	20 percent	80 points
Final paper	40 percent	160 points
Presentations	10 percent (5 percent each)	40 points
Attendance and participation	10 percent	40 points

Note on Writing: As noted above, grades on your take-home midterm essay and on your final paper will include assessment of style and mechanics. These papers should be free of errors in mechanics (grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc) and clear. Learn the difference between simplicity and clarity. Good writing is always clear but is not always simple. Simple writing is

usually bad. This is not a writing course; and so if you know you have problems with writing, please seek help from any of several sources available, and see me outside of class. If you submit drafts before due dates, we can go over them together outside of class.

Grades on the midterm exam, the journals, and the final paper will be based on your reasoning. You will be graded not on *what* you argue but on *how* you argue—that is, logical flow of ideas, engagement with audience, coherence. Your presentations will be based strictly on the information you provide. This is not a course in public speaking, and so do not worry if you feel uncomfortable about speaking to the class.

Course policies

Ideally, each class meeting will be a lively, student-directed discussion of our course material. Short of that ideal, I will try to lecture as little as possible, not because lectures are boring or inefficient. In fact, good lectures often provide excellent ways of learning. Rather, I hope we will model a good community, driven by shared concerns and goals even when we disagree. To do well in this class, please note the following guidelines:

Read the assigned material when it is due. *Bring the assigned reading to class.*

Come to class on time.

Do not read newspapers or magazines in class, and turn off cell phones and all other electronic devices, unless you can show that you are using them for note-taking.

Do not use class time for sleeping or otherwise disengaging, or you will count as absent.

Name-calling and other signs of disrespect will result in your removal from class.

Feel free to disagree, respectfully. Feel encouraged to disagree.

Consider others' views. Reflect on your own social location, your privileges and power.

Learn a historically informed definition of racism, and challenge all racist discourse.

Reflect your grasp of history and social relations by respecting shy and quiet classmates, and by deferring to the experiences of people of color.

Finally, understand and consider the rage of people who are victims of systematic injustice. James Baldwin wrote that people of color have an obligation to feel rage over this nation's history of racism. If injustice does not fill you with rage, then perhaps you should ask yourself why.

Written graded assignments, including reading journals, will not be accepted late for any reason. Nor will they be accepted by e-mail. If you know in advance that you will be unable to attend class when a written assignment is due, let me know in advance and make arrangements for getting the paper to me. Otherwise your paper will not be accepted and you will receive a failing grade for the assignment.

Note on language: In our books we may read some words or phrases that will be, to some sensibilities, coarse or vulgar or racist. By themselves, no “mere” words are offensive. What makes a word vulgar or racist is its usage by a particular speaker in a particular context. Insensitive whites such as Glenn Beck complain that, for example, they are not allowed to say the “n” word without being labeled racist but that black men use it among themselves all the time. To “earn” the right to that word, Beck must first endure 500 years of racism. When you see such words in our books, consider their context. Who speaks them? Why? And to whom?

Academic integrity: “Cheating of any kind will result in your failing the course. See the WSU Standards for Student Conduct WAC 504-26-010 (3). You should read and familiarize yourself with these definitions and standards.”

Students With Disabilities: “Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and need accommodations to fully participate in this class, please visit or call the Access Center (Washington Building 217; 509-335-3417) to schedule an appointment with an Access Advisor. All accommodations MUST be approved through the Access Center.”

Safety and Emergency Notification: “Washington State University is committed to enhancing the safety of the students, faculty, staff, and visitors. It is highly recommended that you review the Campus Safety Plan (<http://safetyplan.wsu.edu/>) and visit the Office of Emergency Management web site (<http://oem.wsu.edu/>) for a comprehensive listing of university policies, procedures, statistics, and information related to campus safety, emergency management, and the health and welfare of the campus community.”

Assignment schedule

Note: Texts are listed by abbreviated titles. Assignments are subject to change. You are responsible for keeping up with changes.

M, July 6: Course and personal introductions. Brief history of American Studies and key terms and ideas (pages 5 and 6 below).

T, July 7: Introductions continued. Discuss more terms and concepts. Film TBA.

W, July 8: Read *Yellow*, pages 1-28.

Th, July 9: Read *Yellow*, pages 37-53. Begin Text Presentations.

F, July 10: Read *Yellow*, pages 54-72 and 121-126.

M, July 13: Read *Yellow*, pages 127-152.

T, July 14: TBA.

W, July 15: Read *Projections*, chapter 1. JOURNAL 1 DUE.

Th, July 16: Read *Projections*, chapter 3. MIDTERM EXAM ASSIGNED.

F, July 17: Read *Projections*, chapter 4.

M, July 20: Read *Projections*, chapters 6 and 7.

T, July 21: Read *Projections*, chapter 9. MIDTERM EXAM DUE.

W, July 22: Read *Projections*, chapter 10.

Th, July 23: Read *Projections*, Chapter 11.

F, July 24: Read *Yellow*, pages 156-177. JOURNAL 2 DUE.

M, July 27: Read *Yellow*, pages 216-236 and 254-255. Paper presentations begin.

T, July 28: Read *Yellow*, pages 262-271 and 277-293.

W, July 29: Read *Yellow*, pages 307-322 and 337-354.

Th, July 30: Read *Yellow*, pages 355-365. PAPER DUE.

F, July 31: Course conclusions.

Some guiding challenges and suggestions

As this is an introductory course, we will briefly scan the history of American Studies, examine basic concepts of culture, and examine the work of culture in interpreting and expressing issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Our work will require a willingness and ability to consider several ideas:

- 1) that social inequalities exist between communities defined by race, gender, sexuality, and class
- 2) that those inequalities exist *because* of perceived differences in race, gender, sexuality, and class
- 3) that those differences, because they are only perceived, are not natural but are socially constructed
- 4) that construction and enforcement of those differences is profitable for groups in power
- 5) that groups marginalized by race, gender, sexuality, and class have used, and sometimes continue to use, their differences as a tool for resistance, for achieving social justice
- 6) that pretending that those difference do not exist merely reinforces inequalities—for example, practicing colorblindness will not end racism but will sustain racial inequality and keep it profitable
- 7) that, as students of these issues, we must examine them from various perspectives, especially the perspective of historically marginalized peoples

Two definitions

As we begin our course, let us consider these definitions of *culture* and *racism*:

Culture is the complex everyday world we all encounter and through which we all move. Culture begins at the point at which humans surpass whatever is simply given in their natural inheritance. The cultivation of the natural world, in agriculture and horticulture, is thus a fundamental element of a culture. As such, the two most important or general elements of culture may be the ability of human beings to construct and to build, and the ability to use language.

Andrew Edgar, *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2002. 102.

Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005. 28.

Terms we will probably encounter

Institutional racism	Popular/mass culture
Capital	Identity
Gender	Representation
Sexism	Dominant narrative
Colonialism/Imperialism	Hegemony

Nationalism
“Oppression Olympics”
Racialization
Social construction
Colorblindness
White supremacy
Totalization
Temporality

Power differentials
Divide and conquer
Naturalization
Prison-Industrial Complex
White privilege
Patriarchy
Relativism
Double consciousness