AS 601: Colloquium: Introduction to American Studies

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Office hours: Tues 9-11, 5:15-6; Thurs 9-11 am, and 2-3:45, and by appointment
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Books:

Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860 (1986)


Hazel Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (1987)

Shelley Streeby, American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture (2002)


Linda Williams, Playing the Race card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson (2001)

These books, have been ordered in the bookstore, and they are also on reserve. The assigned articles are available on E-RES, where you can download copies either at UMB or from a computer at home. Go to the UMB web site, then “academics and libraries,” then “Healey library,” then “Electronic resources,” and then “E-reserves.” Our course password is “AMSTSMITHG”

Course Description:

Course readings, discussion and writing are intended to involve students in the intellectual mapping of the field of American Studies. We will try to assess what differentiates an American Studies approach from common approaches in American history, American literary history, and cultural studies. What are the special qualities of the interdisciplinary historical approach to the historical study of American culture? Why write these books; what are the problems these books are addressing? What is distinctive about the method/approaches of different authors; what new things can these authors
discover because of their distinctive approaches, especially applying techniques of literary analysis to historical evidence, techniques of historical analysis to literary evidence? How do these books enter into an ongoing intellectual discussion in the field?

**Course Requirements:**

Doing the required reading by the assigned date; participation in class discussions; completion of required written assignments.

This course depends on a shift in how you read these books; less for content, more for argument, interpretation, use of evidence. It also asks you to produce a particular kind of term paper; less research on a subject, more research on how different approaches to a subject (different emphases, different questions, different research focus) have developed over time.

Students will be asked to take a turn preparing some background information and a bibliography on one of the required books and presenting this to the class. For opening the discussion on a book, students will:
1) find out where the author was trained, who his/her intellectual influences were, what other books the author has written
2) prepare a bibliography placing this book in its field; note the prior books in the field, and related approaches. Use the footnotes of the introduction to help you here; reviews may also tip you off as to related books.
3) look at reviews of the book to see how it has been evaluated by others in the field (we will be doing a session in the library to learn how to use the electronic data bases to find these reviews, but prioritize reviews in American Quarterly, Journal of American History, Reviews in American History, American Studies, American Literature, American Literary History, Representations, Critical Inquiry, etc.) Do not read from the reviews but summarize critical opinion for us. Make note of where it was reviewed, the reviewers relationship to the field, in what disciplines it was reviewed, important contributions of the book, according to reviewers, important omissions according to reviewers

Written work: Each student will be expected to come to each meeting of the class when a book is due with a journal entry on the book assigned for that class meeting. These journal entries will provide a means for practicing the kind of critical reading and writing skills you will need for the final paper of this course. They will also serve to give students some written record of the reading they have done during the term. I will read and comment on these journal entries, but they will be ungraded. The overall task of the journal entries is to develop skills in assessing these books both in terms of method and content. Pick one of the first four questions for the final paper as a focus for each journal; be sure you have "practiced" each question and gotten feedback from me before you do the final paper. Being able to summarize a book’s main arguments, recognize its significance, identify the book’s disciplinary or interdisciplinary method and its distinctive use of sources -- these are acquired skills that take practicing. If you feel lost, you can write the journal after the class discussion. It is good to have something ready so
that you can participate when we talk about the book in class, but feel free to make use of the alternate plan to write after the discussion. But don’t let yourself get behind.

The final essay should be 15-20 pages, taking off from one of the weekly topics of the colloquium, using the book and articles of that week as a starting point, going on to read 1-2 other books (and possibly essays) on the topic, and then discussing the issues raised for the topic as a whole. Students often find it helpful to consult some reviews of the selected books.

Final essay questions:

1) What kinds of questions does this author seek to answer with this research? What are his/her concerns? What is the author's main thesis?

2) Why did this author pose these kinds of question at this time? What was the general political/historical/intellectual climate shaping the author's questions? What was the prevailing interpretation before this author did his/her research? Who is this author arguing with? How does this author intend his/her work to reframe the intellectual discussion?

3) What is his/her research design (plan, strategy)? Why does the author pick these particular sources to analyze, instead of other sets of sources? how does this author decide what is included and what is left out? why does the author start when he/she does, end when he/she does?

4) What are the problems, if any, with this way of doing research -- what kinds of questions can this kind of research answer? what kinds of questions can this kind of research not answer? ? How does the author read his her evidence--with what questions does he/she look for evidence? what are the problems with the kind of evidence this author uses?

Then two comparative questions:

5) How are the books the same as or different from one another in approach (compare questions, kinds of research, findings)? What territory is covered by the books as a group?

6) how would additional research strengthen or challenge the arguments of the individual books? What kinds of additional research remains to be done? what open questions are there still in this field?

Option for final paper: if you are unsure about your critical approach, prepare a draft answering questions 1-4 about at least one of the books, turn it in to me by the week before the last class so that I can read it, comment on it, and return it before the last class.
Students should see me to check/discuss their topics and book choices before Thanksgiving: by **Tuesday November 14** or **Tuesday November 21**

**Final essays are due Friday December 15** (if you need an extension, it must be negotiated with me/approved by Tuesday December 5)

The grade for the term will be based on the paper (70%) and class participation, including the weekly journals. (30%).

Criteria for grading final papers in 601:
- How well does the paper clearly state the arguments in the two books? Make each "project" clear in its own terms? Compare and contrast them?
- How well does the paper position the authors against those who preceded them, show clearly their innovations in interpretation?
- How well does the paper clearly identify the differences in methodological approach, sources, arguments? Does the paper grapple with the significance of the differences?
- How well does the paper make an effort to historicize the author and the argument, showing why new questions arose at a certain point in time, explain the historical/intellectual influences shaping the author?
Schedule of Classes:

Tuesday 9/5:
Introductions 6-6:30
6:30-7:30 we will have a session with Janet Stewart, Reference Librarian, in the library familiarizing ourselves with the data bases that will help you find reviews, and biographical information on authors (We will look at Academic Search premier, Expanded Academic ASAP, Gale data bases, JSTOR, Project Muse)
7:30-8:30 course mechanics, some discussion of the introductory articles

(handouts)

Social/ Cultural History, with a focus on gender, race, sexuality

Tuesday 9/12: The conceptualization of women’s work, public and private lives

Handout: Recommended: Geoff Eley, "No Need To Choose; Cultural History and the History of Society," paper presented at "The State of Cultural History: A Conference in Honor of Lawrence Levine," George Mason University, September 17, 2005

Presentation on Stansell: start discussing Stansell; read intro. and first chapter

Tuesday 9/19: The challenge of class in women's history
Christine Stansell, City of Women (Journals due on Stansell)

Tuesday 9/26: the social construction of race and ethnicity

Tuesday 10/3: The historical production of race and whiteness

E-RES Dana Frank, "White Working Class Women and the Race Question," International Labor and Working Class History 54 (Fall 1998): 80-102

Presentation on Foley, discuss Foley (Journal due on Foley)

Tuesday 10/10: the social construction of sexuality

start George Chauncey, Gay New York

Tuesday 10/17: continue discussion of Chauncey

(journals due on Chauncey)

Literary History: constructing and deconstructing the canon

Tuesday 10/24: What books and authors have been grouped as constituting “great American literature”? How has literary prestige been established? How have historically-minded literary critics and literary historians made different kinds of arguments for cultural impact and cultural significance of various authors and books?
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(Handout) Charles Chestnutt, “The Wife of His Youth.” 1899

Tuesday 10/31: What new kinds of questions and issues emerge from considering women writers and African-American writers as creators of American literature?


Hazel Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood

Presentation on Carby, discuss Carby
(journal due on Carby)

Mass Culture/American Culture
Tuesday 11/7 the 1840s, popular literature, and popular debates over American empire building

Sheely Streby, American Sensations

Presentation on Streby, discuss Streby
(journal due on Streby)

Tuesday 11/14 The 1930s and Cultural Production: literature, theater, film, and music

Michael Denning, Cultural Front: Parts I and II

Present on Denning; begin discussing Denning

Tuesday 11/21
Denning, Cultural Front Part III, students will select 1 chapter from from Ch 4-11 to summarize for the class; everyone read ch 12

contrast with a historian’s approach to popular culture in the 1930s


(journal due on Denning)

Tuesday 11/28:

Cold War, Civil Rights, and Popular Culture
Von Eschen, Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War
Present on Von Eschen, discuss Von Eschen

(journal due on Von Eschen)


Tuesday 12/5:
"reading" media texts: what are the shifting historical contexts for the production of popular narratives about race and gender; how do these circulate “like a slippery fish”?

Linda Williams, Playing the Race card
Present on Williams, discuss the book
(Journal due on Williams)

Tuesday 12/12:

What is American Studies as an interdisciplinary field, approach to research?

Final paper due 12/15