

HISTORY 2310F / AMERICAN STUDIES 2310F

American Nightmare: An Introduction to American Studies

FALL 2020



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This is a draft syllabus. Please see the course site on OWL for the most up-to-date syllabus. If you have questions about this course, you are welcome to email either professor.

**Lectures will take place in a virtual, asynchronous format - on-line with no scheduled meeting time.
Tutorials will take place in a virtual, synchronous format - on-line and at a dedicated time**

Note: The University is investigating a blend of online and live course delivery and is being guided by recommendations from health authorities and the provincial and federal governments. The Department of History is committed to providing a superior learning experience for all students, and our faculty members are reimagining their course offerings to take advantage of the best new technologies and practices available in online teaching and learning. Please monitor the department website for course information; we will post updates as soon as they are available.

Course Description

In the increasingly polarized culture of the U.S., one American's dream often seems to be another American's nightmare. This course introduces key ideas in American culture (the American Dream, American Exceptionalism, and American Identity), and examines recent socio-political movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and white nationalism.

In Fall 2020, we will pay special attention to the U.S. election as it unfolds in real time, and our case studies will include the COVID-19 pandemic and U.S. health policy; democracy and voter suppression in the United States; police violence and the #BlackLivesMatter movement; gender and #MeToo; the climate crisis and the politics of climate change.

Antirequisites: History 2310F/G or American Studies 2310 F/G

Course Syllabus

It is a strange time in American history. While Americans disagree about many, many things, there is a powerful sense—voiced inside and outside the United States, and from the political left, right, and center—that the richest, most powerful nation in the world is in crisis. Its institutions and its people are being tested.

The lines above appeared in our 2019 syllabus. They were true then, but they are even more true today. As we prepare this draft syllabus on the last weekend of May 2020, over 100,000 Americans have died from the COVID-19 pandemic, with no end in sight; 40 million Americans are unemployed; and across the country, thousands are in the streets protesting (and experiencing) police brutality. We truly do not know how this history will turn out. **If there was ever a time for American Studies to make itself useful, it is now.**

The academic field known as American Studies was born in the 1930s as a revolt against the rigidity of traditional disciplines like history and literature. A basic principle of American Studies scholarship is that “America”—a concept which includes, but is not limited to, the United States of America—is too complex to be analyzed with the tools of any single discipline. Students of American Studies use history, literature, political science, popular culture and more to understand America by any means necessary.

This class will introduce the basic concepts of American Studies scholarship and apply them to some of the most urgent crises and controversies facing the United States today. We'll try to understand these crises from multiple perspectives, and we'll ask: **what, if anything, can be done to address these problems?**

After an introductory class, **the course will be organized around five case studies.** Each case study involves a specific crisis or controversy in American life today: the COVID-19 pandemic; voting rights and the 2020 election; police violence against African-Americans; gender, sexual assault, and the #MeToo movement; the crisis of climate change. But as we'll see, each specific case has a long history and connects to a wide range of cultural and political issues and divides.

We'll spend two weeks on each case study—reading about it, discussing it in class or online, and getting as close to the truth as we can. We will investigate the history of each case, looking for parallel episodes in U.S.

history, and what light they shed on the major themes of American Studies, including American exceptionalism, the American Dream, and “American identity” (whatever that really means). Perhaps most importantly, we will ask what can or should be done about each case, trying to go beyond purely theoretical analysis to propose real responses to each controversy or crisis.

Assignments and Expectations

Although we will post short lectures and slideshows every week, this was not designed to be a lecture course. We do not claim to have the answers to all of America’s current problems! We will attack these cases together. Therefore, the class requires **active participation** every week. In our new Age of Social Distancing, we will discover together what that looks like. For all of you, this means watching short videos and slideshows every week, reading all of the selections we post for each case, thinking about them, and taking an active part in class discussions, whether those take place face to face, in online forums, or video chat. It also means being respectful, constructive, and collegial; we will be wrestling with many difficult and controversial issues during what is an extraordinarily stressful time. Ultimately, your participation grade should reflect what you’ve contributed to the shared work of our entire class.

Each week you will also need to complete a small number of **short assignments** that may include: responding to reaction questions, completing short online quizzes, or working in small groups. Depending on your learning style, some of these things will come easier than others. We will all need to be flexible and patient with one another as we re-imagine teaching and learning during a pandemic.

You will complete three longer writing assignments in this course:

Writing Assignment #1 is an essay or report of 750-1250 words (approx. 3-5 double-spaced pages), based on either Case Study I or II (your choice), and due on October 21.

Writing Assignment #2 is an essay or report of 1250-1750 words (approx. 5-7 pages), based on Case Study III or IV (again, your choice), and due on November 25. Both writing assignments will grow out of the material we discuss in class; the reading and thinking you do during class time should contribute directly to the assignment, though your research and thinking will go beyond our class discussions.

In place of a final exam, you will write a **Reflective Essay** at the end of the term. This will be an essay of 1250-1750 words (approx. 5-7 pages), similar to the two writing assignments, but it will ask you to reflect on and connect any of the content we have discussed all term. The exact question will be discussed in class the week of December 2, and the essay will be due on December 16.

Evaluation

- 10% **Participation**, including tutorial meetings and forum discussions
- 20% **Short Weekly Assignments**, including short quizzes, response questions, and group work
- 20% **Writing Assignment #1**, 750-1250 words, due October 21
- 25% **Writing Assignment #2**, 1250-1750 words, due November 25
- 25% **Reflective Essay**, 1250-1750 words, due December 16

Attendance will be taken in tutorial every week. You may miss one tutorial without penalty; each unexcused absence after the first will remove points from your participation grade. Late assignments will be penalized; however, if consulted before the due date, we will almost always grant a two-day with no questions asked. If you need more time than that, you must speak with one of the professors to go over an outline of your ideas and agree on a schedule for getting the assignment done.

You must complete all course work to pass the course. Failure to complete both written assignments and the final essay will result in a failing grade.

Self-Reported Absences

If a student reports a Self-Reported Absence (SRA) for an assignment, the new due date will be 48 hours after the SRA was submitted. For example, if you complete an SRA on March 19 at 3pm, your new due date will be March 21 at 3pm.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, successful students will be able to:

- Locate, interpret, and evaluate sources of information on current controversies in American life.
- Assess and articulate the relevance of U.S. history and American Studies scholarship to current controversies in American life.
- Draw on U.S. history and American Studies scholarship to propose constructive personal, civic, or political responses to current controversies in American life.

Course Materials

No books are required for purchase. All readings and other course materials will be available through OWL, in Western's libraries, or elsewhere online.

Course Schedule and Readings

A detailed list of readings and assignments will be posted on OWL in September. We reserve the right to add or subtract readings each week, as American politics and history develop during the semester. This real-time responsiveness can be challenging, but it is necessary for this course because we seek to engage you in learning how to use historical and cultural analysis to understand current events.

Week 1 (September 9): Introduction to American Studies

Tutorials will meet this week, and every week until December 4.

In our first week, we'll meet each other, discuss class policies and procedures, and start our investigation of American Studies and the United States today. We'll do a short case study, probably related to the issue of immigration, to give you a taste of how the course is going to work. (Prof. Shire will lead our discussions this week, although both professors will be involved in classes every week.)

Weeks 2 and 3 (September 9 and 23): Case Study I: COVID-19

Our first full case study examines the pandemic that has overturned all our lives, and the United States' response to it. Why was the wealthiest nation in the world so badly prepared for this outbreak? We'll look at the tricky politics of health care in the United States and at earlier pandemics in U.S. history. Does this history offer either insight or hope? We'll explore the way COVID-19 exposes fault lines in American society and exacerbates conspiracy theories, misinformation, and "fake news." And we'll try to devise strategies for mitigating the risks of disinformation and disease. (Prof. MacDougall will lead our discussions this week, although both professors will be involved in classes every week.)

Weeks 4 and 5 (September 30 and October 7): Case Study II: #MeToo

Our second case study examines the #MeToo movement and its aftermath in the context of the 2020 election. Two years after the Kavanaugh hearings, three years after the exposure of Harvey Weinstein and the eruption of #MeToo, how did we end up with both nominees for president being men accused of sexual assault? We'll talk about sexual harassment and assault in American life, along with misogyny, "himpathy," and rape culture. We'll look back at women like Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Anita Hill, and Geraldine Ferraro. We'll wrestle with how to vet or assess accusations against male candidates and elected officials. Do we Believe All Women? And we'll ask what all this tells us about the lives of women and men in the United States today. (Prof. Shire will lead.)

Weeks 6 and 7 (October 14 and 21): Case Study III: I Can't Breathe

Monday, October 12: Canadian Thanksgiving

Writing Assignment #1 due Wednesday, October 21, by 5 pm.

Our third case study considers police and vigilante violence against African Americans: the deaths of George Floyd, Atatiana Jefferson, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and too many more. Why do these killings keep happening, and how have African Americans, and white Americans, understood them? We'll study the Black Lives Matter movement, along with retorts like "All Lives Matter" and "Blue Lives Matter." We'll look at the protests these murders have triggered, considering questions about violence and nonviolence during the long struggle for Black freedom and equality. We'll try to trace the historical relationship between African Americans and U.S. law enforcement, from the days of lynching and Jim Crow to the prison industry today. And we'll ask how to reckon with this history. (Prof. MacDougall will lead.)

Weeks 8 and 9 (October 28 and November 11): Case Study IV: One Person, One Vote

November 2 – 6: Reading Week (no classes)

Tuesday, November 3: U.S. Election Day

Our fourth case, on voting and democracy in America, coincides with the 2020 U.S. election. We'll study the long struggle for voting rights and the long history of voter suppression in the United States. We'll talk about election security and consider the evidence for Russian interference in the 2016 election. We'll debate the true meaning of democracy in America, and we'll respond in real time to the 2020 election (assuming it happens) on November 3. Will democracy be served? (Prof. Shire will lead.)

Weeks 10 and 11 (November 18 and 25): Case Study V: Can This Planet Be Saved?**Writing Assignment #2 due Wednesday, November 25, by 5 pm.**

Our fifth case study considers the unfolding climate crisis and the relationship between capitalism and climate change. What will it take to avoid environmental catastrophe? Can it be done within the logic of American capitalism? What is the so-called Green New Deal, and what connects it to the New Deal of the 1930s? And how does our current crisis compare with the crisis of that era? We may talk about capitalism and communism in U.S. history, about red scares and red-baiting, and American ideas about the environment and the land. And we'll try to confront some existential questions: what are the limits of possible political change in 21st-century America? Can capitalism be saved? Can the world? (Prof. MacDougall will lead.)

Week 12 (December 2): Conclusion and Review

In our twelfth week of class, we'll try to sum up what we've learned from the course and from each other. We will give you the exact question for your final reflection essay, which will be ask you to draw on and connect material we have discussed over the whole term. (Prof. Shire will lead.)

Week 13 (December 9): No Class

There will be no class meetings or online content the week of December 7-11. Use this time to work on your final reflective essay.

Final Reflective Essay due Wednesday, December 16, by 5 pm.

Additional Statements

Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following website: http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf.

Accessibility Options

Please contact the course instructor if you require material in an alternate format or if you require any other arrangements to make this course more accessible to you. You may also wish to contact Student Accessibility Services at 519 661-2111 x 82147 for any specific question regarding an accommodation. Information regarding accommodation of exams is available on the Registrar's website: www.registrar.uwo.ca/examinations/accommodated_exams.html

Medical Issues

The University recognizes that a student's ability to meet his/her academic responsibilities may, on occasion, be impaired by medical illness. Please go to: https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_illness.pdf to read about the University's policy on medical accommodation. In the event of illness, you should contact Academic Counselling as soon as possible. The Academic Counsellors will determine, in consultation with the student, whether or not accommodation should be requested. They will subsequently contact the instructors in the relevant courses about the accommodation. Once the instructor has made a decision about whether to grant an accommodation, the student should contact his/her instructors to determine a new due date for tests, assignments, and exams.

Students must see the Academic Counsellor and submit all required documentation in order to be approved for certain accommodation.

Please visit https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/academic_policies/index.html to view all updated academic policies regarding medical accommodations.

Plagiarism

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offense (see Scholastic Offence Policy in the Western Academic Calendar).

Students are expected to retain all research notes, rough drafts, essay outlines, and other materials used in preparing assignments. In the unlikely event of concerns being raised about the authenticity of

any assignment, your instructor may ask you to produce these materials; an inability to do so may weigh heavily against you.

The following rules pertain to the acknowledgements necessary in academic papers:

A. In using another writer's words, you must both place the words in quotation marks and acknowledge that the words are those of another writer.

You are plagiarizing if you use a sequence of words, a sentence or a paragraph taken from other writers without acknowledging them to be theirs. Acknowledgement is indicated either by (1) mentioning the author and work from which the words are borrowed in the text of your paper; or by (2) placing a footnote number at the end of the quotation in your text, and including a correspondingly numbered footnote at the bottom of the page (or in a separate reference section at the end of your essay). This footnote should indicate author, title of the work, place and date of publication and page number. Method (2) given above is usually preferable for academic essays because it provides the reader with more information about your sources and leaves your text uncluttered with parenthetical and tangential references. In either case words taken from another author must be enclosed in quotation marks or set off from your text by single spacing and indentation in such a way that they cannot be mistaken for your own words. Note that you cannot avoid indicating quotation simply by changing a word or phrase in a sentence or paragraph which is not your own.

B. In adopting other writer's ideas, you must acknowledge that they are another writer's ideas.

You are plagiarizing if you adopt, summarize, or paraphrase other writers' trains of argument, ideas or sequences of ideas without acknowledging their authorship according to the method of acknowledgement given in "A" above. Since the words are your own, they need not be enclosed in quotation marks. Be certain, however, that the words you use are entirely your own; where you must use words or phrases from your source; these should be enclosed in quotation marks, as in "A" above.

Clearly, it is possible for you to formulate arguments or ideas independently of another writer who has expounded the same ideas, and whom you have not read. Where you got your ideas is the important consideration here. Do not be afraid to present an argument or idea without acknowledgement to another writer, if you have arrived at it entirely independently. Acknowledge it if you have derived it from a source outside your own thinking on the subject.

In short, use of acknowledgements and, when necessary, quotation marks is necessary to distinguish clearly between what is yours and what is not. Since the rules have been explained to you, if you fail to make this distinction, your instructor very likely will do so for you, and they will be forced to regard your omission as intentional literary theft. Plagiarism is a serious offence which may result in a student receiving an 'F' in a course or, in extreme cases, in their suspension from the University.

Copyright

Lectures and course materials, including power point presentations, outlines, and similar materials, are protected by copyright. You may take notes and make copies of course materials for your own educational use. You may not record lectures, reproduce (or allow others to reproduce), post or distribute lecture notes, wiki material, and other course materials publicly and/or for commercial purposes without my written consent.

Health and Wellness

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Use of Electronic Devices

Electronic devices are required for participation in the online portions of this course. They will not be permitted in face to face tutorials except with the explicit permission of the tutorial leader.

Please contact the course instructor if you require material in an alternate format or if you require any other arrangements to make this course more accessible to you. You may also wish to contact Student Accessibility Services at 661-2111 x 82147 for any specific question regarding an accommodation.

If you have any further questions or concerns please contact, Heidi Van Galen, Administrative Officer, Department of History, 519-661-2111 x84963 or e-mail vangelen@uwo.ca.