

# Introduction to American Studies

English 20553 | Spring 2019

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## Course Overview

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In 1842, Charles Dickens landed in Boston Harbor. Twenty-nine years old and the most famous living writer in the English-speaking world, Dickens bound through the Boston streets, thrilled to be in the United States for the first time. “Here we are!” he greeted a throng of well-wishers at the Tremont Hotel. But his warm feelings toward his hosts didn’t last long. He found American slavery abhorrent, American manners crude, and American politics malicious. “This is not the Republic I came to see,” he wrote a friend in Britain. “This is not the Republic of my imagination.”

This course is about the nation that Dickens imagined, the nation that disappointed him, and how Americans, then and now, live with the distance between the America they imagine and the America they know. It is an introduction to American studies, a field that brings together thinkers from all different backgrounds—historians, ethnic studies scholars, activists, political scientists, sociologists, regular Joes, and disillusioned British novelists—to investigate the social and cultural life of the United States. Through fiction, film, political speeches, popular music, and comics, we will consider how a diverse cast of Americans have defined and claimed, and redefined and reclaimed, the nation as their own. From the inscrutable diaries of George Washington to the ugly precedent of the Chinese Exclusion Act to Henry Luce’s declaration of an “American century,” this course invites us to, like Dickens, take in the United States anew, bad manners and all.

## Required Texts

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Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. 1963. Vintage, 1993.  
Lepore, Jill. *The Story of America: Essays on Origins*. Princeton UP, 2012.  
Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*, Pantheon, 1986.  
---. *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*, Pantheon, 1991.

## Readings on Course Website

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Anderson, Benedict. “Cultural Roots.” *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1983, pp. 9–36.  
---. Introduction. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1983, pp. 1–8.  
Anderson, Carol. “A History of Disenfranchisement.” *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our Democracy*, Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 1–43.

- BlacKkKlansman*. Directed by Spike Lee. Blumhouse, 2018.
- Bourne, Randolph S. "Trans-national America." *Atlantic*, July 1916, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1916/07/trans-national-america/304838/>.
- "The Constitution of the United States." 1787. National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>.
- Deloria, Philip. Introduction. *Playing Indian*, Yale UP, 1998, pp. 1–9.
- Boym, Svetlana. "Reflective Nostalgia: Virtual Reality and Collective Memory." *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic, 2001, pp. 49–56.
- . "Restorative Nostalgia: Conspiracies and Return to Origins." *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic, 2001, pp. 41–48.
- Dickens, Charles. Concluding Remarks to *American Notes for General Circulation*, vol. 2, Chapman and Hall, 1842, pp. 287–306.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. "The Propaganda of History." *Black Reconstruction in America: A History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*, Harcourt, Brace, 1935, 711–29.
- Dudziak, Mary L. "Coming to Terms with Cold War Civil Rights." *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Princeton UP, 2000, pp. 18–46.
- Gaines, Alisha. "A Secondhand Kind of Terror: Grace Halsell and the Ironies of Empathy." *Black For a Day: White Fantasies of Race and Empathy*, U of North Carolina P, 2013, pp. 83–120.
- Hughes, Langston. "Let America Be America Again." 1936. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Vintage, 1995, pp. 189–91.
- King, Martin Luther. "A Time to Break the Silence." *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, HarperCollins, 1991, pp. 231–44.
- Knausgaard, Karl Ove. "My Saga, Part 1." *New York Times Magazine*, 25 Mar. 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/magazine/karl-ove-knausgaard-travels-through-america.html>.
- Lee, Erika. "The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882–1924." *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2002, pp. 36–62.
- Luce, Henry. "The American Century." *Life*, 17 Feb. 1941, pp. 61–65.
- Morrison, Toni. "Recitatif." *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*, edited by Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, 1983, pp. 243–61.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. "Just Memory." *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Harvard UP, 2016, pp. 4–19.
- Pease, Donald E. "A Brief Critical Genealogy of the Fantasy of American Exceptionalism." *The New American Exceptionalism*, U of Minnesota P, 2009, pp. 7–13.
- Tchen, John Kuo Wei. "George Washington: Porcelain, Tea, and Revolution." *Racially Writing the Republic: Racists, Race Rebels, and Transformations of American Identity*, edited by Bruce Baum and Duchess Harris, Duke UP, 2009, pp. 26–43.

## Assignments and Grading

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### Assignments:

|                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| Reading Quizzes                | 15% |
| Participation and Preparedness | 15% |
| Presentation                   | 20% |
| Midterm Paper                  | 25% |
| Final Exam                     | 25% |

### Grading Scale:

|    |         |    |        |
|----|---------|----|--------|
| A  | 93–100% | C  | 73–76% |
| A- | 90–92%  | C- | 70–72% |
| B+ | 87–89%  | D+ | 67–69% |
| B  | 83–86%  | D  | 63–66% |
| B- | 80–82%  | D- | 60–62% |
| C+ | 77–79%  | F  | 0–59%  |

## Reading Schedule and Deadlines

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| Date                  | Readings  | Deadlines             |
|-----------------------|---|-----------------------|
| <b>Week 1</b>         | <b>What Is American Studies?</b>  |                       |
| Monday, January 14    | Syllabus<br>Hughes, “Let America Be America Again” (in class)                                       |                       |
| Wednesday, January 16 | “The Constitution of the United States”<br>Lepore, <i>The Story of America</i> (“We the Parchment”) | Presentation assigned |
| <b>Week 2</b>         | <b>Nationalism</b>  |                       |
| Monday, January 21    | No class (Martin Luther King Day)   |                       |
| Wednesday, January 23 | Anderson, Introduction to <i>Imagined Communities</i> and “Cultural Roots”                          |                       |
| <b>Week 3</b>         |   |                       |
| Monday, January 28    | Lepore, <i>The Story of America</i> (Introduction, “A Nue Merrykin Dikshunary”)                     |                       |
| Wednesday, January 30 | Du Bois, “The Propaganda of History”  |                       |
| <b>Week 4</b>         |   |                       |

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|------------------------|---|--|
| Monday, February 4     | Lepore, <i>The Story of America</i> (“The Way to Wealth,” “His Highness”)   | Midterm paper assigned                                   |
| Wednesday, February 6  | Pease, “A Brief Critical Genealogy of the Fantasy of American Exceptionalism”<br>Luce, “The American Century”       | Midterm paper proposal due Sunday, February 10 at 5 p.m. |
| <b>Week 5</b>          |   |  |
| Monday, February 11    | Conferences   |  |
| Wednesday, February 13 | Conferences   |  |
| <b>Week 6</b>          | <b>Transnational America</b>  |  |
| Monday, February 18    | Tchen, “George Washington: Porcelain, Tea, and Revolution”  |  |
| Wednesday, February 20 | Bourne, “Trans-national America”  |  |
| <b>Week 7</b>          |   |  |
| Monday, February 25    | Lepore, <i>The Story of America</i> (“Pickwick in America”)<br>Dickens, Concluding Remarks to <i>American Notes</i> |  |
| Wednesday, February 27 | Knausgaard, “My Saga, Part 1”   | Midterm paper due Friday, March 1 at 5 p.m.              |
| <b>Week 8</b>          |   |  |
| Monday, March 4        | Dudziak, “Coming to Terms with Cold War Civil Rights”   |  |
| Wednesday, March 6     | King, “A Time to Break the Silence”   |  |
| <b>Week 9</b>          |   |  |
| Monday, March 11       | No class (spring break)   |  |
| Wednesday, March 13    | No class (spring break)   |  |
| <b>Week 10</b>         | <b>Exclusion Acts</b>   |  |
| Monday, March 18       | Lee, “The Chinese Exclusion Example”  |  |
| Wednesday, March 20    | Anderson, “A History of Disenfranchisement”   |  |
| <b>Week 11</b>         |   |  |
| Monday, March 25       | Baldwin, <i>The Fire Next Time</i> (“My Dungeon Shook,” “Down at the Cross” [1–47])                                 |  |
| Wednesday, March 27    | Baldwin, <i>The Fire Next Time</i> (“Down at the Cross” [47–106])   |  |
| <b>Week 12</b>         | <b>Blurred Lines</b>  |  |
| Monday, April 1        | Deloria, Introduction to <i>Playing Indian</i>  |  |

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| Wednesday, April 3  | Gaines, "A Secondhand Kind of Terror"                    |  |
| <b>Week 13</b>      |  |  |
| Monday, April 8     | <i>BlackKlansman</i>                                     |  |
| Wednesday, April 10 | Morrison, "Recitatif"                                    |  |
| <b>Week 14</b>      | <b>The Politics of Remembering</b>                       |  |
| Monday, April 15    | Nguyen, "Just Memory" (website)                          |  |
| Wednesday, April 17 | Boym, "Restorative Nostalgia,"<br>"Reflective Nostalgia" |  |
| <b>Week 15</b>      |  |  |
| Monday, April 22    | Spiegelman, <i>Maus I</i>                                |  |
| Wednesday, April 24 | Spiegelman, <i>Maus II</i>                               |  |
| <b>Week 16</b>      |  |  |
| Monday, April 29    | Lepore, <i>The Story of America</i> ("To Wit")<br>SPOTs  |  |
| Wednesday, May 1    | Final review   | Final exam assigned<br>Final exam due Sunday, May 5<br>at 5 p.m. |