American Studies

Humanities Quadrangle, 203.432.1186
http://americanstudies.yale.edu
M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Chair
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Professors
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Associate Professors
Rene Almeling, Crystal Feimster, Zareena Grewal, Daniel HoSang, Greta LaFleur, Albert Laguna, Joanna Radin, Elihu Rubin, Tisa Wenger

Senior Lecturer
James Berger

FIELDS OF STUDY
Fields include American literature, history, the arts and material culture, philosophy, cultural theory, and the social sciences.

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR THE PH.D. DEGREE
During the first two years of study students are required to take twelve term courses; at least half of these courses must be in American Studies. First-year students are also required to take AMST 600, American Scholars (graded Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory). The student's program will be decided in consultation with the adviser and the director of graduate studies (DGS). In each of the two years, the student should take at least one seminar devoted to research or requiring a substantial original paper, and must achieve two grades of Honors, with an average overall of High Pass.

Students are required to show proficiency in a language other than English; they may fulfill this requirement by (1) conducting substantial research in the chosen language as part of the course requirements for one of the twelve required seminars, (2) passing a translation test, offered each term by various language departments, or (3) receiving a grade of B or higher in a Yale College intermediate-or advanced-level language course or in a Yale language-for-reading course, such as French for Reading or German for Reading.

Upon completion of course work, students in their third year of study are required to participate in at least one term of a monthly prospectus workshop (AMST 902). Intended to complement the work of the prospectus committee, the workshop is designed as a professionalization experience that culminates in students’ presentation of the dissertation prospectus at their prospectus colloquium.

Students should schedule the oral qualifying examinations in four fields, in the fifth term of study. Preparation, submission, and approval of the dissertation prospectus should be completed by the end of the sixth term, with a final deadline at the end of the seventh term with permission from the DGS. Students are admitted to candidacy for the Ph.D. upon completion of all predissertation requirements, including the prospectus. The faculty in American Studies considers training in teaching to be an important part of the program. Students in American Studies normally teach in years three and four.

COMBINED PH.D. PROGRAMS
American Studies and African American Studies

The American Studies Program also offers, in conjunction with the Department of African American Studies, a combined Ph.D. in American Studies and African American Studies. This combined degree is most appropriate for students who intend to concentrate in and write a dissertation on any aspect of African American history, literature, or culture in the United States and other parts of the Americas. Applicants to the combined program must indicate on their applications that they are applying both to American Studies and to African American Studies. All documentation within the application should include this information. For further details, see African American Studies.

American Studies and Film and Media Studies

The American Studies Program also offers, in conjunction with the Program in Film and Media Studies, a combined Ph.D. in American Studies and Film and Media Studies. Applicants to the combined program must indicate on their application that they are applying both
to American Studies and to Film and Media Studies. All documentation within the application should include this information. For further details, see Film and Media Studies.

American Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

The American Studies Program also offers, in conjunction with the Program in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, a combined Ph.D. in American Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. This combined degree is most appropriate for students who intend to concentrate in and write a dissertation on any aspect of gender and sexuality; transnational politics and security regimes; citizenship and statelessness; public law and sexual violence; public policy and political representation; kinship, reproduction, and reproductive technologies; policing, surveillance, and incarceration; social movements and protest; indigeneity, racialization, and racism; literature, language, and translation; Islam and neoliberalism; colonialism and postcolonialism. Applicants to the combined program must indicate on their application that they are applying both to American Studies and to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. All documentation within the application should include this information. For further details, see Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

PUBLIC HUMANITIES CERTIFICATE

The Certificate in Public Humanities is granted upon the completion of all requirements. For more details on these requirements, as well as information on courses, projects, and teaching opportunities, see Public Humanities under Non-Degree Granting Programs, Councils, and Research Institutes.

MASTER’S DEGREES

M.Phil. See Degree Requirements under Policies and Regulations.

M.A. (en route to the Ph.D.) The M.A. is granted upon the completion of seven term courses (two grades must be Honors and the other five grades must average High Pass), and the successful completion of the language requirement. It can be petitioned for in the term following completion of the requirements. Candidates in combined programs will be awarded the master’s degree only when the master’s requirements for both programs have been met.

Terminal Master’s Degree Program The basic requirements for this terminal degree are seven term courses, including a special writing project, and the successful completion of the language requirement. The project involves the submission of substantial written work, either in conjunction with one course or as a tutorial that substitutes for one course. Students must earn a grade of Honors in two of their courses and an average grade of High Pass in the others.

More information is available on the department’s website, http://americanstudies.yale.edu.

COURSES

AMST 601a, Interdisciplinary Research in American Studies Lisa Lowe
This seminar introduces students to interdisciplinary research methods and paradigms in American studies. It is both a history of the field and American studies scholarship, and an exploration of new approaches and alternative frameworks that revise earlier national objects, areas, historical events, and periods. The seminar features visits from program faculty and others.

AMST 622a and AMST 623b / CPLT 622a, Working Group on Globalization and Culture Michael Denning
A continuing yearlong collective research project, a cultural studies “laboratory.” The group, drawing on several disciplines, meets regularly to discuss common readings, develop collective and individual research projects, and present that research publicly. The general theme for the working group is globalization and culture, with three principal aspects: (1) the globalization of cultural industries and goods, and its consequences for patterns of everyday life as well as for forms of fiction, film, broadcasting, and music; (2) the trajectories of social movements and their relation to patterns of migration, the rise of global cities, the transformation of labor processes, and forms of ethnic, class, and gender conflict; (3) the emergence of and debates within transnational social and cultural theory. The specific focus, projects, and directions of the working group are determined by the interests, expertise, and ambitions of the members of the group, and change as its members change. The working group is open to doctoral students in their second year and beyond. Graduate students interested in participating should contact michael.denning@yale.edu.

AMST 625b / ENGL 885b, The Transpacific Midcentury Sunny Xiang
This course situates war and empire at the cross-section of political geography, critical historiography, and cultural studies. Put another way, it uses the concept-term “Transpacific Midcentury” to undertake an extended meditation on the methodological categories that organize our intellectual work and everyday thinking: period, area, and archive. My hope is that our conversations over the term allow us to unsettle, distort, reject, and remake these seemingly stable categories. Questions that guide our thinking include: How do we periodize a mid-century cold war between superpowers that spun off into multiple colonial wars, civil wars, guerrilla wars, and cultural wars? How does the archipelagic imaginary of the transpacific complicate the continental biases of area studies and ethnic studies? How might cultural texts help us fashion informed hypotheses about a historical period saturated with new ideas about race, gender, media, travel, governance, and consumerism? In exploring these questions, we engage writers, thinkers, and artists such as Gina Apostol, Samuel Delany, Vernadette Gonzalez, Jodi Kim, Myung Mi Kim, Christina Klein, Richard Mason, Craig Santos Perez, Teresia Teaiwa, and Lisa Yoneyama.
This interdisciplinary seminar focuses on the tangled relations of religion and museums, historically and in the present. What does it mean to “exhibit religion” in the institutional context of the museum? What practices of display might one encounter for this subject? What kinds of museums most frequently invite religious display? How is religion suited (or not) for museum exhibition and museum education? Permission of the instructor required; qualified undergraduates are welcome.

This mixed graduate/undergraduate seminar surveys documentary work in three media—film, photography, and sound—since the 1930s, focusing on the documentary both as a cultural form with a history of its own and as a parcel of skill sets and storytelling and production practices to be studied and mastered. Readings and discussions cover important scholarly approaches to documentary as a genre, as well as close readings of documentaries themselves and practitioners’ guides to various aspects of documentary work. Topics include major trends in documentary practice across the three media, documentary ethics, aesthetics and truth-claims, documentary's relationship to the scholarly disciplines and to journalism, and documentary work as political activism. Class meetings include screenings/viewings/soundings of documentary works, and practitioners’ panels and workshops with Yale documentarians (including Charles Musser, Zareena Grewal, Elihu Rubin, Gretchen Berland, and Laura Wexler) and local New Haven documentarians such as Jake Halpern (Yale ’97, This American Life). Students’ final projects may take the form of a traditional scholarly paper on some aspect of documentary history or a particular documentary producer, or an actual piece of documentary work—a film treatment, a brief video, a set of photographs, a sound documentary, or script.

In this interdisciplinary seminar, we study the central importance of kinship, family, and domestic labor to the social reproduction of racial colonial processes. Settler colonialism, colonial slavery, overseas empire, and their aftermaths depend not only on the brute force of war, captivity, and occupation; they are also sustained and contested through culture, language, forms of family and household, and the social reproduction of race, gender, intimacy, and filiation. We trace a genealogy of “colonial domesticity” that considers histories of the sexual violation and separation of slave women from their children, compulsory boarding schools for Native Americans, racialized gendered divisions of care labor, transnational Asian adoption, and contemporary migrant detention and family separation; this genealogy also includes alternative forms of kinship, domesticity, generation, and relation. Readings include historical and anthropological studies of colonialism, feminist debates on social reproduction, and literary and visual culture materials by Maria Mies, Ann Laura Stoler, Silvia Federici, Tithi Bhattacharya, Ruha Benjamin, Kalindi Vora, Thavolia Glymph, Saidiya Hartman, Dorothy Roberts, Audra Simpson, Jodi Byrd, Amy Kaplan, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Laura Briggs, Elizabeth Freeman, Chandan Reddy, Alys Weinbaum, Louise Erdrich, Mary Prince, Toni Morrison, Patricia Powell, Chang-rae Lee, Octavia Butler, and others. Permission of the instructor required.

This reading-intensive seminar examines influential scholarship across disciplines on “the race concept” and racialized relations in American culture and society. Major topics include the cultural construction of race; race as both an instrument of oppressions and an idiom of resistance in American politics; the centrality of race in literary, anthropological, and legal discourse; the racialization of U.S. foreign policy; “race mixing” and “passing,” vicissitudes of “whiteness” in American politics; the centrality of race in American political culture; and “race” in the realm of popular cultural representation. Writings under investigation include classic formulations by such scholars as Lawrence Levine and Ronald Takaki, as well as more recent work by Saidiya Hartman, Robin Kelley, and Ann Fabian. Seminar papers give students an opportunity to explore in depth the themes, periods, and methods that most interest them. Permission of the instructor required.

This course explores recent trends and historiography on several problems through the middle of the nineteenth century: sectionalism, expansion; slavery and the Old South; northern society and reform movements; Civil War causation; the meaning of the Confederacy; why the North won the Civil War; the political, constitutional, and social meanings of emancipation and Reconstruction; violence in Reconstruction society; the relationships between social/cultural and military/political history; problems in historical memory; the tension between narrative and analytical history writing; and the ways in which race and gender have reshaped research and interpretive agendas.

This course treats the aftermath of the Civil War and the 15th Amendment, as writers in various ways imagined the meaning of the war, the possibility of multiracial democracy, and the reality of fracture. The course begins with Civil War writing in a range of genres, including poetry by Whitman and Melville as well as writings by Douglass, Alcott, Keckley, and others. It touches on readings about Reconstruction in the South by white writers such as Constance Fenimore Woolson, Albion Tourgée, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page, alongside the African American tradition from Douglass through Charles Chesnutt and Ida B. Wells. We read The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and various works by Stephen Crane, including “The Monster,” and conclude with the great novel of unfinished business, Absalom, Absalom!

This seminar takes its inspiration from concepts and questions centering theories that engage experimental methodological approaches to navigating the ocipates of the archive: presumptively “lost” narratives of black life, obscure(d) histories, compromised voices and testimonies, contested (auto)biographies, anonymous testimonies, textual aporias, fabulist documents, confounding marginalia. The scholarly and aesthetic modes by which a range of critics and poets, novelists, dramatists, and historians have grappled with such material
The course explores the ways in which both war and peace have been imagined and represented, and how those visual practices might be unlearned and reimagined. What do images and imaginings of war and peace leave out of view, and how can we bring both underlying social vulnerability and extant networks of protest and resistance into greater visibility? How might we avoid automatized reiterations of well-worn locations and scenarios of violence, for example in constructions of “the enemy,” and develop new approaches to the nationalist, racialized, and gendered stakes of conflict? What alternative acts of intervention, witnessing, and reparation might we create so as to see emergencies more freshly — at a time of conflict, as well as in anticipation and in retrospect? Can the visual archives of violence be reframed and recirculated to shape more firmly the potential of justice, cohabitation, and peace? How can visualizations of antiterrorist movements and peace actions be mobilized more effectively? This team-taught course is inspired by the documentary work of Susan Meiselas. Her distinctive photographic practice with communities in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile, Kurdistan, and elsewhere, her repeated return to sites of conflict over time, and her collaboration with the subjects of her images, as well as her extensive and innovative archival work, serve as one model for the kinds of approaches we want to explore and foster. In addition, our work is guided by close study of authors such as Leni Riefenstahl, Virginia Woolf, Alain Resnais, Susan Sontag, Sigmund Freud, Errol Morris, Judith Butler,
AMST 734b / CPLT 64gb / ENGL 971b, Fictions of Canada: Colonialism, Nationalism, Postcolonialism  Katie Trumpener
This course explores the literature(s) of Canada in its long history, its considerable linguistic and cultural range, and its complex relationship to political history. Like Canada itself, Canadian literature represents a “contact zone” between First Nations peoples, French and British settlers, and immigrants from Eastern Europe, East and South Asia, and the Caribbean. Particular focus on Canada’s diverse early literatures (from Jesuit hymn to epistolary novel); on the prominent role of women writers across Canadian literature history; on the emergence of an experimental Québécois literature (utilizing Montreal patois as a new literary language) in an era also marked by secularization, modernization, and political separatism; on English Canadian attempts to rethink colonial history; and on the critiques of Canada’s ongoing decolonization process by new generations of indigenous, immigrant, and ethnic writers. This course explores both literary history and literary form; and the work of internationally famous novelists and poets (Leonard Cohen, Marie-Claire Blais, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje) and their innovative local counterparts. Throughout the term, moreover, our discussion of written literary texts (poems, novels, plays) is supplemented by primarily oral texts (Canadian anthems, ballads, folk, rock, and punk songs in a range of Canadian languages). We are thus listening to even as we are reading Canada.

AMST 746b / ANTH 503b, Ethnographic Writing  Kathryn Dudley
This course explores the practice of ethnographic analysis, writing, and representation. Through our reading of contemporary ethnographies and theoretical work on ethnographic fieldwork in anthropological and interdisciplinary research, we explore key approaches to intersubjective encounters, including phenomenological anthropology, relational psychoanalysis, affect studies, and the new materialisms. Our inquiries coalesce around the poetics and politics of what it means to sense and sensationalize co-present subjectivities, temporalities, and ontologies in multispecies worlds and global economies. This is a core Anthropology graduate program course; others admitted only by permission of the instructor.

AMST 771b / AFAM 775b / ENGL 981b, Affect Theory  Tav Niyong’o
This seminar traces the emergence of affect, sense, feeling, and mood as critical keywords in American studies. Particular attention is paid to the manner in which queer theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, Ann Cvetkovich, Heather Love, Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz developed the concept in what has been called “the affective turn” in queer and feminist aesthetics. The philosophical basis of affect theory in the writings of Spinoza, Heidegger, and Deleuze forms the core of the seminar. We also look to an alternate genealogy for affect politics in the writings of Bergson and Deleuze on fabulation. We consider the psychoanalytic take on affect, in particular the object relations school of Klein and Winnicott, and we read critics who contrast affect theory with trauma theory. Marxist contributions to affect theory include readings from Virno (on humor), Hardt and Negri (on affective labor), and Rancière (on the distribution of the sensible). The writings of Jasbir Puar and Brian Massumi on the affective politics of contemporary war, empire, and societies of control are also considered, as are writings by Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Frank Wilderson on optimism and pessimism as moods/modalities of black studies.

AMST 775a / ANTH 612b / WGSS 613a, Latinx Ethnography  Ana Ramos-Zayas
Consideration of ethnography within the genealogy and intellectual traditions of Latinx studies. Topics include questions of knowledge production and epistemological traditions in Latin America and U.S. Latino communities; conceptions of migration, transnationalism, and space; perspectives on “(il)legality” and criminalization; labor, wealth, and class identities; contextual understandings of gender and sexuality; theorizations of affect and intimate lives; and the politics of race and inequality under white liberalism and conservatism in the United States.

AMST 778b / ANTH 666b / WGSS 666b, Privilege in the Americas  Ana Ramos-Zayas
Examination of inequality, not only through experiences of the poor and marginal, but also through institutions, beliefs, social norms, and everyday practices of the privileged. Topics include critical examination of key concepts like “studying up,” “elite,” and “privilege,” as well as variations in forms of capital; institutional sites of privilege (elite prep schools, Wall Street); living spaces and social networks (gated communities, private clubs); privilege in intersectional contexts (privilege and race, class, and gender); and everyday practices of intimacy and affect that characterize, solidify, and promote privilege.

AMST 785b, Religion and the Performance of Space  Sally Proomey
This interdisciplinary seminar explores categories, interpretations, and strategic articulations of space in a range of religious traditions in the United States. The course is structured around theoretical issues, including historical deployments of secularity as a framing mechanism, conceptions of space and place, and perceived relations between property and spirituality. Examples of the kinds of case studies treated in class include public displays of religion, the enactment of ritual behaviors within museums, the marking of religious boundaries of various sorts, and emplaced articulations of “spiritual” properties or real estate. Several campus events, including research group presentations, are coordinated with the seminar. Permission of the instructor required; qualified undergraduates are welcome.

AMST 797b / AFAM 797b / HIST 797b, Atlantic Abolitions  Marcela Echeverri Munoz
This readings course explores the historiography on the century of abolition, when the new states of the Americas abolished racial slavery. Beginning with the first abolitions in the U.S. North during the 1780s, we consider the emergence and process of abolition throughout the Atlantic world, including the Caribbean, Spanish America, and Brazil, through the 1880s.

AMST 802a / HIST 702a, Readings in Early National America  Joanne Freeman
An introduction to the early national period and its scholarship, exploring major themes such as nationalism, national identity, the influence of the frontier, the structure of society, questions of race and gender, and the evolution of political cultures.
AMST 832a / FILM 735a, Documentary Film Workshop  Charles Musser
This workshop in audiovisual scholarship explores ways to present research through the moving image. Students work within a Public Humanities framework to make a documentary that draws on their disciplinary fields of study. Designed to fulfill requirements for the M.A. with a concentration in Public Humanities.

AMST 837b / RLST 696b, Troubling Heritage  Sally Promey
This seminar invites students to interrogate the complex implications—the racial and religious, political and commercial, problematic—of (American) heritage. The term is a familial one, implying genealogies of belonging, securing identities, designating insiders and outsiders, laying claim to aesthetics and ethics of incorporation and exclusion. Heritage curates history; it (re)invents the past. Heritage often elicits the modifier “sacred,” ensconces itself in the aura of sacrality. It assumes a degree of inherited intimacy with the category “religion.” The state denominates, administers, and preserves “heritage”; an official apparatus (executive, legislative, judicial) supports this maneuver. Heritage is a power operation. Recent events have clearly revealed the extent to which various state and state-supported entities have shaped American heritage to facilitate the institutionalization of racism and the preservation of white (Christian) supremacy. Heritage fabrication in the United States, and to these ends, long predates the erection of heroic Confederate statuary in the early decades of the twentieth century. The course examines this history and aims to understand, especially, its material effects.

AMST 856a, American Mobilities  Laura Barraclough
The “mobilities turn,” developed primarily in the social sciences since the early 2000s, examines the structured movements of people, ideas, and things; the transportation and communication infrastructures that move them; and the cultural meanings attributed to mobility and immobility. This course integrates critical mobilities scholarship with American studies and adjacent fields to consider the significance of (im)mobilities for the evolution of American history, geographies, society, and culture. Our focus is on American (im)mobilities and mobility justice in relationship to settler colonialism, racism, and capitalism in a variety of regions and from the seventeenth century to the present.

AMST 857b / WGSS 857b, Frailties  Terrell Herring
An overview of the methodologies and interdisciplinary potentials of critical age studies. After beginning with a recent issue of Radical History Review on “Old/Age,” we spend our weeks discussing topics such as ageism and age discrimination; immigrant caregiving and servitude; black debility; creative iterations of queer and trans aging; age standardizations in the early twentieth-century United States; “deaths of despair” amidst “the new longevity”; feminist critiques of optimal aging; and junctures of disability and aging. The course brings together a range of thinkers including historians such as Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett; theorists such as Kathleen Woodward and Margaret Morganroth Gullette; disability justice activists such as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha; and sociologists such as Mignon R. Moore. Two governing concerns that we answer as a class: How do considerations of age, aging, and gerontophobia featured in our readings amplify the contemporary investments of American studies? How can we chart political and aesthetic formations of the frail that offset their persistent nonrecognition?

AMST 900a or b, Independent Research  Staff
AMST 901a or b, Directed Reading  Staff
AMST 902a or b, Prospectus Workshop  Lisa Lowe
Upon completion of course work, students are required to participate in at least one term of the prospectus workshop, ideally the term before the prospectus colloquium is held. Open to all students in the program and joint departments, the workshop serves as a forum for discussing the selection of a dissertation topic, refining a project’s scope, organizing research materials, and evaluating work in progress. The workshop meets once a month.

AMST 903b / HIST 746b / PHUM 903b, Introduction to Public Humanities  Ryan Brasseaux
What is the relationship between knowledge produced in the university and the circulation of ideas among a broader public, between academic expertise on the one hand and nonprofessionalized ways of knowing and thinking on the other? What is possible? This seminar provides an introduction to various institutional relations and to the modes of inquiry, interpretation, and presentation by which practitioners in the humanities seek to invigorate the flow of information and ideas among a public more broadly conceived than the academy, its classrooms, and its exclusive readership of specialists. Topics include public history, museum studies, oral and community history, public art, documentary film and photography, public writing and educational outreach, the socially conscious performing arts, and fundraising. In addition to core readings and discussions, the seminar includes presentations by several practitioners who are currently engaged in different aspects of the Public Humanities. With the help of Yale faculty and affiliated institutions, participants collaborate in developing and executing a Public Humanities project of their own definition and design. Possibilities might include, but are not limited to, an exhibit or installation, a documentary, a set of walking tours, a website, a documents collection for use in public schools.

AMST 904a or b / PHUM 904a or b, Practicum  Staff
Public Humanities students are required to complete a one-term internship with one of our partnered affiliates (to be approved by the Public Humanities DGS or assistant DGS) for practical experience in the field. Potential internships include in-house opportunities at the Beinecke Library, Sterling Memorial Library, or one of Yale’s museums, or work at a regional or national institution such as a media outlet, museum, or historical society. In lieu of the internship, students may choose to complete a “micro-credential.” Micro-credentials are structured as workshop series (3–5 daylong meetings over the course of a year) rather than as term courses, and include revolving offerings in topics such as oral history, collections and curation, writing for exhibits, podcast production, website design, scriptwriting from the archive, or grant writing for public intellectual work.
AMST 905a or b / PHUM 905a or b, Public Humanities Capstone Project  Staff
The course work and practicum/micro-credential lead to a significant project to be approved by the DGS or assistant DGS (an exhibition, documentary, research paper, etc.) and to be presented in a public forum on its completion.

AMST 917a, American Studies Professionalization Workshop  Greta LaFleur
This seminar is designed for advanced Ph.D. candidates who are going on the job market. Students draft and revise three full rounds of the five standard genres of job market materials: job letter, CV, dissertation abstract, teaching portfolio, and diversity statement. Students also participate in mock interviewing skills, developing a job talk, and preparing applications for postdoctoral fellowships. Graded Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory.

AMST 998a or b, Directed Reading  Staff