

English 384: Introduction to American Studies

Dr. Michael Germana

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Section 001 11:30-12:20 MWF 200 Clark Hall

Email: Michael.Germana@mail.wvu.edu

Twitter: @michael_germana

Office hours: 9:00-10:00AM MWF and by appointment, 207 Colson Hall

Introduction:

In this course we will examine the theories that form the foundation of American Studies, explore the intersections of Popular Culture Studies and American Studies, and consider how American cultural history has shaped and been reshaped by constructions of race, gender, and class. Encompassing nearly two centuries of popular cultural forms and texts, our semester-long investigation will include an examination of how digital, global, and/or transnational cultures are reshaping American Studies scholarship in the twenty-first century.

An interactive class like this brings with it two burdens of responsibility: your contributions to class discussion should be constructive and inquisitive, and your responses to the contributions of others should be engaging and respectful, especially when you disagree with one of your classmates. As for the course reading, it ranges from light and breezy to densely theoretical. This will test your intellectual flexibility and sometimes try your patience. Expect to be challenged, but expect also to meet these challenges.

Required Materials:

To Purchase from the WVU Bookstore:

- Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, Eds., *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*
- Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*

To Obtain Early in the Semester for the First Paper Assignment:

- A comic book of your choosing (American, naturally)—Gary's Comics on High Street has a wide selection of comics you can sample before you buy; consider paying them a visit if you want a new comic book, prefer to compare texts side-by-side, or have no other source for suitable comics. The Downtown Library has recently acquired several relevant titles including but not limited to the *Complete Frank Miller Batman*, the *Complete Fritz, the Cat*, and bound volumes of *Hellboy*, *Spawn*, and more.

Online Resources:

- Readings marked “ereserves” available on .pdf files via electronic reserve:
 - <https://reserves.lib.wvu.edu/>
- Stanford's “Dime Novels and Penny Dreadfuls” database:
 - http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/dp/pennies/texts/dimes_toc.html
- Felicia L. Carr's “American Women's Dime Novel Project”:
 - <http://chnm.gmu.edu/dimenovels/index.html>

- Online Pulp Database:
 - <http://pulpgen.com/pulp/downloads/>
- danah boyd's "aphophenia" blog:
 - <http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/>
- Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, *Documenting America, 1935-1943*:
 - <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/documentingamerica.html>

On Reserve:

- Pulp Narratives:
 - *The Hard-Boiled Detective: Stories from Black Mask Magazine, 1920-1951* (PS648 .D4H37 1977)
 - *The Black Mask: A Magazine of Mystery, Romance and Adventure*, May 1920 issue (PS648 .D4B53 2005)
- Documentary Photography:
 - Berenice Abbott, *Changing New York* (F128.5 .A22)
 - Robert Frank, *The Americans* (E169.02 .F713 1978)
 - James Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream* (TR820.5 .G82 1991)
 - William Klein, *Life is Good & Good For You in New York* (TR654 .D498 1995)
 - Dorothea Lange, *Photographs of a Lifetime* (TR653 .L35 1995)
 - Gordon Parks, *Half Past Autumn* (TR140 .P35P35 1997)
 - Weegee (Arthur Fellig), *Weegee* (TR820 .W394 1984)
 - Garry Winogrand, *The Man in the Crowd* (TR820 .W56 1999)

Course Objectives:

Practical:

- To become familiar with the theories and practices shaping the field of American Studies.
- To hone primary and secondary researching skills, and conduct independent research that utilizes these skills.
- To engage critically with the work of established American Studies scholars in writing as well as in class.
- To construct original and incisive arguments about American popular cultural texts using the conventions of American Studies scholarship.
- To support these arguments with well integrated and properly cited primary and secondary source material.

Intellectual:

I am hoping you take a few things with you when you step away from this class:

- First, a more nuanced knowledge of the history of American popular culture and its intimate relationship to the exercise of power.
- Second, an appreciation of how various and sundry cultural texts constitute or construct the very ideals they appear merely to represent.
- Third, an understanding of how the meaning attributed to various social/physical differences is contingent upon dynamic cultural processes that stand in interaction.

- Fourth, a heightened sense of the way ideologies and lived practices reinforce one another in an ongoing process of cultural negotiation.
- And finally, the realization that all four of the processes listed above are enmeshed in and inseparable from one another. Power relies upon ideology. The persistence of ideologies relies upon their formalization as lived practices. These lived practices themselves rely upon their “signification” by cultural texts and social/spatial arrangements. No part of our lives exists outside of or is uninfluenced by these interlocking processes. We take the comprehensiveness of their effect upon us for granted at our peril.

Assignments:

Coursework for the semester consists of two formal papers, five independent research reports (~500 words each) and a final presentation. Detailed descriptions of each of the major assignments will be distributed as the semester progresses. **Failure to complete any one of the assignments will constitute failure of the course.** Papers must be printed in 12-point Times or Times New Roman, double-spaced, and properly documented in MLA style. **Late work will not be accepted unless prior arrangements have been made and approved by Dr. Germana. This goes double for presentation dates.** Papers and presentations alike should demonstrate your understanding of the course material and apply the concepts this material covers to the primary texts you have chosen. As is the case with all academic papers, your assertions must be supported with specific examples from the text(s).

Grading System and Evaluation Criteria:

Paper One:	20%
Paper Two:	30%
Final Presentation:	10%
Research Reports:	20%
Participation:	20%

All major assignments will be graded on a 100-point scale with grade ranges as follows:

+	100-98	+	89-88	+	79-78	+	69-68		
A	97-92	B	87-82	C	77-72	D	67-62	F	59-0
-	91-90	-	81-80	-	71-70	-	61-60		

Each of the five independent research reports is worth 20 points (read: there are 100 points-worth of credit to be earned); the total number of points earned on these reports — $n/100$ — will constitute 20% of your final grade. Full credit will be given to responses that engage critically with the course material and demonstrate the writer’s ability to apply concepts learned in the course. **Each response requires you to do some independent primary research, and apply the concepts from the secondary sources we read in class to the primary sources you investigate.** The simplest and most effective way to handle this is to follow a “*précis and response*” format. Begin each of your reports with a one-paragraph summary of the argument, methodology, and upshot of the relevant secondary source(s) you are using. Then use the rest of your response to apply this argument to your primary source(s) and make some claims of your

own. For example, your first response (due September 10) asks you to read a dime novel narrative from one of two online databases. We will have read and discussed Michael Denning's "Reading Dime Novels: The Mechanic Accents of Escapist Fiction" the previous class period. Your response should begin with a lucid summary of Denning's argument before proceeding to apply some aspect(s) of this argument to the dime novel story you read for the 10th. This is a fine place to explore the implications and/or limitations of the scholarly works we are reading this semester.

The two formal essays will be evaluated according to the following rubric:

A (90-100): This essay demonstrates a perceptive and thoughtful response to the assignment. It is well organized with excellent development of ideas, and it reflects the writer's command of appropriate rhetorical strategies. The prose is vigorous and fresh, and the writer is clearly in control of the standard conventions of academic writing.

B (80-89): This essay fulfills the assignment and shows evidence of clear thought and good planning. It is well organized with good supporting details. The writing is fluent, and there are only minor errors in the mechanics that do not interfere with reading.

C (70-79): This essay fulfills the assignment. It is adequately developed, clear, and coherent with relatively few errors in usage and mechanics, but the writer fails to demonstrate any particular strength which would distinguish above-average work.

D (60-69): This essay fulfills the assignment but exhibits major problems in writing. It may have difficulty with the presentation of ideas (e.g., lack of a clear thesis, weak organization, poor development of ideas, or inappropriate diction, poor spelling) or be marred by enough errors in the mechanics of writing to seriously distract the reader.

F (59 or below): This essay is so poorly presented that it fails to fulfill the assignment. It fails to present basic ideas, either because of poor organization and lack of clarity or because the writing reflects a lack of control over the basic conventions of standard academic usage.

Attendance Policy:

Because participation counts for 20% of your grade you have to show up and contribute. Also bear in mind that some days (e.g., workshop days) count more than other days since your classmates will depend on you more to help them fulfill their assignments. You can miss up to five non-workshop, non-assignment-due dates without penalty. Choose your five days judiciously. Subsequent absences will drop your attendance and participation grade one letter grade per day. **A failing grade for the course will be recorded for any student with ten or more absences.**

If you are more than five minutes late for class, you will be counted absent.

See "Contact Information" below for information about how you may use Twitter to participate more fully, both during and outside of class.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the (mis)representation of someone else's work as your own. It may be direct (e.g., not documenting a quoted source) or indirect (paraphrasing ideas, thoughts, etc. without due credit). In either case, neglecting to acknowledge sources for outside material is a serious offence and may result in failure for the assignment and possibly the course. Please see me if you are not sure about how to use or acknowledge certain materials.

Social Justice Statement:

West Virginia University is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and expect to maintain a positive learning environment based upon open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. Our University does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veterans' status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment in this class will be appreciated and given serious consideration.

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Disability Services (293-6700).

Additional Resources:

The WVU Writing Center is committed to helping students become better writers. For more information about the Writing Center, including its hours, how to make appointments, and additional resources, visit their webpage at http://www.as.wvu.edu/english/writing_center/

The Downtown Library also hosts a term paper clinic throughout the semester. Scheduling details TBA.

Contact Information:

If you have questions about the course or concerns you would like to share privately with me, please contact me via email at Michael.Germana@mail.wvu.edu. **But please do not write to ask me for lecture notes or to request a summary of what you missed on any given day.** If you miss class and need class notes, ask one of your classmates.

You are also invited and encouraged—but not required—to follow me on Twitter at [@michael_germana](https://twitter.com/michael_germana). If you already have a Twitter account but want to keep your personal account private, you can always create a second one solely for academic use. If you're new to the medium (like I am), don't hesitate to join if it enables you to participate more fully in the class dialogue. Once you've created your account, go to twitter.com/michael_germana and click the "Follow" button. Then send me a salutation tweet that includes the hashtag #ENGL384 in your message. This will enable you and your classmates to identify one another by searching for this hashtag and, if desired, follow one another—I leave this choice entirely up to you. **When we tweet about this course, we will use the hashtag #ENGL384.**

Course Calendar:

August:

20 M Introduction/s

The Foundations of Cultural Studies:

22 W John Storey, "Ideology" (ereserves) + Stuart Hall, "Dominant Ideology, Hegemony and Cultural Negotiation" (ereserves)

24 F Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" (ereserves)

27 M "Interiority," *Keywords* 135-137 + Michel Foucault, "Panopticism" (ereserves)

"Race"-ing the Republic: The Minstrel Stage and the National Stage:

29 W "Performance," *Keywords* pp. 177-180 + "Race," *Keywords* pp. 191-196.

Lecture/presentation: a brief illustrative history of blackface minstrelsy

31 F Eric Lott, "'The Seeming Counterfeit': Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy" pp. 223-237 (ereserves)

September:

3 M **Labor Day—class does not meet**

5 W Lott, "'The Seeming Counterfeit'" pp. 237-248

Fiction/Factories: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture:

7 F "Class," *Keywords* pp. 49-52 + Michael Denning, "Reading Dime Novels: The Mechanic Accents of Escapist Fiction" (ereserves)

10 M **research report one due:** independent research on dime novels (see Stanford University's "Dime Novels and Penny Dreadfuls" online database (http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/dp/pennies/texts/dimes_toc.htm) and/or Felicia L. Carr's "American Women's Dime Novel Project" (<http://chm.gmu.edu/dimenovels/index.html>))—choose one dime novel narrative from either of these sources, then read and analyze it for this class. Remember to begin your report with a lucid summary of Denning's argument before applying it to the dime novel narrative you chose.

Articulating the Toons: Comics and Ideology:

12 W Scott McCloud, Chapter Two: "The Vocabulary of Comics"

14 F McCloud, Chapter Three: "Blood in the Gutter"

17 M independent research on a comic book of your choosing—bring comic book to class

19 W dime novel/comic book discussion + topic workshop

21 F paper one workshop—paper draft due

24 M **paper one due**

Pulp Fiction, Advertising, and the Mass Culture Revolution:

26 W Erin Smith, "The Adman on the Shop Floor: Workers, Consumer Culture, and the Pulps" pp. 43-58 (ereserves)

28 F Smith, "Adman" pp. 58-73

October:

1 M **research report two due:** independent research on pulp magazines—read a pulp magazine story from the first half of the twentieth century at the "Black Mask Magazine" website, or select a narrative from a hard-boiled writer of your choice (e.g., Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler) from books on reserve at the Downtown Library or at

the Online Pulp Database (<http://pulpgen.com/pulp/downloads/>). Then, after offering a précis of Smith's argument, compare/contrast the pulp story you read with Smith's claims about hard-boiled detective fiction and constructions of class and gender.

Seeing vs. Being: Sculpture and Sound as Technologies of Subjectivity:

- 3 W Kirk Savage, Introduction to *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (ereserves)
- 5 F "Identity," *Keywords* 123-127 + Alexander G. Weheliye, "'I Am I Be': The Subject of Sonic Afro-modernity" pp. 97-105 (ereserves)
- 8 M Ralph Ellison, Prologue to *Invisible Man* (ereserves) + Weheliye pp. 105-114
- 10 W **research report three due:** independent research on either American sculpture/memorials or what Weheliye calls "sonic modernity." To complete this assignment, offer a one-paragraph précis of the relevant source (Savage or Weheliye) before analyzing either an existing sculpture/monument or musical medium/composition that illustrates the concepts articulated in these sources.

Whither Cultural Authority?: Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces:

- 12 F D. T. Max, "The Oprah Effect" (ereserves) + danah boyd, "Streams of Content, Limited Attention: The Flow of Information through Social Media" + "'for the lolz': 4chan is hacking the attention economy" (go to "apophenia" blog <http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/> and search for these two documents by title)
- 15 M **research report four due:** independent research on any issue relating to cultural authority, popular culture, and/or new media as framed by D. T. Max and danah boyd. The topic is largely open, so this is a chance for you to examine how, say, social media complicates and/or affirms historical trends in American cultural authority.

Popular Culture as a Window on American Studies in a Global Context:

- 17 W "Globalization," *Keywords* 120-123 + Eric Lott, "*National Treasure*, Global Value, and American Literary Studies" (ereserves)

American Photography and the American Dream:

- 19 F **research methods overview—class meets in room 136 of the Downtown Library**
- 22 M Alan Trachtenberg, Prologue to *Reading American Photographs* (ereserves)
- 24 W James Guimond, "Dreams and Documents" (ereserves)
- 26 F Lawrence W. Levine, "The Historian and the Icon" in *Documenting America* pp. 15-40 (<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ows/seminars/tcentury/fsaphotos/levine.pdf>)
- 29 M **research report five due:** independent research on an FSA photographer of your choosing whose work is featured in *Documenting America*. Review the work of any one of the FSA photographers examined in *Documenting America* in the context of observations made by Trachtenberg, Guimond, and/or Levine. The portfolios these photographers are available at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/documentingamerica.html>.
- 31 W Robert Frank, *The Americans* (selected images will be supplied to you)

November:

- 2 F **student conferences—class does not meet**
- 5 M **student conferences—class does not meet**
- 7 W **student conferences—class does not meet**
- 9 F research day—class meets in the Downtown Library
- 12 M research day—class meets in the Downtown Library
- 14 W paper two workshop—paper draft due

16 F **paper two due**

---Thanksgiving Recess---

26 M **presentations**

28 W **presentations**

30 F **presentations**

December:

3 M **presentations**

5 W **presentations**

7 F final thoughts + course evaluations