



The University of Western Ontario

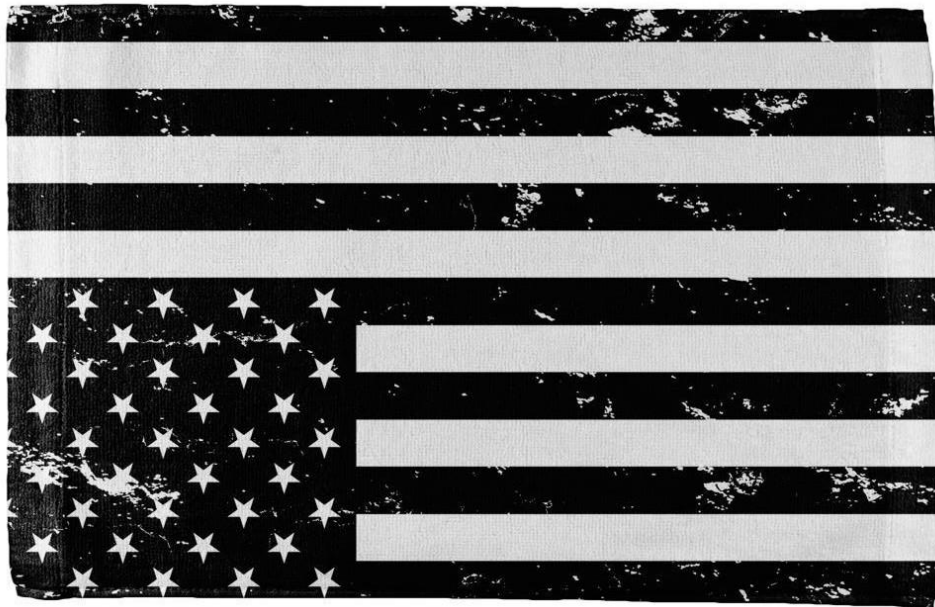
AMERICAN STUDIES 2310F / HISTORY 2310F

# AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

AN INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN STUDIES

FALL 2019

WEDNESDAYS 11:30 AM – 1:30 PM, FIMS & NURSING BUILDING 1250



Instructor: **Professor Rob MacDougall**

Office Hours: **Drop-in Mondays 1:30 – 3:30 pm, or email for appointment**

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## COURSE DESCRIPTION

In the increasingly polarized culture of the United States, one American's dream often seems to be another American's nightmare. This course introduces key ideas in American culture (including the American Dream, American Exceptionalism, and American Identity), and examines current socio-political movements such as Black Lives Matter, #Me Too, and White Nationalism.

**Antirequisite(s): History 2310F / American Studies 2310F**

## 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 deep crisis. Its institutions and its people are being tested. We really do not know how this story 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 big and 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 hardest, messiest 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 solve 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: Donald Trump’s demand for a wall at the U.S. - Mexico border; the Christine Blasey Ford - Brett Kavanaugh hearings; police violence against African-Americans; the resurgence of white nationalism and monuments to the Confederate past; climate crisis and the Green New Deal. But each specific case, as we will see, has a long history and connects to a wide range of thorny cultural and political issues.

We’ll spend two weeks on each case study—reading about it, discussing it in class, and getting as close to the truth as we can. We will investigate the history of each case, looking for parallel episodes in the American past, and what light they shed on the major themes of American Studies. Most importantly, we will ask what could 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 I will lecture from time to time, **this is not a lecture class.** I 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. This means attending every class. It means doing the readings every week, thinking about them, and taking an active part in class discussions. It will often mean working in small groups or doing short writing exercises and informal presentations. We will be wrestling with many difficult and controversial issues; we will need to be respectful, constructive, and collegial at all times. Ultimately, your participation grade should reflect what you’ve contributed to the shared work of our entire class, and how you have helped every other student learn.

You will complete **two writing assignments** in this course. **Writing Assignment #1** is an essay or report of 1000-1500 words (approx. 4-6 double-spaced pages), based on either Case Study I or II (your choice), and due on October 16. **Writing Assignment #2** is an essay or report of 1500-2000 words (approx. 6-8 pages), based on Case Study III or IV (again, your choice), and due on November 20. Both writing assignments will grow out of the material we discuss in class; the reading and thinking you do during class time will contribute directly to the assignment, though your research and thinking will go beyond our class discussions.

The final exam is a **take-home exam.** It will be an essay of 1500-2000 words (approx. 6-8 pages), similar to the two writing assignments. The exact question will be distributed and discussed in our final class on December 4, and the essay will be due on December 18. Your answer may draw on any of the content we have discussed all term.

## EVALUATION

Participation, including group work and in-class exercises	20%	every week
Writing Assignment #1 (1000-1500 words)	20%	due October 16
Writing Assignment #2 (1500-2000 words)	30%	due November 20
Take-home Exam (1500-2000 words)	30%	due December 18

Attendance will be taken every week. You may miss one class without penalty; each unexcused absence after the first will remove two points from your participation grade. Late assignments will be penalized; however, I will almost always grant a two-day extension on writing assignments with no questions asked. If you need more time, you must meet with me in person 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 take-home exam will result in a failing grade.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

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

- Locate, interpret, and evaluate sources of information on current crises and 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

A detailed list of readings and assignments will be posted on OWL in September.

### **Week 1 | September 11 | Introduction to the Course**

In our first class, we'll meet each other, discuss class policies and procedures, and start our investigation of American Studies and the United States today. I'll introduce the idea of "wicked problems" in American life and we'll do a mini case study to give you a taste of how the course is going to work.

### **Week 2 | September 18 | Case Study I: "Build the Wall"**

### **Week 3 | September 25 | Case Study I: "Build the Wall"**

Our first real case study will be Donald Trump's demand for a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. Is there a crisis at the border, and if so, is it real, manufactured, or imagined? Are migrant children being locked in cages? Are illegal immigrants flooding into the United States? And how can we know what the truth is? In weeks 2 & 3 we'll explore the history of the U.S. border and of American ideas about immigration (for and against). We'll discuss competing visions of multi-culturalism, the melting pot, and America as a white man's country. We'll wrestle with the problem of "fake news," biased news, and the polarization of our media and culture. And we'll try to devise strategies for living in a world filled with misinformation and disinformation.

**Week 4 | October 2 | Case Study II: “I Like Beer”****Week 5 | October 9 | Case Study II: “I Like Beer”**

Our second case study involves the 2018 Senate Judiciary Committee hearings before the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. What happened between Kavanaugh and Christine Blasey Ford in the summer of 1982, and should it have disqualified him from a seat for life on the highest court in the land? We'll discuss the #Me Too movement and its predecessors. We'll talk about sexual harassment and assault in American life, along with misogyny, “himpathy,” and rape culture. We'll compare the Ford – Kavanaugh hearings to the Clarence Thomas – Anita Hill hearings of 1991 and look back further still. We'll discuss masculinity, class, and privilege, and probably alcohol too; maybe even the teen culture of the 1980s. We'll definitely need to touch on the politics of abortion and high-stakes political warfare over the Supreme Court. Finally, we'll ask what all this tells us about the lives of men and women in the United States today.

**Week 6 | October 16 | Case Study III: “Don’t Shoot” | Writing Assignment #1 Due****Week 7 | October 23 | Case Study III: “Don’t Shoot”**

Our third case study considers police and vigilante violence against African-Americans: the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, 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 responses 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 trace the historical relationship between African-Americans and American law enforcement, from the days of lynching and Jim Crow to the War on Drugs and the prison industry today. And we'll ask how to reckon with this history.

**Week 8 | October 30 | Case Study IV: “You Will Not Replace Us”****READING WEEK | November 4-8 | NO CLASS****Week 9 | November 13 | Case Study IV: “You Will Not Replace Us”**

Our fourth case study takes us to the “Unite the Right” rally at Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017. More broadly, we'll be examining the history and rise of the so-called “alt-right,” including white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and the KKK. We'll discuss mass shootings and other forms of domestic terrorism, grapple with the place of guns in American culture, and study the ways white nationalists get radicalized, not only in the United States but around the world. We'll also be talking about symbols and memories like the Confederate battle flag and monuments to the Confederacy and the Civil War. What exactly do these monuments commemorate? Where is the line between heritage and hate? How should the slave south and the Confederacy be remembered?

**Week 10 | November 20 | Case Study V: “Can This Planet Be Saved?” | Writing Assignment #2 Due****Week 11 | November 27 | Case Study V: “Can This Planet Be Saved?”**

Our fifth case study considers the Green New Deal 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'll 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 confront some existential questions: what are the limits of possible political change in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America? Can capitalism be saved? Can the world?

**Week 12 | December 4 | Conclusion and Take-Home Exam**

In our final class meeting, we'll try to sum up what we've learned, from the course and from each other. I will give you the take-home exam, which will be like a sixth case study that draws on and connects much of the material we have discussed over the whole term.

**Take-Home Exam Due December 18**

## ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

**Academic Offences**

Scholastic offences are taken seriously. Students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitute a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_undergrad.pdf](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 Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) 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](http://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](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 note: Please visit [https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/academic\\_policies/index.html](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 theirs.**

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's receiving an 'F' in a course or, in extreme cases, in their suspension from the University.

**Copyright**

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**Support Services**

Students who are in **emotional/mental distress** should refer to Mental Health@Western, [http://uwo.ca/health/mental\\_wellbeing/](http://uwo.ca/health/mental_wellbeing/) for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

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 [vangalen@uwo.ca](mailto:vangalen@uwo.ca).