

HISTORY 2310G / AMERICAN STUDIES 2310G

# American Nightmare: An Introduction to American Studies

WINTER 2022

TUESDAYS 10:30 AM – 12:30 PM, PLUS 1 TUTORIAL HOUR



Instructors:

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**This draft syllabus was prepared in June 2020. An updated syllabus will be posted closer to Winter Term. If you have questions about the course, please email either professor at any time.**

## 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.

This course will be organized around five case studies. In order to make the course as current and relevant as possible, we will finalize our choice of case studies for Winter 2022 closer to the term. Possible case studies include: democracy and voter suppression in the United States; the COVID-19 pandemic and U.S. health policy; police violence and the #BlackLivesMatter movement; gender and #MeToo; the climate crisis; hate crimes and white nationalism; immigration and anti-immigration.

**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 2020 syllabus, written in the summer of 2020. They were true then, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests catalyzed by the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, but they remain no less true today. We 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 will involve a specific crisis or controversy in American life today. **In order to make the course as current and relevant as possible, we will finalize our choice of case studies for Winter 2022 closer to the start of that term.** This draft syllabus describes the five cases we examined in Fall 2020, the last time this course was taught: 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. The case studies for Winter 2022 will probably be similar but involve some updates and changes.

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, American identity, and the American Dream (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 lecture from time to time, **this is not a lecture class**. 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**. 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 three longer 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 in mid-February.

**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 in mid-March. 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.

Your third writing assignment, is a **Take-Home Exam** at the end of the term. This will be an essay of 1500-2000 words (approx. 6-8 pages), similar to the two writing assignments, but it will ask you to reflect on and connect content we have discussed all term. The exact question will be discussed in the final week of class, and the essay will be due during the April exam period.

## Evaluation

- 20% **Participation, preparation & engagement**, including group work and in-class exercises
- 20% **Writing Assignment #1**, 1000-1500 words, due mid-February
- 30% **Writing Assignment #2**, 1500-2000 words, due mid-March
- 30% **Take-Home Exam**, 1500-2000 words, due during April exam period

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.

## 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

**These are the cases covered in Fall 2020. The cases and topics for Winter 2022 will be similar but not identical. Check back closer to the term for updates or email either professor for more details.**

### Week 1: Introduction to American Studies

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 offer a sample case study on the issue of immigration, to give you a taste of how the course is going to work. (Prof. Shire is the lead instructor for this week, although both professors will be involved in classes every week.)

### Weeks 2 and 3: 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 earlier pandemics in U.S. history and 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 is the lead instructor for this week, although both professors will be involved in classes every week.)

### Weeks 4 and 5: 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 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: Case Study III: I Can't Breathe

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 look at the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests these murders have triggered. 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: Case Study IV: One Person, One Vote**

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: Case Study V: Can This Planet Be Saved?**

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, 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: 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.)

**Additional Statements**

Please review the Department of History Must-Knows Document:

[https://www.history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/Docs/Department of History Course Must-Knows.pdf](https://www.history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/Docs/Department%20of%20History%20Course%20Must-Knows.pdf)

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