

HISTORY 2310F / AMERICAN STUDIES 2310F

# American Nightmare/American Dream: An Introduction to American Studies



Fall 2022

Thursdays 10:30 am – 12:30 pm, plus 1 tutorial hour  
in AHB 1R40

Instructor: Associate Professor Laurel Clark Shire

Office Hours on Zoom:

**by appointment** Weds. 10am-12pm (and other times available – email me)

<https://westernuniversity.zoom.us/my/laurelshire>

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This syllabus was last updated on June 17, 2022; please see the course site on OWL for the most up-to-date information. If you have questions about the course, please email the professor.

## 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. In Fall 2022, the course will be organized around five case studies: the wealth gap and inequality in America; gun violence and mass shootings; police violence, mass incarceration and the Black Lives Matter movement; the politics of abortion and

reproductive justice; American imperialism and its effects on the world, past and present; and the unfolding Climate Crisis and how capitalism can and cannot address it.

**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, and 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 six case studies.** Each case study involves a specific crisis or controversy in American life today: the increasing wealth gap between different Americans and how inequality affects democracy and American politics; gun violence and mass shootings and why it is so difficult to make policy changes to end this form of violence in the USA; police and vigilante violence against African Americans; abortion rights and reproductive justice; how American imperialism effects the world today; the climate crisis and American capitalism’s ability to respond. But as we’ll see, each specific case has a long history and connects to a wide range of cultural and political issues and divides.

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**. 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 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-October (before Reading Week).

**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 late November. 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 December exam period.

## Evaluation

20% **Participation, preparation & engagement**, including group work and in-class exercises

20% **Writing Assignment #1**, 1000-1500 words, due 20 October

30% **Writing Assignment #2**, 1500-2000 words, due 17 November

30% **Take-Home Exam**, 1500-2000 words, due during December exam period, TBA

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

This is just a brief overview; please consult the OWL site for the up-to-date schedule of topics, readings, and assignments.

### Week 1 (Sept. 8): 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.

### Weeks 2 (Sept. 15) and 3 (Sept. 22): Case Study I

**The Wealth Gap, Economic Inequality and American Democracy:** Our first case study examines "the wealth gap": income inequality, poverty, and class identity and experiences in America today and in the past. This week we will, as they say, "follow the money!" How much has the difference between the richest 1% and the other 99% of Americans increased in the last 10 years? What policies, events, and other causes explain this? What difference have major legal or legislative decisions made, such as the *Citizens United* SCOTUS case, or the taxation policies pursued under Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden? How have different kinds of Americans responded? How did the #Occupy Wall Street movement or the conservative "Tea Party" change how Americans viewed the wealth gap in their country? How are different Americans affected differently? That is, to what extent are the poorest Americans also female, or children under 12? How many of them are concentrated in cities or rural areas? How many of them are white, and how many are Black, Latinx, members of Indigenous groups, or Asian-Americans? Finally, what do Americans actually think about class and the wealth gap, and how do their opinions influence how (or even whether) they vote?

### Weeks 4 (Sept. 29) and 5 (Oct. 6): Case Study II

#### Guns, Mass Shootings, and the NRA

Our second case study considers gun violence and mass shootings in America, in the wake of what happened in Buffalo, NY and Uvalde, TX in 2022 (and likely other shootings that will happen after this syllabus is published). Why do mass shootings still happen in America, but not in other places like Canada, the UK, or Australia? Why is it so seemingly impossible for American leaders to pass common-sense gun control measures? Who is most likely to own a gun in America, and who is most likely to be shot and harmed or killed by guns? What does the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution actually say, anyway? And why does the NRA have so much power over US legislators? We'll look at the history of gun ownership and identity politics in the USA and consider whether the problem is guns or something else.

### Weeks 6 (Oct. 13) and 7 (Oct. 20): Case Study III

#### Writing Assignment #1 due Tuesday October 20

**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 in the present day.

### **Weeks 8 (Oct. 27) and 10 (Nov. 10): Case Study IV**

#### **Week 9 (Nov. 3) - no class, Fall Reading Week**

**The End of *Roe v. Wade*?** Our fourth case, on reproductive justice, will examine the politics of abortion law in America, past and present. We will be examining how Americans' ideas about gender and sexuality influence their political preferences and beliefs about reproductive rights and justice. We will also look at what most Americans say and believe about abortion, birth control, and other reproductive health matters. Finally, with many different legal decisions pending regarding *Roe*, we will look at what the Supreme Court said in past and more recent cases about privacy, abortion, and women's rights.

### **Weeks 11 (Nov. 17) and 12 (Nov. 24): Case Study V**

#### **Writing Assignment #2 due Tuesday, November 17**

#### **American Imperialism: Continental Expansion and International Interventions since 1776**

As requested and suggested by previous students in this course, this case study will consider American imperialism today and in the past. How did a former British colony become an international superpower with such conflicted ideas about its own role in the world? How did Americans come to believe that it was their "manifest destiny" to expand across all of North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Is the US a force for good (however one defines good – democracy? free markets? human rights?) or evil (exploitive economics? neo-colonialism? settler colonialism? nationalistic violations of others' rights?) in the world? How has its treatment of "domestic dependent nations" (Indigenous peoples) belied its commitment to democracy? How did its interventions into democratically elected governments abroad during the Cold War violate its own ideas about human rights and self-governance? Ultimately, how should we understand American imperialism today, and what could or should be done about it?

### **Weeks 13 (Dec. 1) and 14 (Dec. 8):**

**Can This Planet Be Saved?** Our sixth and final case study considers the 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?

In our last week of class, we'll also 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.

**Take-Home Essay Exam due TBA (during the December exam period)**

**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) for information regarding accessibility options; medical issues and accommodations; health and wellness; plagiarism and other academic offences; copyright issues.