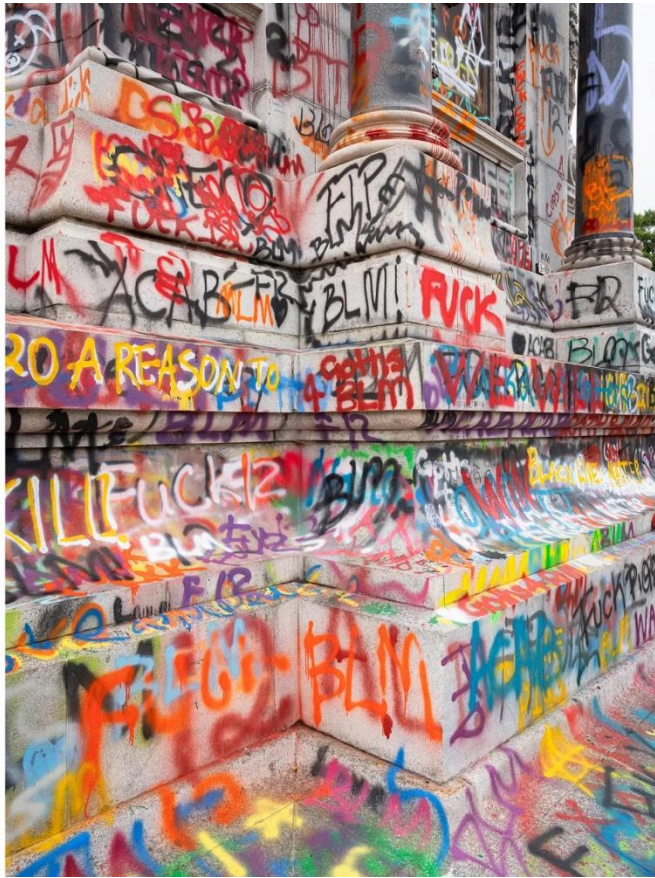


HISTORY 2310F / AMERICAN STUDIES 2310F

American Nightmare/American Dream:



Lee Square, Richmond, Virginia, 2020 (Credit: Kris Graves)

A photo showing graffiti on the base of a statue of Gen. Lee that includes "ACAB" and "BLM".

From "Eight Photos Showing a US in Crisis" by Andrew Dickson, 3 February 2022, BBC Culture,
<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20220202-eight-photos-showing-a-us-in-crisis>

An Introduction to American Studies

Fall 2023

Instructor: Associate Professor Laurel Clark Shire

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This syllabus was last updated on June 8, 2023; 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; police violence, mass incarceration and the Black Lives Matter movement; the politics of abortion and reproductive justice; Climate Change; and Reparations and Ways Forward – What are the Solutions?

**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 five 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; police and vigilante violence against African Americans; abortion rights and reproductive justice; the climate crisis and American capitalism’s ability to respond; and finally, what making reparations for the past harms that have created these current crises might look like, what that might accomplish, and how we get there. 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 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 in both lecture and in tutorial. 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 **WITHOUT THE USE OF AI TOOLS**:

Writing Assignment #1 is an essay or report of 1000-1500 words (approx. 4-6 double-spaced pages), based on either Case Study I and/or II, 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 and/or IV, 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 an **In-Person Exam** at the end of the term. This will be an essay of similar to the two writing assignments, but it will ask you to reflect on and connect content we have discussed all term.

Evaluation

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

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

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

30% **Final Exam** in December exam period

Students must submit all course work to pass the course.

Make-up tests, midterms, and exams can only be approved by Academic Counselling. Please see https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for department procedures and requirements involving make-up tests and exams.

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.

Participation, Engagement, Attendance

Students ARE REQUIRED TO attend lectures and tutorials in this course. **Please note that it is rude to arrive late or leave early** without a reasonable excuse and explanation provided in advance. Students are required to be on time and leave when class ends. If students in lecture regularly arrive late, we will start closing and locking the doors when class begins, and will only open them once, at 10 minutes past the start of class, at a moment when your tardiness will not interrupt the flow of the discussion. Unfortunately, the terrible behaviour of past students has made this policy necessary. Failure to attend will negatively affect your grade and your ability to succeed on the assignments. If, for example, you are expected to be at work during our regular class times, do not enroll in this course. It is not an “optional attendance” course.

If you are ill, please do not come to class. If you have a cold, please wear a mask if you are able to do so, and I will do the same. **If you wish to be excused from class**, you must provide evidence to the Academic Counseling office in your home faculty that you were ill, or attending a medical appointment, or participating in a University athletics match, or unable to attend due to a personal emergency. Unexcused absences, as well as frequent tardiness, will harm your participation grade and will hamper your ability to be successful in the course. It is up to you to provide explanations and supporting documentation to Academic Counseling, I will not remind you to provide them and I cannot accept them from you directly (to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and equity).

Every absence will affect your ability to be successful in this course.

Students are expected to be prepared to discuss the readings assigned for each lecture in that lecture and in tutorials that week. There may be discussion questions, pop quizzes, or other weekly assessments in class, which will be marked as part of your participation grade. ***Our discussions will be as good, or as bad, as you make them. The tenor, value, and***

engagement of each lecture and tutorial depends entirely on the preparation, attitudes, and generosity of each of you.

We will meet 13 times in lecture and 12 times in tutorial, so each class meeting will be an opportunity for you to earn up to 4% of your participation mark. You will earn all 4 points by attending on time, leaving on time, and **listening** and **participating** actively and respectfully in the discussion, being mindful not to dominate or derail it. I will take note each week of who is listening actively to your peers, who has useful and relevant things to contribute, who is distracted by their devices, and who is just taking up space. You will be marked accordingly: each class session, half your participation mark is attendance, and the other half is how well you listened, contributed, and engaged. If you feel anxiety about speaking in class, please discuss your options with me as soon as you enroll in the course. I have many strategies that I have used in the past to help shy or anxious students earn their full participation marks, and I will be very happy to work with you.

Please note that missing one class will result in a 0% for participation that class – and thus will reduce your best possible total participation mark to 96%, even if you are engaged at every other meeting. Missing two will reduce that best possible participation mark to 92%, missing 3 classes will reduce it to 88%, missing 4 classes will reduce it to 84%, missing 5 class meetings will reduce it to 80% and missing 6 of our class meetings will result in a 76% or lower for participation, and so on. Please understand how this math works before you skip class. An excused absence will not affect your grade, but it will change the way your other weekly participation scores are calculated (rather than 25 classes to earn 100 points, you will only have 24, after 1 excused absence, for example, making each week worth more – 4.16 points rather than 4, thereafter).

Please do not attend class if you are ill. If you have a cold, please wear a mask if you are able to do so, and we will do the same. **If you wish to be excused from class**, you must provide evidence that you were ill, or attending a medical appointment or participating in a University athletics match, or unable to attend due to a personal emergency.

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. 13): 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.

All tutorials WILL MEET this week and you are expected to attend.

Weeks 2 (Sept. 20) and 3 (Sept. 27): Case Study I - The Wealth Gap

Our first case study examines "the wealth gap": income inequality, poverty, taxation, economics 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 (Oct. 4) and 5 (Oct. 11): Case Study II - I Can't Breathe

Our second 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.

No tutorials in week 5 (Oct. 9-13) due to the Thanksgiving holiday. Wednesday lecture WILL MEET.

Writing Assignment #1 due Monday 16 October by 11:59pm**Weeks 6 (Oct. 18) and 7 (Oct. 25): Case Study III: The End of *Roe v. Wade*.**

Our third 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.

Week 8 (Nov. 1) - no class, Fall Reading Week**Weeks 9 (Nov. 8) and 10 (Nov. 15): Case Study IV: Can This Planet Be Saved?**

Our fourth 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?

Writing Assignment #2 due Monday 20 November by 11:59pm**Weeks 11 (Nov. 22) and 12 (Nov. 29): Case Study V: Solutions? Reconciliation, Reparations**

In our final case study, we will consider what might be done to repair some of the past harms discussed in this course: what kinds of processes and policies might be able to address the past harms caused by slavery, colonialism, capitalism, misogyny, industrialization, and so on? How might Americans and all citizens of the world come to terms with the legacies of these things in the present? What precedents are there for Reparations or Truth & Reconciliation processes? What would have to happen to make such solutions possible, and what might be the outcomes? How can we make "unthinkable" things possible?

Weeks 13 (6 Dec.): 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 questions to prepare for your final essay, which will be ask you to draw on and connect material we have discussed over the whole term.

Final Exam date TBA, sometime during the December exam period

Additional Statements

Communication policies:

The best way to reach me is email, lshire@uwo.ca (which pops to profshire@gmail.com). Please feel free to drop in during office hours, which is time set aside for you to come and speak with me about anything related to the course, or to your academic career. I also encourage you to email me to set up an appointment anytime. I am happy to meet over Zoom or in person at a time that will work for both of us.

Classroom behavior:

Please be on time for class, and please be respectful of me and your peers at all times. Do not carry on private conversations during lecture, and listen actively to me and to each other. As this is only a 110 minute lecture, we will not take a break during class, and you should plan ahead so that you do not need the washroom during that time (if you have an emergency, please get up and go). You may eat and drink in class, so long as you clean up after yourself, and are not disruptive to the discussion.

Use of electronic devices:

Please do not use electronic devices for tasks unrelated to the discussion during class. If you must access the reading that week on a screen, be sure to stay on task and turn off any notifications or sounds that might distract you and those around you. If you are off task on a device during class, that will be obvious to me and everyone else around you, and you will receive a zero for participation that day. You will not be allowed access to electronic devices during pop quizzes, tests or exams. Do not record audio or video of our class meetings without written permission from me and from your classmates.

Use of generative AI tools: All work submitted in this course must be your own. You may not make use of generative AI tools like ChatGPT for any assignments in this course.

Please review the Department of History's shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at:

https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.