

ENGL 150
Sean McCann
285 Court St, Rm. 209
Office Hours, TTH 10:45-12, 2:45-4 and by appt

American Crazy: Four Myths of Violence and National Identity

By comparison to the developed nations of the world, the United States has long had high rates of violent crime and incarceration. It also has deep storytelling traditions that Americans have called on to understand, justify, celebrate, and sometimes to critique the use of personal violence. The most powerful of these stories view personal violence as in some way central to democratic society or to American cultural identity. This seminar will survey four prominent narrative traditions that have been called on often to depict and explain the role of violence in American society. We will look at some of the historical sources of these myths of American violence, investigate their expressive resources and ideological implications, and consider some of the change and variation they have undergone over time.

REQUIREMENTS

See course Moodle for a further description of writing assignments

- One research essay (10-15 pp) (30% of final grade)
- Three response essays (2-4 pp each); choose any three of four assigned dates (30% of final grade)
- Two research paper proposals (one page each)
- One survey of critical literature and/or summary of resources (4-6 pp) (15% of final grade)
- One annotated bibliography (6-10 sources) (15% of final grade)
- Arrive to each class with 2-3 sentences, summarizing your response to a reading question, on a 4x6 index card
- Class participation. 10% of final grade
- Class attendance is a requirement of the course; two or more unexcused absences will result in a penalty to you grade.

- Please bring hard copies of primary readings to class on the days when they are due to be discussed.

REQUIRED TEXTS

James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*
Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*
James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*
Kathryn Derounian-Stodola, ed., *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*
James Dickey, *Deliverance*
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
Simon Ortiz, *From Sand Creek*
Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*
Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*
A number of PDFs available via the course Moodle (m)
Several film viewings

LAPTOP POLICY

Electronic devices--including laptops, smartphones, and tablets—may not be used during class time without express permission of the instructor.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

It is the policy of Wesleyan University to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Students, however, are responsible for registering with Disabilities Services, in addition to making requests known to me in a timely manner. If you require accommodations in this class, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible (during the 2nd or 3rd week of the semester), so that appropriate arrangements can be made. The procedures for registering with Disabilities Services can be found at www.wesleyan.edu/deans/disability-students.html.

SCHEDULE

9/5 course introduction

Indian and Indian Killer

9/7 selections from, Mary Rowlandson, "The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson," *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*

9/12 John Filson, "Life and Adventures of Colonel Daniel Boon, as written by himself" (m)

recommended: Richard Slotkin, "Regeneration through Violence: History as an Indian War, 1675-1820," *The Fatal Environment* (m)

Group A response paper due

9/14 Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*

9/15 **first proposal for research paper due**

9/19 Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*

Group B response paper due

9/21 Roland Emmerich, dir. *Independence Day* (1996)

recommended: Martin Scorsese, dir. *Taxi Driver* (1976)

Slave and Slave Master

9/26 George Fitzhugh, selections from *Cannibals All! Or Slaves without Masters* (m)

William Harper, "Memoir on Slavery" (1837), *The Ideology of Slavery: Pro-Slavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1960*, 114-118 (m)

David Grimsted, "The Peculiar Institution of Southern Violence," *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (m)

Recommended:

Orlando Patterson, "Honor and Degradation," *Slavery and Social Death* (m)

Eric Horowitz, "Honor: The Cause of—and the Solution to—All of Society's Problems," *Pacific Standard: The Science of Society* (August 26, 2014)
(<http://www.psmag.com/navigation/health-and-behavior/honor-culture-american-south-disrespect-cause-solution-societys-problems-89316/>)

Fox Butterfield, "Bloody Edgefield," "Masters and Slaves," *All God's Children: The Bosket Family and the American Tradition of Violence* (m)

9/28 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Kenneth Greenberg, "Gifts, Duels, and Humanitariansm," "Death," *Honor and Slavery* (m)

Group C response paper due

10/3 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

recommended: Joan Hedrick, "Stowe's Life and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture: A Multimedia Archive*, ed. Stephen Railton (<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu>)

10/5 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Toni Morrison, "Romancing the Shadow," *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

recommended: Barry Allan Shain, "The Concept of Slavery: Liberty's Antithesis," *The Myth of American Individualism* (m)

Group A Response Paper Due

10/10 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Adam Gussow, "The Blade Already Crying in My Flesh: Zora Neale Hurston's Blues Narrative," *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (m)

Recommended: "From the Dictates of Pride to the Paths of Righteousness: Slave Honor and Christianity in Antebellum Virginia," in *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia*, ed., Edward L. Ayers and John C. Willis (m)

10/12 Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Group B response paper due

10/17 Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*

10/19 Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children*

Group C response paper due

10/20 **Second proposal for research paper due**

10/26 John Singleton, dir., *Boyz n the Hood* (1991)
Ridley Scott, dir., *Blade Runner* (1982)

Jill Leovy, "The Assignment," *Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America*
(m)

Group A response paper due

Citizen, State, and Clan

10/31 Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders*, I, XIV, XV, XVII
(m)

William Carlos Williams, "To Elsie" (m)

"Beer for my Horses," music video, dir. Michael Salomon, featuring Toby Keith
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1JOFhfoAD4>)

recommended: David Hackett Fisher, "Borderlands to the Backcountry,"
Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America (m)

11/2 Selections from *The Education of Little Tree* (m)
Dan T. Carter, "The Education of a Klansman," op-ed, *The New York Times*
(October 4, 1991) (m)

Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Strangers No Longer: The Power of Promise,"
Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right (m)

Recommended:

Allen Barra, "The Education of Little Fraud," *Salon* (December 20, 2001)
http://www.salon.com/2001/12/20/carter_6

Arlie Russell Hochschild, "I Spent 5 Years with Some of Trump's Biggest
Fans. Here's What They Won't Tell You," *Mother Jones*
(September/October 2016),
<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters/>

11/7 *The Godfather* (1972), dir. Francis Ford Coppola

Group B response paper due

11/9 Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*

11/10 Survey of Critical Literature/Review of Sources Due

11/14 Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Group C response paper due

Killer on the Road

11/16 James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

Group A response paper due

11/21 Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

Recommended, Ginger Strand, "What a Mean World This is," *Killer on the Road: Violence and the American Interstate*

11/21 Annotated Bibliography due

11/28 Capote, *In Cold Blood*

Group B response paper due

11/30 Simon Ortiz, *From Sand Creek*

12/5 Ortiz, *From Sand Creek*

12/7 Jonathan Demme, dir., *The Silence of the Lambs*

Group C response paper due

12/17 **Final papers due**