

Professor Daniel A. Nathan
AM 103, Introduction to
American Studies
TLC 202, MW 2:30-3:50 PM
Office: TLC 330 (580-5023)
Office Hours: MW 4:00-5:00 &
by appointment
E-mail: dnathan@skidmore.edu



“The Constitution, jazz, and basketball are all creatures of the idea of freedom that drew people here—the freedom once denied those people whose journey here was far from voluntary. A republic, if we can keep it. Music, if we can hear it. A game, if we can play it.”

“Sport is no sanctuary from the real world because sport is part of the real world.”

—Charles P. Pierce, 1999

—Robert Lipsyte, 1983

Introduction to American Studies

Course Description & Objectives

This course introduces students to different forms of cultural criticism and examines some recurrent American cultural values and themes, such as the tension between community and individualism, and the disparity between American ideals and social realities. It also emphasizes reading critically, thinking historically, practicing interdisciplinarity, acknowledging diversity, and making connections. Students will analyze and synthesize many kinds of texts in order to better appreciate the complexity of American life and culture. The course employs an interdisciplinary approach that melds history, sociology, journalism, autobiography, fiction, poetry, art, film (feature and documentary), and other forms of knowledge and expression—and uses basketball as its focal point.

Yes, basketball, a game invented in 1891 by a Canadian of Scottish parentage now played by more than 450 million people worldwide. Why basketball? Because it provides us with rich opportunities to consider the politics of race, class, and gender formation, identity, and relations. Because it is a site where meaningful, complicated cultural exchange takes place—on playgrounds, in schools, on television, and on-line. Because its popularity, commercial success, and metaphoric possibilities should not be ignored. No previous knowledge of or experience playing basketball is required for this course. A word of warning: this is not a class *about* basketball; rather, it is a class that *uses* basketball to think critically about American culture and utilizes an interdisciplinary sensibility to studying it.

Of course, even a cursory glance at the reading schedule reveals significant omissions. Students are encouraged to view them as opportunities for their own research and study.

A second word of warning: this course will heavily stress class discussion, centering upon considerations of the assigned readings (texts should be brought to class). Discussions are collective endeavors which demand everyone's preparation, attendance, and participation. Learning to participate in a discussion involves social and intellectual skills that are an essential part of one's education. These include: listening to others and learning to absorb and synthesize their remarks; learning to respond constructively and analytically to others' ideas; learning to develop and articulate positions of one's own; responding to criticism; and learning to modify or discard an argument as one comes to see another, more satisfactory one. Students are expected to come to class eager to share their ideas about the topics under consideration and to question our readings and one another.

At the end of the course, I expect that we will have learned some critical skills and interdisciplinary techniques, that we will have noted connections between the past, the present, and the future, and that we will have gained a better understanding of American culture and ourselves.

Books

Jeffrey Lane, *Under the Boards: The Cultural Revolution in Basketball*

James Naismith, *Basketball: Its Origin and Development*

Reuben A. Buford May, *Living Through the Hoop: High School Basketball, Race, and the American Dream*

Note: In addition to these books, there are numerous other readings, which will be distributed in class and/or as PDFs.

Films

David Anspaugh, *Hoosiers*

Steve James, *Hoop Dreams*

George Roy and Steve Stern, *City Dump: The Story of the 1951 CCNY Basketball Scandal*

Ward Serrill, *The Heart of the Game*

Requirements

Course requirements include three papers (the first two will be 3-5 pages, the third will be 6-8 pages), a group presentation, active class participation, and quizzes/in-class writing assignments. You must complete all assignments in order to pass this course. The break down of grades is as follows:

In-class Writing Assignments & Quizzes	10%	
Class Participation	10%	
Group Presentation	15%	
First Paper	10%	(due September 30)
Second Paper	15%	(due October 20)
Third Paper	20%	(due November 25)
Final Exam	20%	(December 17)

Attendance & Participation

Because the success of the course depends upon your participation, attendance is mandatory. Three or more absences will adversely affect your final grade; six or more absences will result in failure. Active participation requires that you attend class regularly, that you come to class prepared (i.e., having carefully read and thought about the assigned material), and that you share your perspectives, ideas, and questions.

Special Needs

Anyone who has a disability which may require some modification of seating, testing, or other class requirements should see me after class or during my office hours so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

Reading Schedule

- 9/3: Introductions, goals, policies, reading/screening schedule
- 9/8: Terms, Concepts, Presuppositions: culture, ideology, interdisciplinarity, representation, et al
Burgett and Hendler, *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* excerpts
- 9/10: Cowan, "American Studies: An Overview"
Wise, "Some Elementary Axioms for an American Culture Studies"
Horwitz, "American Studies: Approaches and Concepts"
- 9/15: McConnell, "The Gilded Age, Populism, and the Era of Incorporation"
Gorn, "Sports Through the Nineteenth Century"
Naismith, *Basketball*, v-99
- 9/17: Library tutorial (meet in Scribner Library, room 128)
- 9/22: Naismith, *Basketball*, 100-189
Gorn and Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sport* excerpt
- 9/24: Basketball clinic (meet in the Sports and Recreation Center)
- 9/29: Mandelbaum, *The Meaning of Sports* excerpt
Levine, *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field* excerpt
- 10/1: Roy and Stern, *City Dump* (film)
Cohen, *The Game They Played* excerpts
Levine, "'Allagaroo, Garoo, Gara': The College Game, CCNY, and the Scandals of 1950"
Shapiro, "The Shame of the City: CCNY Basketball, 1950-51"
- 10/6: Glassie, *Material Culture* excerpt
Glenn and Hayes, *Taking Things Seriously* excerpt
Hughes, "The Material Culture of Sport"
- 10/8: Messenger, *Sport and the Spirit of Play in Contemporary American Fiction* excerpt
Alexie, "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore"
Mason, "State Champions"
Hirsch, "Fast Break"
Troupe, "A Poem for 'Magic'"
- 10/13: Lott, "Class"
Macionis, "Social Class in the United States"
- 10/15: Eitzen, "Upward Mobility through Sport? The Myths and Realities"
Maharaj, "Talking Trash: Late Capitalism, Black (Re)Productivity, and Professional Basketball"
Updike, "Ex-Basketball Player"
- 10/20: Halberstam, "Gender"
Macionis, "Gender Stratification"
- 10/22: Berenson, "The significance of basket ball for women"
Beran, *From Six-on-Six to Full Court Press* excerpts
Miller, "Half-court Basketball: Power and Sex"
Fields, *Female Gladiators: Gender, Law, and Contact Sport in America* excerpt
Vande Berg and Projansky, "Hoop Games: A Narrative Analysis of Television Coverage of Women's and Men's Professional Basketball"
Kian, Vincent, and Mondello, "Masculine Hegemonic Hoops: An Analysis of Media Coverage of March Madness"
Wallace and Wallace, "She Got Game: Basketball and the Perfectly Developed Woman"

- 10/27: Ferguson, "Race"
Yu, "Ethnicity"
Macionis, "Race and Ethnicity"
- 10/29: Levine, *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field* excerpts
Liberti, "Fostering Community Consciousness: The Role of Women's Basketball at Black Colleges and Universities, 1900-1950"
Pope, "Decentering 'Race' and (Re)presenting 'Black' Performance in Sport History: Basketball and Jazz in American Culture, 1920-1950"
Goudsouzian, "Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution"
Simpson, "Sporting Dreams Die on the 'Rez'"
Platt, "The White Shadow"
- 11/3: James, *Hoop Dreams* (film)
Vanderwerken, "Hoop Dreams: A Basketball Bildungsroman"
hooks, "Neo-Colonial Fantasies of Conquest"
Wise, "Looking Back at Broken Dreams: Film's Key Players Have Moved On"
- 11/5: May, *Living Through the Hoop*, xiii-49
- 11/10: No Class
- 11/12: May, *Living Through the Hoop*, 49-202
- 11/17: Halberstam, "The Basket-Case State"
Anspaugh, *Hoosiers* (film)
Briley, "Basketball's Great White Hope and Ronald Reagan's America: *Hoosiers* (1986)"
Peterson, "*Hoosiers* and the Meaning of Life"
- 11/19: Lane, *Under the Boards*, xi-66
- 11/24: Lane, *Under the Boards*, 69-241
- 11/26: No Class—Thanksgiving
- 12/1: Wideman, "Michael Jordan Leaps the Great Divide"
Halberstam, "A Hero for the Wired World"
Dyson, "Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire"
Gates, "Net Worth"
LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* excerpts
Hartmann, "Bound by Blackness or Above it? Michael Jordan and the Paradoxes of post-civil rights American race relations"
- 12/3: Wolff, *Big Game, Small World* excerpts
Nathan, "Travelling: Notes on Basketball and Globalization"
- 12/8: Serrill, *The Heart of the Game* (film)
Conclusions and course evaluations
- 12/17: Final Exam, 1:30 PM - 4:30 PM, 202 TLC

Note: I reserve the right to make minor revisions in the reading schedule.

Screening Schedule

- | | | |
|--------|---------------------------------|---------|
| 9/30: | Roy and Stern, <i>City Dump</i> | 201 TLC |
| 11/2: | James, <i>Hoop Dreams</i> | 201 TLC |
| 11/16: | Anspaugh, <i>Hoosiers</i> | 201 TLC |

12/7: Serrill, *The Heart of the Game* 201 TLC