

HUMS 628
Sean McCann
Rm 205, Shapiro Writing Center
Office Hours, MW 4:00-5:30 and by appt

American Crazy: Three 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 three 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 term paper (8-10 pp) (40% of final grade), due 8/10
- Three response essays (3-4 pp each) (40%), choose any three dates
- Class participation (20% of final grade)

REQUIRED TEXTS

James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*
Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*
James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
Jack London, *Iron Heel*
Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
A number of PDFs available via the course Moodle (m)
Seven film viewings

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

Indian and Indian Killer

- 6/27 Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*
- 7/2 London, *Iron Heel*
- 7/9 Fred Zinneman, dir. *High Noon* (1952)
Martin Scorsese, dir. *Taxi Driver* (1976)
Roland Emmerich, dir. *Independence Day* (1996)

Slave and Slave Master

- 7/11 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
William Harper, "Memoir on Slavery" (1837) (m)

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

7/16 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Morrison, "Romancing the Shadow," *Playing in the Dark* (m)

7/18 Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
Richard Wright, "Bright and Morning Star" (m)

John C. Willis, "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)

7/23 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)

Killer on the Road

7/25 James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*
Simon Ortiz, selections, *from Sand Creek*

7/30 Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

8/1 Jonathan Demme, dir., *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)
Ridley Scott, dir., *Thelma and Louise* (1991)

8/10 **term paper due**