American Regional Cultures and Global Transition: Appalachia, Louisiana, and the Texas Border Country

English 597.02  Prof. Dorothy Noyes
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Denney 238  TR 1:30-3:18

This course will introduce you to the folklore of three American regions. Each is famous for its traditional culture, but each is often thought of as deviating in a distinctive way from the national culture: Louisiana is “creole,” Texas is “border,” and Appalachia is “folk.” While exploring these differences, we’ll also explore the commonalities. Imagined as different from a supposed American norm, each region is both attractive to outsiders and stigmatized by them. In each region, a dynamic vernacular culture has emerged out of complex race and class relations. In each region, both government policy and economic forces have powerfully transformed local lifeways and the physical environment, and vernacular political expression has been subject to violent repression. Each region has also been strongly marked by in-and out-migration. And each region is strongly connected with the outside world: Louisiana looks to the Francophone world and the African diaspora, Texas maintains strong relationships across the border, and, unexpectedly, Appalachia has been economically and culturally involved with places like Spain and China since the eighteenth century.

We’ll look at historical change through the prism of celebrated folklore forms such as Louisiana Mardi Gras, Appalachian fairy tales, and the Tex-Mex corrido. We’ll also explore the impact—economic, environmental, demographic, and thus also cultural—of recent events: Hurricane Katrina and the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast, mountaintop-removal mining in Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee, and the debates over various kinds of traffic (migrants, drugs, and capital) across the US-Mexican border.

GEC CAPSTONE REQUIREMENT

This course satisfies the Senior Capstone GEC requirement, “Issues of the Contemporary World.” The Expected Learning Outcomes prescribed are as follows:

1. Students synthesize and apply knowledge from diverse disciplines to contemporary issues.
2. Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationships between information derived from different disciplines by interacting with students from different majors.
3. Students write about or conduct research on the contemporary world.

As is typical of folklore courses, students in English 597.02 are likely to come from a wide range of majors in the humanities, social and behavioral sciences, arts, and beyond. We don’t expect you to have a background in folklore studies: instead, we hope
you’ll contribute what you know from your major towards the group’s understanding of these regions. This course fulfills the capstone requirement by asking you to synthesize both primary sources and scholarship from different disciplines—folklore, history, literary studies, ethnomusicology, anthropology, and others—in order to address issues of general importance in the contemporary world:

- How do local traditions interact with national and global frameworks?
- How can we examine cultures comparatively, when cultures are experienced as unique and distinctive?
- How do Americans and American policymakers think about regional cultures? How is this thinking affected by politics and economics?

REQUIRED TEXTS
You’re expected to bring the readings with you to class, except of course in the case of websites.

Books ordered


Other readings
Links are provided for readings directly available on the Web. Others, marked “Carmen,” are in fact in Carmen. Those marked “Library” can be found online through the library catalogue by searching the journal title. (Note that journals are sometimes in multiple repositories depending on the article’s publication year.) The readings come from a wide range of sources and some may seem opaque. Don’t panic. We will talk them through. When words and references are unfamiliar, try looking them up!

COURSE REQUIREMENTS
All assignments must be completed as described below for a passing grade.
1. Participation. You should be present, on time, prepared, and awake. You should have relevant contributions to make in discussion and respond respectfully to other speakers. If you are shy about talking in class you can add to the post-class discussion (see below, #3). 15%.

2. Three take-home exams, one for each region, asking you to synthesize readings and class discussion in relation to major regional issues and cultural forms. Ca. 1200 well-chosen words, a bit longer for the last one. 20%, 20%, and 25%.

3. Two post-class writings, posted on Carmen under Discussions. Ca. 600 words each. You'll post a brief list of the issues or concepts that seemed most important from the day’s discussion, 3 or 4 items, each with some explanation and commentary (you can develop, challenge, revise, question as you see fit). These will help everyone to study for the exams and to retain what they've learned. Others are welcome to add additional comment—this will count as extra credit for your participation grade. I will choose five “scribes” at the end of each class session by pulling names out of a bag, each of you at random until your two dates are up. This means that you could be chosen at any time so you should be taking good notes every day! (A substitute for pop quizzes.) To receive credit you must post by midnight of the day after the class in question (e.g. Tuesday class-post by midnight Weds). 10% each.

**Grading scale:**

F. You and/or your assignments failed to materialize at the necessary minimum; written work was not done, not relevant to the assignment, or not your own.

D. You've done just enough work to slide through: done some reading, turned in all major assignments with minimal attention to their requirements, and been present in body and occasionally in soul.

C. You've done the course reading and turned in all required work on time and in the spirit of the assignment. You've been present in both body and mind as a useful participant in the class. Your course assignments were of limited value, perhaps because of major problems with mechanics, organization, or logic in your writing, or perhaps because you have not thought very deeply about the material.

B. You've done everything required for a C, but have responded more fully to the demands of the course, both in class and in your writing. Your written work demonstrates your engagement with both the readings and class discussion. You've made progress in reading challenging material, drawing connections between different cultural forms and situations, and shaping your thinking through writing.
A. You've done everything required for a B. In addition, you've read actively, thought creatively, and written with style. I’ve learned something from you.

**Attendance** affects your grade both directly (via your participation grade) and indirectly (via your ability to do the written work effectively). Announcements made at the beginning of class will not be repeated for latecomers, so it is also in your interest to arrive on time. If you must miss a class, you should arrange to get the notes from a fellow student. You *may not make up work missed due to absence* except in documented cases of illness, etc. As per department policy, *five absences automatically result in a final grade of F.* I am not, however, unreasonable. If something dramatic is going on, please speak with me so we can negotiate a plan.

**Office hours.** T 3:30-5, W 1-3 at the **Mershon Center**, 104A, 1501 Neil Ave. (corner of 8th and Neil), 292-8683. Or by appointment or by telephone. Please note that I am affiliated with multiple units on campus and have a manic meeting schedule. Therefore it is always best to try me first by email rather than phone, and even during regular office hours I need to know when you’re coming so I don’t double-book. Nonetheless I am always happy to make time for you!

**Class Cancellation.** In the unlikely event of class cancellation due to emergency, I will contact you via email and request that a note on department letterhead be placed on the door. In addition, I will contact you as soon as possible following the cancellation to let you know what will be expected of you for our next class meeting.

**Plagiarism.** Plagiarism is the representation of another’s works or ideas as one’s own: it includes the unacknowledged word for word use and/or paraphrasing of another person’s work, and/or the inappropriate unacknowledged use of another person’s ideas. In accordance with university rules, all cases of suspected plagiarism will be reported to the Committee on Academic Misconduct. Be careful to credit your sources appropriately, especially when doing research on the Internet (come to me if you are not certain how to do this). And bear in mind that it is far less work to write the exam yourself than to plagiarize convincingly.

**Disability resources.** Students with disabilities that have been certified by the Office for Disability Services will be appropriately accommodated, and should inform the instructor as soon as possible of their needs. The Office for Disability Services is located in 150 Pomerene Hall, 1760 Neil Avenue; telephone 292-3307, TDD 292-0901; [http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu/](http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu/).
**SCHEDULE**

Background and/or discussion questions for each session will be posted on Carmen.

**Introduction.**

1/4  What is a regional culture? What is national culture? How can we compare cultures?

**I. Louisiana: A Creole Culture**

1/6  Introduction to Louisiana history. Images of French Louisiana.

**Read**  *Swapping Stories*, xxv-xlvi, 3-26

**Film**  *Louisiana Story*, dir. Robert Flaherty 1948 (77 mins.)

1/11  Creolization, language, and narrative


1/13  Stigma and revival in Cajun country: food and music


1/18  Rural tension and reciprocity: Cajun Mardi Gras


1/20  Race and class in New Orleans Mardi Gras


Read  Blues for New Orleans

1/25  After Katrina


Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston: A Survivor-Centered Storytelling and Documentation Project http://www.katrinaandrita.org/index.html (explore this website)

Takehome exam 1 distributed

II. Texas: A Border Culture

1/27  Border society

Film  “Chulas Fronteras (the Beautiful Border),” dir. Les Blank, 1976


1/31  Takehome exam #1 due in Carmen dropbox by noon.

2/1  Border society and song construction

Read  Paredes continued—finish chs. 3 and 4.

2/3  Mutations of the corrido: migration and narcotrafficking

Film  "Al Otro Lado (To the Other Side)," dir. Natalia Almada, 1996. See related website http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2006/alotrolado/


and maybe an update on Joe Arpaio and the new Arizona law--

2/10 Conflicts of memory

**Film** First half of “Lonestar,” dir. John Sayles, 1996


2/8 Immigration and generations

**Film** Second half of “Lonestar.”


2/15 Chicanismo. Social movements and identity construction


III. Appalachia: A Mountain Culture

2/17 Introduction to Appalachia: Representing the Region

**Film** *Appalachian Journey* (Alan Lomax, dir. Association for Cultural Equity, 1991.)
(streaming at [http://www.folkstreams.net/film,128](http://www.folkstreams.net/film,128) with transcript and supporting materials)

**Read**  
Roberts, *Up Cutshin and Down Greasy.*


**2/21**  
Takehome exam #2 due in Carmen dropbox by noon.

**2/22**  
Fairy tales and family relations: ogres, witchy women and fighting men

**Read**  


**2/24**  
Music and migration

**Read**  


**3/1**  
Labor and struggle in mining communities

**Read**  
http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol2no1/lightssoundessay.html
(browse)

3/3  Are we America?


3/8  Moving mountains


3/10  Wrap-up

Takehome exam #3 distributed.

3/15  Takehome exam due in Carmen dropbox