

AMST 355
Class and Culture
M, TH, 3:30-4:50
CAS 228
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Roger Williams University

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Hours M W F 1:00 - 2:00
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Course Introduction

This course was previously offered as *American Studies 430, Special Topics: Class and Culture*. If you took the course under this number and title you won't get credit for taking it again. If you have any questions, see me A.S.A.P.

“So now my father, writing in the workbook he received at his ‘transition’ seminar, dutifully answers their questions. What do you feel is your greatest accomplishment? ‘My greatest accomplishment,’ he writes in the clipped, impossible language he has never learned to love, ‘is my family’. What was most satisfying about your previous employment? ‘I was very proud,’ he says, carefully calling up the past tense, ‘to work for the University.’”

Kristin Kovacic, “Proud to Work for the University”

I've been teaching at Roger Williams for thirty-six years now, and as one can imagine I've seen many changes across that time. One thing I've noticed is that while the student body has become more diverse in some ways (for example, a wider ethnic mix), it has become less diverse in others, particularly in terms of economic and geographic terms. By *geographic* I'm not talking on the regional level, but on the community level. Fewer of our students come from urban areas now. More come from small towns, suburbs, and exurbs. (Exurbia is rather like the “suburbs of the suburbs”. Consequently, I have a sense that today's student is less aware of patterns of living other than his or her own. This course is an attempt to raise that awareness.

This course has a point of view. Its object is not to raise sympathy for the “less fortunate” or, on the other hand to reinforce the sense of the cultural or intellectual superiority of the social classes to which we belong. Rather, the point of view can best be summed up in the word “respect”. Some of you may have taken *Urban America*. If you have, you may remember the films *Strut*, and *da Feast*, and if you do, you remember how important being *respected* was for the participants in the events which these documentaries portrayed. Both represented life in urban “blue-collar” ethnic neighborhoods. The residents believe they have a right to community respect equal to that of any resident of any exclusive gated suburb. So do I.

The quotation with which I begin this introduction has a special significance for me. I, too, am “proud to work for the University”. As you'll soon find out, the person about whom this essay was written is no professor. But his contribution to *his* university is equally valuable, to my way of thinking, as is the contribution of folks who earn their living as I earn mine. Some of you have heard

me go off on a tear about this in other classes. Read the essay, and think about the idea of respect as you do.

Those of you who have had me before know pretty much how my classes operate. They tend to be a little less structured and orderly than the classes of some other professors are. I like to let the class evolve as it develops. At the beginning I provide a broad outline. You have it in your hands. Then I fill in that outline across the semester, week by week. I do this by preparing a website for the class. The URL for this class will be <http://amst355Class.homestead.com>. If you are uncomfortable with this method, you may want to consider transferring into another American Studies section with more structure.

Books for the Course:

Shipler, David K.,
The Working Poor: Invisible in America
New York: Vintage, 2005

Terkel, Studs,
Working: People Talk About What they Do All Day and How they Feel about What they Do
New York: New Press, 1997

Lautner, Paul, and Fitzgerald, Ann, Editors,
Literature, Class, and Culture
New York: Pearson Education, 2000

Price, Richard
Samaritan
New York: Random House, 2004

The four books for this course cover a wide spectrum of types. We will also be using the internet version of a New York Times book, entitled *Class Matters*. (You'll use a lot of Internet sources in this class—one of my auxiliary purposes is to leave you better equipped to use the Internet for scholarly work). The book's website is <http://www.nytimes.com/class>. Why not take a few minutes in the next several days to look it over? This will give you a good sense of what the course is all about. You'll get specific assignments from this website later in the semester.

David Shipler is an award winning journalist of wide experience, both in the real world and on the university campus. I hope you went to hear him when he visited us in the fall term, and I hope at least *some* of you have already read his book. It was designated the summer reading book of 2008. Shipler is a writer of passion and elegance. The word of emphasis in the title, *The Working Poor, Invisible in America*, is **working**. I think you will be surprised by the *kinds* of jobs the people hold. Shipler writes, "To spend years doing a dozen, fifteen, twenty, or more interviews with people, you've got to like them. So I am rooting for them, no doubt." I expect you'll be rooting for them, too.

Studs Terkel died just before the election last fall at the age of 96. Beyond doubt he was America's greatest Oral Historian. I've used *Division Street America* in my Urban America Course. *Working* is another seminal Oral History. In it you'll meet over 130 Americans from all walks of life, scattered from around the United States. Work in Terkel will form the basis of two assignments for the course. More about them later.

I chose **Lautner and Fitzgerald** for two reasons. First, it focuses on issues of class in a balanced way. It doesn't *just* focus on poverty and the poor *or* on urban issues. Class transcends the rural/urban split or the black/white split. Second, as you'll see, the sources themselves are remarkably broad. Students doing a quick skim of the table of contents and will see some names they recognize, and I'm willing to bet a nickle, maybe two, that some of these would not have been expected.

Finally, for something completely different, a mystery novel, by **Richard Price**. *Samaritan* also is not the standard fare one finds in typical University courses. I hope class members are going to find this book interesting. I chose it because it presents variety of characters interacting in ways which bring issues of class and race to the fore. Be warned in advance that the language is a little raw, and the story, if brought to the screen faithfully, would receive an X rating.

After the first couple of weeks we'll be working in all books pretty much simultaneously. I want you to begin *Price* immediately, and have it finished before we bring it before the class for discussion. It isn't a difficult read. I'll have specific instructions for you on it shortly.

Work for the Course.

I'm still thinking this over. As I've been working on this, it struck me that it would not be *impossible* for me to consult with you about how you'd like to demonstrate what you learned in this course. It would also be *possible* to take a little time at the outset to find out what students in this course *want* to learn. I was surprised at the speed at which this class filled. No doubt some are here because the course fulfills a requirement: and maybe *this* method of doing so is the *lesser evil*. The class is hardly in prime-time. But I know that some of you are very much interested in persons whose life experiences are *not* yours: you find them intrinsically interesting, or perhaps you find them useful for the light they shine on your own personality, aims, aspirations, and ideas. Some of you may have become interested in the topic of this course because of discoveries you made in Urban America, or one of the American Studies courses you've taken. This course is related to Urban

America in a number of ways, though its focus is on people and their lives, and less on the environments which provide the stage for them.

So, I think I'm going to take a week or so to finalize the work requirements for this course. In general, these guidelines will be observed. *First*, I need a minimum of **four** different products through which to assess your accomplishments. *Second*, I need these to be varied. I don't want students to do the same kind of thing four times. I have some ideas about things which I want you to do. But I'm going to solicit your input as well. *Third*, I need these to incorporate internet activities in some way. *Fourth* I need these to reflect *all* the required materials for the course. I will also be finding ways for you to collaborate with each other, and to share the results of your findings using a number of new tools available on Blackboard. I'm excited about using them, and I think you're going to find them fun, yourselves.

Some Projects upon which I'm pretty keen:

1. I want you to write something for me on Price's book, *Samaritan*. I want you to look at the book from the perspective of one of its primary characters. This will make more sense to you once you've started the book. I'm setting the target date for completion of the book at **February 20**. I want you to write on the book *before* we discuss it in class, and I want your *written* work to form the basis of our discussions. I'll have details in about a week.
2. I'm dividing the characters in *Working* and apportioning them among you. I will do this pretty much at random, and the initial lists will be posted on the class website, <http://amst430classandculture.homestead.com>. Everyone will be responsible for reading all the assigned sections. Those who have been assigned *specific* persons will lead the class discussion on them. Everyone will do research on the work represented by their assigned characters, and will write a medium-length paper on one of those persons/occupations per their own choice.
3. We will not use all of the Anthology. Many of these correlate well with the life stories in Terkel, and we'll use these, certainly. Others we'll use because they are interesting for their own sakes. Here, I'm going to ask you take some time early in the semester to browse your way through the table of contents, and glance at some of the those things which seem most interesting to you. I will call for recommendations and follow as best I can the will of the class. You'll notice that many of the sources are songs. I'm going to do my best to find these and play them for you. Behave yourselves and I won't make you sing along.
4. We will read the Shipler study entirely. Hopefully, many of you have read the book already and attended his lecture last semester. I am open to suggestions on how students wish to be assessed on their learning from this book.

5. We'll investigate all sections of the New York Times special, *Class Matters* (I think we will, anyhow). I am going to use some collaborative procedures with this book, too. You'll be working in groups of four and five, both in class and out. Start thinking about whom you'd like to work with.
- 6 I'm going to ask you to keep a journal for this course, in which you'll write both *reflections* on the things you read, and *good questions* which the materials raise in your mind.

A *reflection* is a thoughtful personal reaction. How did the material make you think? How did it make you feel? *Reflections don't have to be long*. In fact, they work better in stream-of-consciousness fashion than they do as polished essays.

Good Questions

- Can't be answered yes or no.
- Can't be answered by hunting through the material and paraphrasing or quoting the substance therein
- Require thoughtful analysis to come up with hypotheses or tentative answers. The form the basis of fruitful discussions.

Persons who faithfully keep their journals may apply to be exempted from any final exam the course requires.

NOTE THAT THIS COURSE HAS ITS OWN UNIQUE MAIL ADDRESS. It is at the top of this syllabus, and every weekly update. USE IT! You'll get a quicker response.

Attendance Policy:

SHOW UP! That's the key to success as Woody Allen said. I don't reward good attendance with gold stars, but I do diminish grades for those who take their responsibilities cavalierly. Three unexcused absences will result in a grade reduction. Five unexcused absences may lead asking you to withdraw from the course. I give excuses liberally. I don't expect you to show up if you're shedding viruses. Sharing is not always a good idea. I'm also sympathetic when there are conflicting obligations—for example, athletic competitions or special events for other classes. And life happens: there are family emergencies and the like. The key is to notify me *in advance* if you're not able to make class, and to *see me in my office during office hours* to assure me that you know what's going on. How do you know what's going on if you're not there? That's what the website is for. Use it! Use Blackboard, too: I'll post last minute announcements there, so check regularly.

Academic Honesty:

The twin supports of Academic Life are *collaboration* and *independence of thought*. In this class, there is no curve. In the largest sense, you're not in competition with each other, and to the degree that you can assist each other in learning you'll win nothing but praise from me. Yet it is equally important that each student exercise his/her own independent judgment, and have confidence in his/her own mind. Plagiarism defeats the whole purpose of the enterprise, and the University will not tolerate this particular form of intellectual theft. For the university statement on plagiarism, and for a general exposition of standards of Academic Integrity, consult the [Roger Williams University Website](#). You have learned appropriate techniques for incorporating ideas from others with your own in writing classes and elsewhere. When in doubt about something you've written, don't hesitate to show it to me or any other professor and ask for an opinion. The [Roger Williams University Writing Center](#) is very helpful to those who make the effort to use it. It has also posted a number of helpful documents online.

If I can conclude with a personal note. I was very pleased with the response to this course when I offered it on an experimental basis in the spring of 2006. I'm delighted my colleagues decided it was valuable enough to be incorporated into the regular offerings of the History and American Studies Department. I'm looking forward to this semester very much, and I hope that you are as well. I will do my best to meet your expectations, and I hope, at the end of the term you agree that our time together was well spent.