

Ethnicity &
Diversity in
US Culture

American
Studies
Leipzig

Oceans as Boundaries & Connections

Seminar — Winter 2025/26 — Mon 1–3pm — NSG 120

The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.
— Gloria Anzaldúa

Dr. Steffen Wöll

MOODLE



AMERICAN
STUDIES
LEIPZIG



*Oceans as
Boundaries
&
Connections*

Ethnicity and
Diversity in
US Culture
(04-001-1018)

SEMINAR

Winter Term
2025/26

**Monday 1–3pm
NSG 120**

Moodle Course

Dr. Steffen Wöll

Office Hour
Fridays 4–5pm
via Zoom

Syllabus

Course Description

In this seminar, we move beyond the view of oceans as empty expanses or mere transit routes. Instead, we approach the sea as method, archive, and transformative text.

We explore how maritime spaces have shaped histories of colonialism, migration, and resistance—from the transatlantic slave trade and Pacific indenture to Indigenous seafaring and contemporary cruise tourism.

Drawing on literature, theory, visual culture, and archival fragments, we ask: How does water function as both boundary and conduit? Who moves across it, under what conditions, and at what cost?

Readings include historical accounts, film, poetry, and theoretical texts, with particular attention to questions of race, empire, and environment. Students will engage in both critical and creative work, culminating in a final paper that expands on oceanic forms of knowledge, connection, and control.

Objectives

This seminar aims to:

- examine how oceanic spaces shape and reflect racialized and ethnic formations in American cultural history
- introduce interdisciplinary methods and theoretical frameworks for analyzing space, mobility, and identity
- support students in developing independent research questions and articulating them through critical discussion and academic writing

Requirements

To successfully complete this seminar, you are expected to:

- attend class regularly
- complete the assigned readings and bring the texts to class
- actively participate in discussions and group work
- take part in the Term Paper Workshop
- pass the 2 Prüfungsvorleistungen (PVL)
- pass the final exam (Prüfungsleistung)

Prüfungsvorleistungen

To be eligible for the final exam, you must complete 2 PVL, both graded on a pass/fail basis. Each PVL may be repeated once if necessary. Please keep track of your completion rate.

PVL 1: Peer Reading Guide (individual)

- write a 1-paragraph reaction and 2–3 discussion questions for the readings of 2 sessions
- post them in the respective sessions' forum
- due by **Sunday 5 pm**, the day before class
- all participants are expected to read the posts as warm-up

PVL 2: Weekly Media Respondents (group work, 2-3 students)

- sign up for 1 session on Moodle until October 19
- connect with your co-presenters
- select a media object (e.g., video clip, meme, soundbite, newspaper article, TikTok post, comic, map, painting, etc.) related to the week's topic
- give a 4-5-minute in-class presentation discussing its relevance
- Creativity is encouraged!

Prüfungsleistung (Projektarbeit)

The Prüfungsleistung assesses your academic development throughout the semester. It is required to pass the seminar and the ED-I module (exceptions apply for Erasmus students).

It consists of a Projektarbeit (project-based exam) with two components:

1. **Term Paper** (written in this class, due **March 16, 2026**. See guidelines below)
 - Written in this seminar
 - Due: **March 16, 2026**
 - Detailed guidelines below
2. **Oral Presentation**
 - delivered in the accompanying tutorial

Grading

Final grades are calculated from the weighted average of:

- **Term Paper** (double weight)
- **Oral Presentation** (single weight)

If the result falls between two valid grades, the better grade will be awarded.

For example: $\frac{(2 \times 1.7) + (1 \times 2.0)}{3} = \frac{3.4 + 2.0}{3} = \frac{5.4}{3} = 1.8 = 1.7$

Erasmus

Erasmus students may earn:

- **2 ECTS** for regular attendance
- **4 ECTS** for completing both PVL and the term paper

Please clarify requirements with your home institution if needed.

Code of Conduct

This seminar follows the American Studies Leipzig Code of Conduct.

Academic practice in the humanities thrives on open debate among diverse perspectives. Respectful academic engagement is expected at all times.

Trigger Warning

Some of the materials and discussions may involve **controversial or distressing content**, including topics such as racism, violence, or trauma.

If you have concerns, feel free to approach me anytime.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism means **submitting the work of others as your own**. While academic writing regularly builds on existing scholarship, using such work **without proper citation** constitutes fraud.

You must use quotation marks and provide full attribution when:

- quoting or borrowing **three or more consecutive words**,
- referencing a **distinctive term**, or
- discussing an **original concept** coined by another author.

Proper citation applies to all formats, including print, digital, audiovisual, and AI-generated sources.

Generative AI

Generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini) may be useful for **idea generation** or **initial research**. However:

- Do not rely on AI-generated text without verification.
- Do not submit AI-produced writing as your own.
- Do cite and document any use of AI tools explicitly.

American Studies Leipzig uses **detection tools** for both plagiarism and AI-generated content.

Submitting AI-generated text without proper attribution will result in **automatic failure** of the course component and may have **serious academic consequences**.

Schedule

1	Oct 13	Oceanic Thinking	<p>Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands" (1994): 29-34</p> <p>Denis Wood, Rethinking the Power of Maps (2008): 1-7</p> <p>Be prepared to introduce yourself and your research interests. Reflect about what you expect from the seminar.</p>
2	Oct 20	Middle Passages	<p>Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative (1789): Ch. III & IV</p> <p>J.M.W. Turner, The Slave Ship (1840)</p> <p>Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" (2008): 1-4 (until para. 2)</p> <p>(Optional) Marcus Rediker, The Slave Ship (2008): Ch. 1</p>
3	Oct 27	Black Atlantics	<p>Derek Walcott, "The Sea Is History" (1978)</p> <p>Kamau Brathwaite, Rights of Passage (1967): "Negus," "Calypso," "South"</p> <p>Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals (2020): Ch. 1 & 2</p>

4	Nov 3	Sweets & Sweat	<p>Sidney W. Mintz, Sweetness and Power (1986): Ch. 2</p> <p>José Garcia Villa, Have Come, Am Here (1942): poems 3, 4, 16, 17, 39</p>
5	Nov 10	Indigenous Maritimities	<p>Lee Francis IV and Weshoyot Alvitre, Ghost River (2019)</p> <p>Craig Santos Perez, from UNINCORPORATED TERRITORY [guma'] (2014):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “ginen tidelands [latte stone park] [hagåtña, guåhan]” (14-16) • “ginen (sub)aerial roots [13° 28' 0" N / 144° 46' 59" E]” (17-18) • “ginen sounding lines [date : 8/8/93] [epicenter : 12.982° n 144.801° e] [depth : 59 km] [strength : 8.2]” (19-20) • “ginen the micronesian kingfisher [i sihek]” (24)
6	Nov 17	Shipwreck & Horror	<p>H.P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928)</p> <p>Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster” (1965)</p> <p>J.M.W. Turner, The Slave Ship (Revisited)</p>

7	Nov 24	Sex and the Sea	<p>Herman Melville, Benito Cereno (1855)</p> <p>M. Jacqui Alexander, “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen” (1994)</p>
8	Dec 1	Liquid Laws	<p>The Amistad Case (1840s): Selected primary sources</p> <p>Vinh Nguyen, The Gift of Freedom (2012): Introduction</p> <p>U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982): Articles 17-21, 92-94, 98</p> <p>CNN, “A haunting final message and other takeaways from the Coast Guard inquiry into the Titan submersible implosion” (2024)</p> <p>RSA, “Pylos Shipwreck: Timeline and archive of a tragedy that could have been avoided” (2023)</p>
9	Dec 8	Blue Fantasy	<p>Ron Clements et al., Moana (2016)</p> <p>Dean MacCannell, The Tourist (1976): Ch. 1</p>

10	Dec 15	Pirates, Rebels & Utopias	<p>Marcus Rediker, Villains of All Nations (2004): Ch. 3</p> <p>Hadley Meares, “Did the Utopian Pirate Nation of Libertatia Ever Really Exist?” (2015)</p> <p>Disney’s Pirates of the Caribbean, “A Pirate’s Life for Me”</p>
11	Jan 5	Segregated Sands	<p>Kevin Dawson, Undercurrents of Power (2018): Ch. 1</p> <p>Delaware Historical & Cultural Affairs, “Segregated Sands: Delaware’s segregated beaches during the Jim Crow era” (2021)</p> <p>National Geographic, “Bruce’s Beach was stolen a century ago. It’s finally been returned.” (2022)</p>
12	Jan 12	Speculative Depths	<p>Margaret Brown, Descendant (2022) clipping. “The Deep” (2017)</p>

13	Jan 19	Imperial Infrastructures	<p>Craig Santos Perez, from UNINCORPORATED TERRITORY [guma'] (2014) (revisited):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “ginen ta(la)ya” (21-23; 32-36) <p>Paul Kramer, “Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons” (2006)</p> <p>Teresia Teaiwa, “Bikinis and Other S/pacific N/oceans” (1994)</p>
14	Jan 26	Term Paper Workshop	<p>Dionne Brand, The Blue Clerk (2018): Verso 33, 44, 59.2</p>
15	Feb 2	Final Reflections	<p>Craig Santos Perez, “A Love Song for Oceania” (2017)</p>
<p>Term paper due March 16, 2026 — see guidelines below</p>			

Term Paper Guidelines

Deadline: Submit via Moodle by **March 16, 2026**.

Late submissions are only accepted under specific, documented circumstances.

Choosing a Topic

Your paper builds on the analytical frameworks we developed throughout the semester. It should:

- extend class discussions by applying **secondary literature** (theory, criticism, etc.)
- analyze **one primary source** (or, in justified cases, more)
- relate your analysis to **key seminar themes**

You may—but are not required to—choose a text discussed in class.

Secondary Sources

Aim to include scholarship relevant to your topic, text, or approach. Use **peer-reviewed academic sources** to frame and support your argument.

Recommended starting points:

- Leipzig University Library
- JSTOR, Project MUSE, ResearchGate, Google Scholar
- Bibliographies from our seminar readings

Writing Standards

Your paper should:

- present a **clear thesis** in the introduction
- develop your argument **paragraph by paragraph**
- **analyze**, not summarize

Plagiarism

Always cite **any idea, term, or phrasing** that is not your own—whether quoted or paraphrased. **Failure to do so is plagiarism** and can have serious consequences.

Formal Requirements

- **Length:** 3,500 words incl. footnotes and bibliography ($\pm 10\%$)
- **Format:** Times New Roman, Arial or similar; 12 pt; 1.5 spacing; 1-inch (2.54 cm) margins
- **Citation Format:** Chicago Manual of Style or MLA
- **Structure:** Include an introduction, conclusion, and bibliography/works cited
- **Thesis:** State your central argument clearly, usually around the start or the end of the introduction
- **Submission:** Upload as single PDF with signed Plagiarism & AI Disclaimers

Optional (but Recommended)

- Use **chapter headings** to improve orientation
- Offer **reader guidance** that signals what is to come and/or outlines how your paper is structured
- Include a **table of contents**

Final Tip

Start early, stay curious, and do not hesitate to reach out for feedback.
Good luck on your research journey!