AMST 501/ENG 595: Sustainability in New England and Beyond (Introduction to American Studies)

This class does double-duty as an introduction to the methods of American Studies and to the topic of Cultural Sustainability. American Studies uses historical analysis, cultural criticism, ethnography and related disciplines to study “the United States”—as an “imagined community” sharing a particular history and political identity, and as a “contact zone” where a variety of regional, ethnic, and other cultures meet, cooperate and struggle. These methods are also ideally suited to the study of cultural sustainability—both the sustainability of particular cultural groups and practices, and the “culture” (values, ethics, beliefs) required to make our local environments, and indeed the planet, sustainable.

We’ll pursue these methods and topics through a series of places where the four content areas prioritized by UNH’s Sustainability Academy come into play: climate and energy; biodiversity; food; culture. Studying the Piscataqua Region will allow us to explore local weather, biodiversity, and history. Building an online exhibit of New England Native American baskets will allow us to see the interplay among ash trees, sweetgrass, Abenaki language, and Abenaki poetry. Reading Dave Eggers’s nonfiction account of a Muslim family surviving Hurricane Katrina, Zeitoun, will bring us to New Orleans for an examination of music and food, as well as racial and economic stratification. Finally, we will turn outward by reading African-American playwright Lynn Nottage’s Ruined, which asks Americans to consider how our iphones, consumer culture and other ideologies implicate us in violence against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

AMST 501 fulfills the Discovery Requirement in the Humanities (or GenEd Group 8), and can count toward the English major. It is required for students minoring in American Studies, and is intended to contribute to a developing undergraduate curriculum (including a possible future dual major) in Sustainability Studies. In Fall 2012, this class does NOT fulfill the university writing requirement.