

# A Conversation about American Studies with Princeton Professor Anne Anlin Cheng

Ann Slater

With all the issues today in areas such as race, migration, and gender and sexuality, American Studies is a rapidly changing field. One place this can be seen is at Princeton University. Founded in 1942, Princeton's Program in American Studies (AMS) seeks "to integrate the historical and literary studies traditionally identified with 'American Studies' with newer methodologies and approaches," attempting to "make sense of a complex and polyglot society." ([https://www.princeton.edu/ams/undergraduate\\_program/](https://www.princeton.edu/ams/undergraduate_program/))

Anne Anlin Cheng, Professor of English and of the Center for African American Studies at Princeton, is Director of AMS. She completed her B.A. in English and Creative Writing at Princeton, her Masters in English and Creative Writing at Stanford, and her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley. She has taught at Harvard and UC Berkeley, and focuses on race studies, aesthetic theory, literary theory, film studies, and psychoanalytic and feminist theories. She has a special interest in twentieth-century American literature and visual culture, particularly twentieth-century Asian American and African American literatures. Her first book, *The Melancholy of Race: Assimilation, Psychoanalysis, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford University Press), is "a study of the notion of racial grief at the intersection of culture, history, and law." Her second book, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford), "tells the story of the unexpected intimacy between the invention of a modernist style and the theatricalization of black skin at the turn of the twentieth century." (<https://english.princeton.edu/people/anne-cheng>)

Professor Cheng was kind enough to answer a few questions about American Studies at Princeton.

**How has the Princeton Program in American Studies evolved since its inception?**

It is Princeton's oldest interdisciplinary program and continues to be one of the few places where the humanities and the social sciences meet. The curricular focus, however, has changed much over the years. This change is reflective of what has been happening to the field of American Studies at large, across the country and internationally. Currently, Princeton University's American Studies Program is proud to be developing new curriculum in the area of comparative race, ethnicity, and migration.

**What is the general disciplinary composition in the Program?**

Our faculty comes from English, History, Anthropology, Sociology, Political Science, Art and Architecture, and Religion, among other departments.

**What are some examples of recent American Studies theses by Princeton students?**

"For Women Only: How Collegiate Social Settings Affect Political Engagement for Women"

"Happiness and Compliments: How Altruism, Human Interaction, and Feedback Influence Our Moods"

"Into the Woods: American Narratives and the Appalachian Trail"

"Reimagining Racial Passing through Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* and Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*"

**What is the relationship between American Studies and Ethnic Studies? African American Studies? Asian American Studies?**

There is currently a Task Force on American Studies at Princeton aimed precisely at working through these questions. All I can say now is that the Program aims to be a place for out-of-the-box thinking and methods and lines of inquiry not possible in traditional departments. And we hope to be an

agent for facilitating new developmental work in Asian American Studies, and Race and Ethnicity, as well as aim to work closely with the new Department in African American Studies.

Among the course offerings this spring are “Yellow Peril’ – Documenting and Understanding Xenophobia,” taught by John Kuo Wei Tchen, Visiting Professor from the Departments of History and Social and Cultural Analysis at NYU; and “Islands in the Sun: Caribbean Literature,” a course on European colonialism, African enslavement, and Indian and Chinese indenture taught by Tao Goffe of the Princeton Department of African American Studies.

### **What are the most exciting developments in American Studies right now?**

How to think about diversity within America AND how to think about America in the world.