Life in America: Identity and Everyday Experience

What is American Culture? This is a very complicated question and impossible to answer. Culture is not a thing, and American cultural patterns and practices are continuously in flux. They often change in step with shifts in technology, migration patterns, class relations, and global relations, but not always.

One way to approach that amorphous entity called “American Culture” is to explore how people make sense of their everyday lives. Important to many Americans is the notion of identity, which is itself a complicated concept to explore. We will focus on the way people use, appropriate, marshal, and negotiate identity as an integral aspect of their everyday lives. By exploring how people use identity, we can systematically explore aspects of American culture. This course focuses on identity in everyday life in the United States.

We will focus on three interlaced themes. The first theme focuses on the fact that culture, power, and history structure society in ways that shape and impacts the everyday lives of all Americans. The second theme focuses on how particular groups shape and are shaped by unique (and sometimes not so unique) practices that often turn on ideas about race, language, or community. Although these practices may signify shared experiences that unify “a people,” they can also lead to fissures and fractures within the so-called community. The final theme we will explore looks at the role of individuals within communities, from iconoclasts to conformists, to demonstrate how an individual can at once resist and challenge prescribed notions of identity, while articulating that age-old virtue - -American individualism.

Course Requirements: You will be required to take 5 exams, and hand in 5 short essays. You will also be responsible for one course project.

Quizzes will be a combination of written essays and online. I will give out a short essay on Friday, which will be handed in on Monday. The online quizzes will also be taken Monday mornings, after you hand in your essay.

Quiz: Monday February 6th, Quiz: Monday February 20th, Quiz: Monday March 6th, Quiz: Monday March 27th, Final Quiz: Monday April 3rd

Course Project: Course projects include a 7 page paper that explores a particular issue in everyday life in America. Using themes, concepts, and approaches gleaned from class, tackle an issue, explain a problem, or describe a unique or mundane cultural practice and how it relates to identity or people’s everyday experiences. You may work in teams of up to three people. Be advised, one paper is due for each team. Every member of the team gets the same grade, do your fair share of the work, and don’t get stuck with a lame partner.
Duke has a “community standard,” which I expect every student to adhere. We will be using the world wide web extensively as well as various forms of electronic communications. It is easy to pass notes through instant messaging, and get ideas from online sources. However, the same rules about passing notes or messages (during an exam for example) apply while taking your online exam. Similarly, your writing must be your own prose, and your ideas and quotes must be properly cited. Talking about and editing each other’s essays is fine. However, you must adhere to the community standard and do not collaborate or work together on the essays.

**Week 1: Life In America: Identity and Everyday Experience**

*Assignment Due Date 1/13*


**Week 2: Post-Industrialism, Post-Modernism, and Civic Participation in Red and Blue States** *Assignment Due Date 1/20*


Maureen Dowd. 2005 What’s a Modern Girl to Do? The New York Times October 30, 2005 Sunday Late Edition - FinalSection 6; Column 1; Magazine; Pg. 50 (On Blackboard)

*SPECIAL REPORT: A portrait in red and blue - American politics; American politics;*


Divided we brand

This Land is Your Land (Jib Jab)

Bib Box Mart (Jib Jab)

Week 3: Race, Racism, and Democracy

Assignment Due Date 1/27


Week 4: Conditions of Identity: Technology, Violence, and the “new” Immigration

Assignment Due Date 2/1 [note discussion will be on a Wednesday, film will be on Friday]

Anne Alison. “Cyborg Violence: Bursting Bodies and Borders with Queer Machines.” LinA Pp. 25-45

Aiwa Ong. “Cultural Citizenship as Subject Making.” LinA Pp. 156-175

Marcelo M Suarez-Orozco. “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Assimilation but were Afraid to Ask.” LinA Pp. 45-62

Week 5: Church, Family and the Dynamics of Post-Civil Rights Migration

*Quiz: 2/6*

*Assignment Due: 2/10*


[Choose one]


Week 6: The Politics and Perils of Assimilation

*Assignment Due: 2/17*


**Week 7: More than Consumption: Experiencing Gender, Class, and Race**

*Quiz 2/20*  
*Assignment Due 2/24*


Jacqueline Woodson *Being A Gay Teenager May 30, 2001* NPR All Things Considered

Kylo-Patrick R Hart.2004 *We’re Here, We’re Queer—and We’re Better Than You: The Representational Superiority of Gay Men to Heterosexuals on Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.* Journal of Men’s Studies. 12(3) 241-254.

**Week 8: Policing Blackness, Authenticity, and the Soul Patrol**

*Assignment Due 3/3*


Maureen Mahohn. Black Like This: Race, Generation, and Rock in the Post-Civil Rights Era. LinA Pp. 303-321


Week 9: Privilege, Power, and Anxiety of the Norm

Quiz: 3/6
Assignment Due: 3/10


Week 10: SPRING BREAK
3/13-----3/17

Week 11: Language, History, and Specificity
Assignment Due 3/24


Brenda Bright “‘Heart Like a Car’: Hispano/Chicano Culture in Northern New Mexico” Pp. 392-418.


Claudio Sanchez. “Hispanic Students Most Ill-Served in U.S.” NPR All Things Considered, November 1, 2005


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**Week 11: Blood Politics and the Racial Currency of Culture**

*Assignment Due: 3/31*


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**Week 12:**

**Quiz: 4/3**

4/5 Classroom Presentations of Projects
4/7 Classroom Presentations of Projects

**Week 13**

4/10 Classroom Presentation of Projects
4/12 Classroom Presentation of Projects
4/14  Classroom Presentation of Projects
Week 14
4/17  Classroom Presentation of Projects
4/12  Classroom Presentation of Projects
4/14  Classroom Presentation of Projects
Week 15
4/24  Classroom Presentation of Projects
4/26  Classroom Presentation of Projects

Final Papers are Due at the beginning of class on April 26, 2006