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 4 exams, and hand in 4 short essays. You will also be responsible for one course project. Class participation is a vital component of your overall evaluation. I may enhance the syllabus; any change will be communicated through blackboard at least a week in advance. Coming to class and being on time is also expected. There are many sensitive issues we explore through the readings and discussion. It is important that we engage each other as members of a learning community and foster a community of learning. Be respectful, thoughtful, and deliberate with your comments. As well, engage in a spirit of charitable interpretation of other people’s views.

Quizzes will be a combination of written essays and online multiple choice and short answer. 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 5th, Quiz: Monday February 19th, Quiz: Monday March 5th Final Quiz: Monday April 2nd

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.
Community Standard
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. 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 and encouraged. However, you must adhere to the community standard and do not collaborate or work together on the essays. Plagiarism will not be tolerated.

Writing Assignments
This course requires a number of written assignments designed to develop critical reading and writing, as well as enhance one’s analytical skills. Essays will be evaluated on critical analysis and close reading of the texts, making careful and creative connections between texts and various units, and your ability to synthesize films, lectures, and discussions in class. In short, essays should creatively bring it all together.

Required Textbook:
Lee D. Baker, Editor

Week 1: Life In America: Identity and Everyday Experience
Assignment Due Date 1/12

Week 2: Post-Industrialism, Post-Modernism, and Civic Participation in Red and Blue States
Assignment Due Date 1/19
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)


This Land is Your Land (Jib Jab)

Bib Box Mart (Jib Jab)

Nuckin Futs - - The Jib Jab Year in Review
Week 3: Race, Racism, and Democracy
Assignment Due Date 1/26


Optional Reading:


Week 4: Conditions of Identity: Technology, Violence, and the “new” Immigration
Assignment Due Date 2/2

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


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

*Quiz 1: 2/5*

*Assignment Due: 2/7* [note: discussion and assignment will be on Wednesday, Film will be Friday]


**Optional Reading**


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Week 6: The Politics and Perils of Assimilation

*Assignment Due: 2/16*


Yen Le Espiritu. “We Don't Sleep Around Like White Girls Do”: Family, Culture, and Gender in Filipina American Lives.” LinA Pp. 197-212.


Week 7: More than Consumption: Experiencing Gender, Class, and Race Quiz 2:2/19

Assignment Due 2/23


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

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

Assignment Due 3/2


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

Devah Pager and Bruce Western (2005) Race at Work: Realities of Race and Criminal Record in NYC Job Market

Being a Black Man Washington Post Series (Read Articles and Browse Site).

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

Quiz 3: 3/5

Assignment Due: 3/9


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**Week 10: SPRING BREAK**
3/12-----3/16

**Week 11: Language, History, and Specificity**
*Assignment Due 3/23*


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


Nathan Thornburgh 2006 “Inside the Life of the Migrants Next Door
Thirty years of migration--mostly illegal--connect a small town in Mexico to New York's wealthy Hamptons. How both sides have benefited, and paid a price.” TIME MAGAZINE February 6, 2006 (On Black Board).


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: 3/30*


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Week 12:
Quiz 4: 4/2

4/4 Classroom Presentations of Projects
4/6 Classroom Presentations of Projects

Week 13
4/9 Classroom Presentation of Projects
4/11 Classroom Presentation of Projects
4/13 Classroom Presentation of Projects

Week 14
4/16 Classroom Presentation of Projects
4/18 Classroom Presentation of Projects
4/20 Classroom Presentation of Projects

Week 15
4/23 Classroom Presentation of Projects
4/25 Classroom Presentation of Projects

Final Papers are Due at the beginning of class on April 25, 2006