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Lecture: TR, 9:30-11
Room: GCB 207
Office Hours:
Thursdays 11:15-2:15

HI300: American Popular Culture

How do you know who you are? How do you know how to act in relationship to others around you? How do you know how the world works? This course explores how Americans have asked and answered questions like these since the late nineteenth century—how they have thought and argued about what it has meant to be a woman or a man, to be black or white, to be a worker, a rebel, or an American. Our exploration will not center on watershed dates and the great deeds of powerful figures—the external markers of history. Instead, we will uncover the internal forces that drive people to do what they do. We will seek out the web of assumptions and ideals that have framed the ways in which Americans have made sense of their complex society—how they have understood and organized their homes, their work, and public life. We will consider the rules of conduct that people have been expected to follow and, considering the role of subcultures and outsiders, we will investigate who had the power to make or break those rules.

Over the course of the semester, you will become familiar with many of the major trends in American culture over the past century. At the same time, you will learn to think about history and especially cultural history as a contentious, open-ended endeavor with many possible interpretations. You will learn that it is not defined by a linear progression of ideas, with one replacing another, but made up of overlapping, contradictory messages and an ongoing series of debates.

At the heart of cultural history is an effort to think deeply and creatively about original historical sources. For this reason, this course will familiarize you with a broad spectrum of primary documents, and it will help you hone your ability to analyze such sources. Each week, you will have the opportunity to interpret American cultural history for yourself—all assignments are drawn from primary sources ranging widely from novels, films, and memoirs, to magazines, sociological investigations, and political manifestos. Discussions and assignments will then provide you with a chance to articulate your ideas and interpretations. The lectures will complement this work and give you more material for your essays by providing necessary historical context. They will also explicitly model approaches to historical analysis.

The following books are available in paperback at the Bookstore:

Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (1901).
Abraham Cahan, *Yekl* (1896).
Edith Wharton, *House of Mirth* (1905).
Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929).
Arthur Miller, *Focus* (1945).
Grace Metalious, *Peyton Place* (1956).
Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984).

You will also need to view one film: Paul Haggis' *Crash* (2005), which can be "rented" from amazon.com for a few dollars and viewed on your computer.

Additional sources will be available on the Blackboard Learn website (https://learn.bu.edu). Readings posted on Blackboard are designated on the syllabus with **.

Assignments:

The assignments for this course consist of the following. There will be no in-class final exam.

1. The first assignment for this course will be a **5-page essay**, **due at the beginning of lecture on October 2.** See the last section of this syllabus for a description of the assignment.

2. **A take-home exam** will be distributed on **November 18** and **due at the beginning of class on November 25**. The exam will consist of a set of short essay questions that will require you to demonstrate your knowledge of the lecture material and the readings.

3. The final assignment for this course will be an **8-10 page essay**, which is described on the last page of this syllabus. This paper will be due **on Friday, December 12, by 3 p.m.** to my box in the History Department office on the third floor of 226 Bay State Road. In preparation for this assignment, you must also **complete the final paper proposal** found on the Blackboard website. This must be **turned in by Tuesday, Dec. 2 in lecture.**

Late policy:

Late papers will be **penalized one-third grade per day** (example: a B paper that is one day late becomes a B-). All students are required to keep copies of their graded essays and exams until the end of the semester.

Grade Breakdown:

To pass, you must complete and pass **all** of the course's components. This entails passing both essays, both exams, and being an active and regular participant in class. Your final grade will be calculated according to the following percentages:

First Essay: 25%
Take Home Exam: 35%
Final Essay: 40%

ATTENDANCE and PARTICIPATION: Attendance at the lectures is expected. If you do not come to class, you will not be able to do well on the assignments. Participating in class discussions not only will help you learn, but it could also be a deciding factor in your final grade. If you have earned a B+ for the course but you are close to an A-, for example, and you have been an active, regular participant in class discussions, I will bump you up to the higher grade.

PLAGIARISM. **Remember that plagiarism is a serious offense**, and it's your responsibility to know and understand the provisions of the CAS Academic Conduct Code. Plagiarism is subject to serious sanctions, including reprimand, suspension, and expulsion. Cases of suspected academic misconduct in this course will be referred to the Dean's Office. For a detailed description of Boston University's rules, consult the code of conduct at www.cs.bu.edu/students/conduct.html.

USING OUTSIDE SOURCES: **Do not use any outside sources for the exams and essays**. This includes information procured from the internet or another course. Your job is not to rely on others' interpretations or material you have become comfortable with because you have worked through it for another class. Your job is to go out on a limb and grapple with new material from this course—to challenge yourself and learn new things. The only exception to this rule is the primary source you chose to use for your final paper, and this choice must be approved to ensure that you are on the right track. Please see the end of the syllabus for directions on this final assignment.

SCHEDULE OF LECTURES AND READING ASSIGNMENTS*

Week 1: Introduction

Tues., Sept. 2: Culture and Cultural History
Thurs., Sept. 4: The Victorian Moral Order

READING: Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (1901), chs 1-15.

Week 2: Compartmentalizing Life

Tues., Sept. 9: Organizing Home and Leisure
Thurs., Sept. 11: Categorizing People by Race

READING: Abraham Cahan, *Yekl* (1896).
Also begin reading *House of Mirth*—at least chapters 1-10 of Book I.

Week 3: Restless People

Tues., Sept. 16: Redefining Success
Thurs., Sept. 18: Revolutions in Perception

READING: Edith Wharton, *House of Mirth* (1905).

Week 4: Making Americans

Tues., Sept. 23: Imagining America
Thurs., Sept. 25: New Pleasure Grounds

READING: Finish *House of Mirth* and other outstanding reading. Work on essay.

Week 5: Transformative Encounters

Tues., Sept. 30: Remaking Sexuality in the City
Thurs., Oct. 2: Pioneering Subcultures
—*First paper due at the beginning of lecture*.

READING: ** Harvey Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago's Near North Side* (1929), excerpts.
Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929).

* This schedule is subject to change; any revision in topics will be announced in class.

Week 6: Surviving Modernity

Tues., Oct. 7: World of Mass Design
Thurs., Oct. 9: A World in Collapse

READING: ** Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (1926), excerpts.

Week 7: Depression-Era Political Culture

Tues., Oct. 14: No classes
Thurs., Oct. 16: From the Marx Brothers to Disney

READING: **September 18, 1934 issue of the *New Masses*. Begin *Focus*.

Week 8: American Dreams and Nightmares

Tues., Oct. 21: War and Anxiety
Thurs., Oct. 23: Other-Directed Selves

READING: Arthur Miller, *Focus* (1945).

Week 9: Prescriptions for Postwar Americans

Tues., Oct. 28: Modern Marriage and the Home
Thurs., Oct. 30: Sanctions against Transgressors

READING: ** Excerpts from popular magazines and advice books.
Also begin reading *Peyton Place*—at least Book One. *Attention!*: Do not read the introductory essay—it will spoil the plot!

Week 10: Rebels and their Causes

Tues., Nov. 4: Trailblazers
Thurs., Nov. 6: The Art of Protest

READING: Grace Metalious, *Peyton Place* (1956).

Week 11: The "Sixties": Backlashes and Legacies

Tues., Nov. 11: God, Country, and Cowboys
Thurs., Nov. 13: Identity Politics

READING: **1960s documents and clips of *Blazing Saddles*.

Week 12: Stories about Contemporary Americans

Tues, Nov. 18: T-Shirt Time (or New Tales of Class and Fortune)
-Take home exam distributed

Thurs., Nov. 20: It's a Family Thing

Week 13: Relationships with Benefits

Tues., Nov. 25: It's a Vampire Thing
-Take home exam due at the beginning of class

Thurs., Nov. 27: Thanksgiving

Week 14: How to Be You and Me

Tues., Dec. 2: Experiencing the Culture Wars
-Final paper proposal due in lecture
Thurs., Dec. 4: Serial Selves and Post-Apocalyptic Community

READING: McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984).

Week 15: Conclusions

Tues., Dec. 9: Parables for the New Millennium

VIEWING: *Crash* (2004)

— Final Paper due Friday, Dec. 12 by 3pm to my box in the History Dept. office, 3rd floor, 226 Bay State Road.

NOTE ON GRADING and EXPECTATIONS FOR THE ESSAYS:

All essays for this course should draw specifically on both the assigned readings and relevant lecture material. You should not use outside sources. Your goal is not simply to summarize and regurgitate the ideas of others, but rather to craft an original and contentious argument that responds to the essay question you choose. You should support your argument with detailed evidence and analysis that is sustained throughout the entire paper in a clear and cogent manner. Your argument should be a historical one; your job is to make claims about what Americans thought at the time under consideration, NOT what you think about certain beliefs or policies. Try to imagine and uncover how Americans viewed themselves and their world in the past, and consider the historical conditions that led them to think in particular ways at particular moments in time.

Essays will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- **An "A" range essay** is both ambitious and successful. It presents a perceptive and independent argument backed up by well-chosen evidence, a creative and compelling use of sources, and sensitivity to historical context. Written with grace and confidence, it is the kind of paper that could be read aloud in class. It demonstrates that the writer has grappled seriously with the issues of the course, has done a close, critical reading of the texts, and has synthesized the readings, discussions, and lectures.
- **A "B" range essay** is one that is ambitious but only partially successful, or one that achieves modest aims well. It may demonstrate many of the aspects of A-level work, but falls short in organization and clarity, the formulation and presentation of its argument, or the depth of source analysis. It demonstrates a command of course material and an understanding of historical context and contains flashes of insight, but lacks consistency in the writing or depth in the argument.
- **A "C" range essay** has significant problems in articulating and presenting its argument, or seems to lack a central argument entirely. Oftentimes, C-range papers offer little more than a summary of information covered in the course, or they might prove insensitive to historical context, contain factual errors, unclear writing, poor organization, or insufficient evidence.
- **A "D" essay**, in addition to displaying the shortcomings of a C-range paper, also fails to grapple seriously with either ideas or texts, or fails to address the expectations of the assignment. A D essay suggests seriously insufficient command of the course material.
- **An "F" essay** falls short in the manner of a "D" essay. It is also often significantly shorter than the assigned length, does not demonstrate even a glint of potentially original thought, and suggests a lack of effort or no competence in the material at hand.

All essays should be **double-spaced**, with one-inch margins and a reasonable font. For a detailed description of the proper format for historical essays and other things to keep in mind, students should consult the **BU History Department Writing Guide** at the following website: http://www.bu.edu/history/undergraduate-program/resources/writing-guide/

First Essay

For this 5-page paper, chose one of the three short primary documents that have not been discussed in class and have been posted on the Blackboard website. Your task is to make an argument about the historical significance of the source you've chosen. **How does it extend, complicate, or contradict what you've learned about American culture during the Victorian period** from the lectures and the readings?

Relate the source you choose to the assigned readings and lectures so far. A strong paper will proceed from a concise and clearly articulated thesis. Rather than listing different observations, therefore, you should develop a compelling interpretation of your source and analyze it and the supplementary material you choose from the course in detail in the body of the paper. This paper should help to prepare you for the kind of analytical work you will want to do for the final paper. For this reason, tips given below for the final essay also apply to this assignment.

Final Essay

The final assignment is an 8-10 page paper focused on a **problem and primary source of your choice, set in the context of American cultural history** as you have come to understand it in this course. There are few limits on the kind of source you choose. In the past, students have chosen everything from a nineteenth-century etiquette manual to *The Sims*™ video game. A building in Boston, a piece of artwork at the MFA, a family photo album, a novel, a primetime television show—these would all make worthy choices. But you must be able to relate your source to some of the themes of the course and make an argument about its significance to the study of modern American cultural history.

You **must have your source approved** in advance to make sure you are on the right track. **A short proposal form for the final paper** can be found on the Blackboard website. You can begin thinking about the final paper as soon as you would like, and I am available to talk about your ideas in office hours. The result should not be a research paper, but a thoughtful, analytical essay. Do not simply summarize the source or relate what others have said about it. You should read your cultural history source with your own eyes and using the historical tools and references from the course—not through the eyes of other historians or interpreters.

Your goal in this paper is twofold:

First, you should provide **a close analysis of your source**. Pick the source apart. Analyze its overt and implied messages, and determine how it communicates those messages. Read it with and against the grain. Are there any tensions within the source? Can it be used for multiples purposes? The result should be a richly textured essay that demonstrates how you have thought in depth about the different facets of your source.

Second, you must place your source in **a meaningful historical context**. Why is your source important to our understanding of American cultural history? How does it relate to other things you have seen and read this semester? If your source had been assigned, what would we have talked about in lecture and section that week? *How does it challenge, complicate, or extend what you already know from other lectures, readings, and discussions*?

The paper is **due on Friday, December 12 by 3pm** to my box in the History Department office on the third floor of 226 Bay State Road. Good luck, and have fun!