

Professor Brooke L. Blower
History Department, Boston University
226 Bay State Road, Rm. 307
bblower@bu.edu

Lecture: MF, 2:30-3:45
Room: CAS211
Office Hours:
Mondays 10-noon
Fridays 9-10

HI300: American Popular Culture

How do you know who you are? How do you know how to act around others? 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 goal will be to 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 readings are drawn from primary sources, ranging widely from novels, films, and memoirs, to magazines, sociological investigations, and political manifestos.

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” online 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: To pass, you must complete and pass **all** of the course's exams and be an active and regular participant in class. The assignments for this course consist of the following. There will be no in-class final exam.

First take-home exam: 25%

Second take-home exam: 35%

Final take-home essays: 40%

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.

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.

ELECTRONICS: No laptop, cell phone, or other electronic use in class. The temptation to check email, shop for jeans, or otherwise juggle and surf while studying or even sitting in class is strong. “Multitasking” sounds like a positive skill that good time managers master. Yet studies have shown again and again that dividing your attention in this manner does not work. It lowers comprehension, thwarts long-term memory retention, and undermines the quality of class discussions. Your coursework deserves the kind of focus and respect you give to any other momentous gathering, whether it be church, live entertainment, or yoga class.

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 unless directed to do so. 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.

SCHEDULE OF LECTURES AND READING ASSIGNMENTS*

Week 1: Introduction

Fri., Sept. 8: Culture and Cultural History

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

Week 2: Compartmentalizing Life

Mon., Sept. 11: The Victorian Moral Order

Fri., Sept. 15: Organizing Home and Leisure

READING: Abraham Cahan, *Yekl* (1896).

Also begin reading *House of Mirth*—at least chapters 1-10 of Book I.

Week 3: Restless People

Mon., Sept. 18: Categorizing People by Race

Fri., Sept. 22: Redefining Success

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

Week 4: Making Americans

Mon., Sept. 25: Revolutions in Perception

Fri., Sept. 29: Imagining America

—***First exam distributed at the end of lecture.***

READING: Finish *House of Mirth* and other outstanding reading. Work on take-home exam.

Week 5: Transformative Encounters

Mon., Oct. 2: New Pleasure Grounds

Fri., Oct. 6: Remaking Sexuality in the City

—***First exam 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. 10: Pioneering Subcultures

Fri., Oct. 13: World of Mass Design

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

Week 7: Depression-Era Political Culture

Mon., Oct. 18: A World in Collapse

Fri., Oct. 20: From the Marx Brothers to Disney

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

Week 8: American Dreams and Nightmares

Mon., Oct. 23: War and Anxiety

Fri., Oct. 27: Other-Directed Selves

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

Week 9: Prescriptions for Postwar Americans

Mon., Oct. 30: Modern Marriage and the Home

Fri., Nov. 3: 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

Mon., Nov. 6: Trailblazers

Fri., Nov. 10: Class cancelled

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

Week 11: The “Sixties”: Backlashes and Legacies

Mon., Nov. 13: The Art of Protest

Fri., Nov. 17: God, Country, and Cowboys

-Take home exam distributed

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

Week 12: Stories about Contemporary Americans

Mon, Nov. 20: Identity Politics

Wed., Nov. 22 ***Take home exam due by noon to the History Office, 226 Bay State Road***

Fri., Nov. 24: No class (Thanksgiving)

Week 13: Relationships with Benefits

Mon., Nov. 27: It's a Family Thing

Fri., Dec. 1: Serial Selves and Post-Apocalyptic Community

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

Week 14: How to Be You and Me

Mon., Dec. 4: New Tales of Race, Class, and Fortune

Fri., Dec. 8: Experiencing the Culture Wars

— ***Final exam distributed***

VIEWING: *Crash* (2004) plus handouts

Week 15: Conclusions

Mon., Dec. 11: Parables for the New Millennium

— ***Final exam due Friday, Dec. 15 by 3pm to my box in the History Dept. office, 3rd floor, 226 Bay State Road.***

NOTE ON GRADING:

Exam essays will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- **“A” range work** is both ambitious and successful. It presents perceptive and independent arguments 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 work 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.
- **“B” range work** is ambitious but only partially successful, or 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.
- **“C” range work** has significant problems in articulating and presenting its arguments, 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.
- **“D” work**, 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.
- **“F” work** 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.