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Lecture: Tu/Thurs 11-12:15 CAS 203
Office hours: Tues. 9-10, Thurs. 12:30-2:30

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.

ACCOMMODATIONS for Students with Documented Disabilities: If you are a student with a disability or believe you might have a disability that requires accommodations, please contact the Office for Disability Services (ODS) at (617) 353-3658 or access@bu.edu to coordinate any reasonable accommodation requests.

HUB LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Historical Consciousness

Students will create historical narratives, evaluate interpretations based on historical evidence, and construct historical arguments.

Students will demonstrate an ability to interpret primary source material (textual, visual, or aural) using a range of interpretive skills and situating the material in its historical and cultural contexts.

Students will demonstrate knowledge of American cultural traditions, intellectual paradigms, forms of political organization, and socioeconomic forces, as they have shaped the United States since the late nineteenth century, including how these have changed over time.

These outcomes will be reached by regular attendance and participation in lectures, embarking on a substantial reading list, and completing three take home "exams," which are comprised of a series of guided essay assignments in which students demonstrate what they've learned and practice their skills of historical cultural analysis.

Aesthetic Exploration

Students will demonstrate knowledge and appreciation of notable works in American literature and the visual and performing arts, including the cultural contexts in which those works were created, and be able to identify their ongoing significance and relevance.

Students will demonstrate the reasoning skills and vocabulary necessary to interpret American literature, music, and visual arts since the late nineteenth century.

Students will produce evaluative, analytical, or creative works that demonstrate an understanding of the characteristics—such as genres, modes, styles, and cultural history—of various modern American creative media.

These outcomes will be reached by reading and discussing a range of fictional works as well as interpreting, during lecture, the stakes involved in different art movements and the politics and meanings that Americans have invested in certain styles and aesthetics. Essay prompts in the course's assignments are furthermore explicitly designed to help students practice their own evaluation of creative works—for example, by comparing different works of art or situating them in historical contexts.

Critical Thinking

Students will be able to identify key elements of critical thinking, especially habits of distinguishing historical versus ahistorical thinking, translating ordinary language into formal argument, distinguishing empirical claims about matters of fact from normative or evaluative judgments, and recognizing the ways in which emotional responses can affect reasoning processes.

Drawing on skills developed in class, students will be able to evaluate the validity of arguments, including their own.

Discussion in this class centers on opportunities for students to consider multiple points of view on complex issues, and approach the lives and beliefs of others with empathy and historical understanding. In both assignments and discussions students explore the critical tension between the stories Americans tell themselves (normative judgments) and material realities (empirical evidence), and they learn strategies for analyzing how common cultural tropes (ordinary visual and textual languages found in commercials, films, and other types of sources) actually make large claims and arguments about the American way of life. They also learn to practice historical thinking, a fundamental technique of critical thought which allows practitioners to evaluate their own contemporary assumptions by testing them against the arguments Americans have made about themselves in the past.

SCHEDULE OF LECTURES AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Week 1: Introduction

Tues., Sept. 3: Culture and Cultural History

Thurs., Sept. 5: The Victorian Moral Order

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

Week 2: Compartmentalizing Life

Tues., Sept. 10: Organizing Home and Leisure

Thurs., Sept. 12: Categorizing People by Race

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

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

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

Week 3: Restless People

Tues., Sept. 17: Redefining Success

Thurs., Sept. 19: Revolutions in Perception

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

Week 4: Making Modern Americans

Tues., Sept. 24: Imagining America

Thurs., Sept. 26: New Pleasure Grounds

—***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

Tues., Oct. 1: Remaking Sexuality in the City

Thurs., Oct. 3: Pioneering Subcultures

—***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).

Week 6: Surviving Modernity

Tues., Oct. 8: World of Mass Design

Thurs., Oct. 10: A World in Collapse

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

Week 7: Depression-Era Political Culture

Tues., Oct. 15: No class (Monday schedule)

Thurs., Oct. 17: 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. 22: War and Anxiety
Thurs., Oct. 24: Other-Directed Selves

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

Week 9: Prescriptions for Postwar Americans

Tues., Oct. 29: Modern Marriage and the Home
Thurs., Oct. 31: 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. 5: Trailblazers
Thurs., Nov. 7: The Art of Protest

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

Week 11: The “Sixties”: Backlashes and Legacies

Tues., Nov. 12: God, Country, and Cowboys
Thurs., Nov. 14: Guerrilla Theater on the Screen
-Second exam distributed at the end of lecture.

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

Week 12: Stories about Contemporary Americans

Tues, Nov. 19: Identity Politics
Thurs., Nov. 21: It’s a Family Thing
-Second exam due at the beginning of lecture.

Week 13: Relationships with Benefits

Tues., Nov. 26: Serial Selves and Post-Apocalyptic Community
Thurs., Nov. 28: No class (Thanksgiving)

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

Week 14: How to Be You and Me

Tues., Dec. 3: New Tales of Race, Class, and Fortune

Thurs., Dec. 5: Experiencing the Culture Wars

— *Final exam distributed*

VIEWING: *Crash* (2004) plus handouts

Week 15: Conclusions

Tues., Dec. 10: Parables for the New Millennium

— *Final exam due Friday, Dec. 13 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.