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Lecture:
Location:
Office hours:

HI300: American Popular Culture

How do you know who you are? How do you know how to act around others? How do you think 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 this gender or that, 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. You will get more jokes.

You will also have the opportunity to interpret American cultural history for yourself by immersing yourself in a broad spectrum of primary documents from novels, films, and memoirs, to magazines and political manifestos.

The following books are available at the Bookstore and can be found at Mugar Reserves: [CAS HI300 A1: American Popular Culture](#)

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)
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.

Additional sources will be available on [Blackboard Learn](#). Readings posted on Blackboard are designated on the syllabus with **.

CONTENT ADVISORY: This course includes some R-rated content, and we will address sensitive, controversial issues throughout that may “hit close to home.” Our goal in class will be to be honest but respectful of each others’ opinions, so that we can bring our own experiences and knowledge to bear on the course topics while also keeping our discussions civil, productive, and grounded in historical analysis. We will be testing our own views, assumptions, and practices by comparing them to how others have done things differently—asking not only what do we think but also why do we think the way we do? How and why have others thought differently?

DISABILITIES AND SPECIAL NEEDS: Students with documented disabilities or special needs should contact the professor as soon as possible for appropriate accommodations. For more information, please contact the Office of Disability Services at (617) 353-3658. All discussions will be confidential.

If, in the course of the semester, you feel like you are having mental health challenges, please reach out to [B.U. Counseling](#). Phone assistance is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 617-353-3569.

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 exams 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 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, we will bump you up to the higher grade.

TECHNOLOGY: Please put away laptops, phones, or other electronics during class. Taking notes by hand is preferred. If you must type your notes, please sit in the front of the classroom and turn off your WiFi. 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, a concert, or yoga class. It is also extremely distracting to those around you.

PLAGIARISM: **Remember that plagiarism is a serious offense**, and it’s your responsibility to know and understand the provisions of the BU [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.

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

Tues: Culture and Cultural History

Thurs: The Victorian Moral Order

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

Week 2: Compartmentalizing Life

Tues: Organizing Home and Leisure

Thurs: 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: Redefining Success

Thurs: Revolutions in Perception

Fri—First exam posted on Blackboard at 2pm.

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

Week 4: Making Modern Americans

Tues: Imagining America

Thurs: New Pleasure Grounds

Fri: First exam due by 2pm on Blackboard.

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

Week 5: Transformative Encounters

Tues: Remaking Sexuality in the City

Thurs: Pioneering Subcultures

READING: Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929).

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

Week 6: Surviving Modernity

Tues: No class. Catch up on the readings.

Thurs: World of Mass Design

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

Week 7: Depression-Era Political Culture

Tues: A World in Collapse

Thurs: From the Marx Brothers to Disney

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

Week 8: American Dreams and Nightmares

Tues: War and Anxiety

Thurs: Other-Directed Selves

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

Week 9: Prescriptions for Postwar Americans

Tues: No class. Catch up on readings.

Thurs: Modern Marriage and the Home

READING: ** Excerpts from popular magazines and advice books.

Week 10: Rebels and their Causes

Tues: Sanctions against Transgressors

Thurs: Trailblazers

READING: ** Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1938)
Malcolm X, "My First Conk" (1964)

Week 11: The “Sixties”

Tues: The Art of Protest

Wed—*Second exam distributed at 2pm.*

Thurs: God, Country, and Cowboys

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

Week 12: A Radical New Era

Tues: Identity Politics

Wed: *Second exam due by 2pm on Blackboard.*

Thurs: *No class*- Thanksgiving.

Week 13: How to Be You and Me

Tues: It’s a Family Thing

Thurs: Serial Selves

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

Week 14: Stories about Contemporary Americans

Tues: New Tales of Race, Class, and Fortune

Thurs: Parables for the New Century

— ***Final exam distributed***

VIEWING: *Crash* (2004)

— ***Final exam due xxx by 3pm on Blackboard.***

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.

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.