

History 221: Explorations in American History: Popular Culture in Multiracial America

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Humanities 1217
MW 2:30-3:45
Office hours: M 4:00-5:30
W 10:30-12:00

Course Description:

Why popular culture in a history class? One reason is that the explosion of forms of media and leisure activities since about 1870 (popular theater and fiction, movies, radio, records, television, etc) means that popular culture increasingly defines people's daily routines, their ways of socializing and the ways they see the world and become who they are. Who we are as people can not entirely be separated from the media and products we use daily. But another important reason is that this is something that virtually everyone participates in, unlike government politics or high finance or foreign policy. This means that by looking at popular culture we can tell a history that is about ordinary people who weren't particularly privileged and how they struggled with things, what they cared about and tried to build, and how their lives changed over time. Last but not least, popular culture is a great place to look if you want to understand the social hierarchies that define and dog our history—race, gender, class and sexual hierarchies especially. Popular culture is full of stories about the world in the form of music, film narratives, radio shows, minstrel shows, television programs, etc., and these competing stories often reflect not just the way things were, but the ways different people were trying to influence, or justify, the ways things were. By looking closely at old popular culture forms and phenomenon we can see the traces of how people formed and challenged social hierarchies, and hopefully better understand the world we inherited.

This course has five units that allow us to explore various topics and themes. They proceed in a chronological order, but loosely rather than rigidly, allowing us to delve into issues in more depth than if we made a decade-by-decade coverage of events our focus. The units are: *Racialization and the Origins of US Popular Culture*; *Star Making and the Collective Imaginary*; *Consumer Activism: Turning the Joke*; *Commodities 'Я' Us: Making a Self in Consumer Culture*; *How Much is that Public Sphere?: Popular Culture, Political Discourse and Alternative Publics*.

I can't imagine conducting this course as a regular lecture when there are so many great popular culture sources that we can (actively!) look at or listen to right in class. I'll lecture sometimes for part of the hour, but you can count on being asked to speak up and give your thoughts and perspectives. We will do in-class activities and many different kinds of research, so you will be contributing knowledge to the class in a variety of ways. Together, it will be a mix that will surprise us all, and it will be interesting and hopefully fun, even though there's also a lot of hard work. (Don't miss that—check out the reading and writing assignments so you know what you're signing on to.)

Attendance Policy

Attendance is required because so much of this course happens in class; each unexcused absence over two will lower your semester grade by one third of a letter grade.

Required Texts

Books are available on reserve at College Library and for purchase at the Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative on Gilman Street. Turn right on Gilman from State if you're walking toward the capitol. Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*
Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948*
Marie "Keta" Miranda, *Homegirls in the Public Sphere*

Required Texts cont---->

A required Course Packet, available on line through ereserves at College Library OR in hard copy at Student Print in the Memorial Union. To access ereserves: Login to MyUW portal: <http://my.wisc.edu/>. Click on your **Academic** tab. Note that in your list of current courses, those with library reserves available contain a link for "**library/reserve**". Click that link to go to your reserves.

Course Requirements:

1. Participation (10%)

You will be assigned a letter grade for your participation, based on (ungraded) in-class writing assignments and the quality and quantity of your participation in small and large class discussions.

2. 2-3 page Position Paper (10%)

3. Weekly Written Assignments (30% total)

These are short, graded WEEKLY assignments that ask you to respond in some way to class readings, to bring in information or ideas to the class, or to prepare for research assignments. Each person may SKIP TWO of these in the course of the semester. Assignments will be sent out weekly over our email list and will note whether they are due Monday or Wednesday. Our email list address is: hist-221@lists.students.wisc.edu. Assignments must be turned in at the beginning of class when they are due in hard copy (unless otherwise instructed). Late assignments will not be accepted.

4. Group Star Research Project Presentation (20% total—10% individual grade; 10% group grade)

This is a group research project that analyzes the historical and cultural meanings of a particular star, paying particular attention to racialization, and the negotiation of race hierarchies. More info to come!

5. Toys Я Us Field Research Paper (20%)

This is a paper on the ways that commodities construct and/or challenge race and gender hierarchies in our society. It will utilize analytical frameworks learned from our readings to design and conduct a focused field research project at Toys Я Us. Results will be analyzed in a written paper.

6. Take-home Final Exam (10%)

Course Schedule

(note: complete readings before class. Please bring relevant readings to class.)

Week 1

W 9/8 Introductions—What is Popular Culture and Why Should We Study its History?

UNIT ONE: Racialization and the Origins of US Popular Culture

Week 2 Minstrelsy and the Joke at the Base of US History

M 9/13 Roediger, “White Skins, Black Masks” Packet

W 9/15 primary sources on minstrelsy (handout)

Week 3 Love, Theft, and Making a Living Anyway

M 9/20 Kasson, “American Indian Performers in the Wild West” Packet

W 9/22 (no new reading)

Week 4 The Double Edge of Mimicry

M 9/27 Chauncey, “Building Gay Neighborhood Enclaves” Packet

DUE: 2-3 Page Position Paper

W 9/29 Hamilton, “I’m the Queen of the Bitches” and “The Honor of White Womanhood” Packet

UNIT TWO: *Star Making and the Collective Imaginary*

Week 5 The Creation of Celebrities

M 10/4 Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free* pp. xiii-xv; 1-33;
Ruiz, "Starstruck" Packet

W 10/6 Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free* pp. 35-95; *Lady Sings the Blues* excerpt (handout).

Week 6 What do Stars Reveal about Race in the US?

M 10/11 Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free* pp. 97-139

Streible, "Race and the Reception of Jack Johnson Films" Packet

W 10/13 Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free* pp. 141-198

Lipsitz, "White Desire: Remembering Robert Johnson" Packet

UNIT THREE: *Consumer Activism: Turning the Joke*

Week 7 Amos 'n' Andy and the Battle for the Airways

M 10/18 Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom* pp. 1-17

W 10/20 Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom* pp. 63-105

Week 8 World War II and Promises of Change

M 10/25 Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom* pp. 106-153;

W 10/27 Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom* pp. 157-193

Week 9 Informal and Formal Consumer Activism?

M 11/1 Cosgrove "The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare" Packet

Kelley, "The Riddle of the Zoot" Packet

W 11/3 Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom* pp. 246-277

Week 10 What is a "Positive" Image?

M 11/8 Creef, "The Representation of the Japanese American Body..." Packet.

W 11/10 Ward, "A Dixie Dilemma" and "Conclusion" Packet.

UNIT 4: *Commodities Я Us: Making a Self in Consumer Culture*

Week 11 Our Earliest Education in Race and Gender

M 11/15 Chin, "Ethnically Correct Dolls: Toying With the Race Industry" Packet

W 11/17 Negrón-Muntaner, "Barbies Hair: Selling Out Puerto Rican Identity in the Global Market" Packet.

NOTE: TRIP TO TOYS Я US MUST HAPPEN THIS WEEK!!

Week 12 Marketing Ethnic/Race Identities

M 11/22 Deloria, "Counterculture Indians and the New Age"

W 11/24 Workshop on Toys Я Us research paper.

UNIT 5: *How Much is that Public Sphere?: Popular Culture, Political Discourse and Alternative Publics*

Week 13 What is a "Public Sphere" and Who Gets Access?

M 11/29 Miranda, *Homegirls in the Public Sphere* pp. 1-48

W 12/1 **DUE: Toys Я Us research paper**

Week 14 The Hazards of Representation

M 12/6 Miranda, *Homegirls in the Public Sphere* pp. 49-77;

Entman and Rojecki, "Violence, Stereotypes and African Americans in the News" Packet

W 12/8 Miranda, *Homegirls in the Public Sphere* pp. 78-153;

Muñoz, "Pedro Zamora's 'Real World' of Counterpublicity" Packet

Week 15 Rap and the Paradoxes of Alternate Publics

M 12/13 Bakari Kitwana, "Introduction" and "The New Black Youth Culture" Packet

Tricia Rose, "Voices From the Margins" Packet

W 12/15 Last day—wrap up and final exam prep

FINAL EXAM—This is a take home exam, and it is due in my mailbox (#5002) by our exam time: Monday December 20, 10:05 am. My mailbox is on the fifth floor of the Humanities Building by the Northeast elevator. You may turn your exam in earlier, but not later, than this date and time.