

American Studies 3112: American Everyday Life

Riv-Ellen Prell

WHAT THIS COURSE IS ABOUT

Everyday life, like culture, is something we experience on a daily basis. It is created by our ability to take for granted, without question, that what we do is "natural." But all commentators on society, from novelists and poets, to social scientists and psychoanalysts, understand that there are patterns and power relations that structure "natural" and daily experience. The "taken for granted" is anything but natural. It has been historically constructed within a *particular* time, place, and set of relations that have changed. Everyday life is not the same for rich and poor, males and females, blacks and Hispanics, elderly and young, and professionals and workers. Everyone lives a daily life--eating, finding a means of support, sleeping somewhere, and being in a series of relationships. But the *content* and *meaning* of these processes differs within the United States and between societies. Everyday life, in addition, is not simply inherited or structured but created through the activities of those who live it. We challenge, undermine, change, and cooperate with the "rules" of daily life. That active participation and protest is also key to understanding everyday life.

This class primarily concentrates on the U.S. after World War II. We begin with an historical work on the family in the 1950s and end with a novel set in the 1980s that looks at how the war in Vietnam affects a series of people in a small town. This period is marked by dramatic shifts in everyday life--transformations of family, work, consumption, and ideas about American society. The class is not "about" the period but uses it to explore issues of everyday life.

In this class, we want to learn something about how daily life is lived and how scholars have thought about the creation of daily life. We want to pay particularly close attention to how daily life is WRITTEN about, and writing will be an important element of learning in the class. We will examine the CONTENT of daily life, the CONSTRUCTION of daily life, and the INSCRIPTION of daily life. You will participate in reproducing each of these levels of knowledge as writers, readers, and collectors of data.

JOIN US IN AN EXPERIMENT

This class is designed for you to learn something about the impact of writing on learning. Funds from a University program, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing, allowed us to develop writing exercises and the content of this class. You will be asked to write often during the quarter, and a great deal of time will be devoted to the writing assignments. Whether you find writing difficult or enjoy it, this class has something to offer you. We want to explore what type of writing works best for you as an individual learner and how to enhance your writing and learning. Writing assignments are listed in a separate section of the syllabus.

REQUIRED READING

Homeward Bound: Families in the Cold War, Elaine Tyler May

All Our Kin, Carol Stack

Reading the Popular, John Fiske

The Managed Heart, Arlie Russell Hochschild

In Country, Bobbie Lee Mason

A packet of articles will be available at Copies on Campus in the basement of Coffman Union. They will be listed in the syllabus with an asterisk (*).

CLASS TOPICS AND DATES

I. Everyday life and why it's interesting:

January 2-4

Read: "Understanding Popular Culture," p. 1-13 in *Reading the Popular*.

II. Families

January 9-18

Read: *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May and *All Our Kin*, Carol Stack.

In this section we will discuss how families organize daily experience and what constructs and defines families. How do families vary in American culture and in what ways have they changed and why? We will discuss ideas of what a family is and should be and the link between those definitions. We will also examine the significance of the perspective of whether the family member is male or female, young or old, in what social class and culture.

III. Work as everyday life

January 23-February 1

Read: *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild.

*"The 'Industrial Revolution' in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the Twentieth Century," Ruth Schwartz Cowan, in Thomas J. Schlereth ed. *Material Culture Studies in America*.

*"The Customers Ain't God': The Work Culture of Department Store Saleswomen, 1890-1940," Susan Porter Benson in Frisch and Walkowitz eds. *Working -Class Americans*.

*"Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Good," Toni Cade Bambara, *The Seabirds Are Still Alive*, Vintage Books, 1982.

In this section we will discuss work from the point of view of the worker. How is work experienced and why? What is the impact of the type of job on the experience of the worker? What happens at work for the workers that is not connected to what is formally produced? What does the workplace mean in the twentieth century?

IV. Desire--Wanting and Having in Contemporary Society

February 6-15

Read: *From *Salvation of Self -Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930, the Culture of Consumption*. "Shopping for Pleasure," p. 13-42

and/or "Video Pleasures," p. 77 -94 from *Reading the Popular*.

*"The Jeaning of America," *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske.

*"Waste a Lot, Want a Lot: Our All-Consuming Quest for Style," Stuan Ewen, *Utne Reader* (insert also attached).

*"The Lesson," Toni Cade Bambara, from *Gorilla, My Love*, Vintage 1981.

This section will examine the idea of a consumer culture and with it the emphasis on experience and the therapeutic. It will contrast a producer and consumer culture and the impact on everyday life. It will look at how these processes differ by gender/class. The consumer as a "guerilla fighter" in the war against mass culture will also be discussed.

V. U.S. Television: The Production of Images and Meanings within Everyday Life

February 24- March 6

Read: *In Country*, Bobbie Ann Mason

*"The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," George Lipsitz, *Camera Obscura*, January 1988.

"Madonna," p. 95-114; "Romancing the Rock," p. 115-132; "Everyday Quizzes Everyday Life"; "News, History and Undisciplined Events"; "Popular News" from *Reading the Popular*, John Fiske.

*"We Keep America on Top of the World," Daniel C. Hallin.

*"The Look of the Sound," Pat Aufderheide.

*"TV's Black World Turns-But Stays Unreal," Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *New York Times*.

This section will examine TV as it structures daily life and how it provides a crucial source of information, usually distorted, but still persuasive, about social, political, and interpersonal reality. We will discuss how the TV viewer interacts with the screen, not simply as a passive receptor, but as an activist as well. We will look at various forms of TV and videos.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Class members will produce a paper about every two weeks, as well as bring drafts to class for discussion. Papers will be returned within one week. This schedule requires class members to turn all work in on time and to keep up with all reading. As a result, we cannot accept late papers without a medical excuse. Papers should be typed double-spaced or printed neatly by skipping lines. All papers are due in class on the due date.

Assignment 1--Everyday Life

Method: Participant observer

Writing Form: Ethnographic

Due: January 9 in class--5 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to examine everyday life and then to write about it. Anthropologists and sociologists conduct participant-observation fieldwork by observing behavior and interaction, interviewing people, and then inscribing or writing up the process. You should select a setting to observe everyday life in which you are NOT a participant--a restaurant, gas station, store, domestic setting, classroom, etc. Observe it twice. Spend about 1-2 hours each

time. You can ask people what they are up to, but you do not have to interview anyone.

In the write up, describe what you see. Description that simply elaborates, details, or lists communicates much less than one that shapes a story or scene. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes ethnographic writing as a "fiction," a "thing made," more than something invented. You are to construct an incident of everyday life.

Assignment 2--Historical Readings of the Family

Method: Use of primary historical resources

Writing form: Historical Writing

Due: January 23--7 to 10 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to apply some of Elaine May's and Carol Stack's ideas about the family to some examples of images of the family from two historical periods prior to 1960. You will find these images in what historians call primary sources--texts taken from a particular period about which one is writing. Select two popular magazines that are published over a period of several decades. Select three decades, for example, 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s. Read these magazines in order to find images of the family in advertising, articles, fiction, and even advice columns. Define the images. You may find contrasting ones within the same period. Then compare and contrast them to one another. When you choose magazines, consider who the readers were--middle class, white, black, working class, men, women, etc. Compare the images in light of the readership.

Historical writing is widely regarded as the finest writing in the social sciences. It is narrative par excellence, telling a story using detail and rich illustrations derived from primary sources. At the same time, historical writing is never a catalogue of disconnected details. Its narrative force comes from the power of the "story" over the details. Its interpretations of events are woven into the story. Your essay should tell a story about what images of the family are in these two periods and some reasons why they develop as they do. The view of the family held by middle-class Americans in the 1950s and the working-class blacks described by Stack in the 1960s should help you think more broadly about what is meant by the family.

On January 16 we will devote a portion of the class to reacting to one another's assignments. Bring to class a draft of some portion of your essay for discussion.

Assignment Three--Everyday life of work

Method: Reflection on "work culture" and "marketing emotion"

Writing form: Fiction/Journal

Due: February 6--6 to 10 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to write in your own voice or through the voice of a character you create. You should have a narrator who is experiencing the workplace from the "floor." Drawing on your own experience or fictional or sociological writing, describe an

incident of work culture.

The value of first-person writing is to give a close reading of emotion, interaction, interpersonal power and experience. Like for Bambara, small events can be made to stand for far larger and more powerful relations, like racism, dignity, and power. You should aim to write a piece that may work at more than one level, for example, work culture as a subversion of management or work as a setting for emotional autonomy, etc. Bring a draft to the January 30 class.

Assignment Four--Reading a Cultural Artifact

Method: Participant observation

Writing form: Cultural Criticism

Due: February 20--7 to 10 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to interpret a symbol of contemporary American culture. Using John Fiske's approach as a model, you should interpret an item of clothing (for example, jeans), personal adornment (such as hairstyle or jewelry), or some other "style" by which a person asserts uniqueness and identifies with a group or movement.

Fiske often refers to magazines or advertisements (primary sources) or interviews of people. For this assignment, please interview three different people about the same cultural symbol. These may be brief interviews of thirty minutes or so in which you learn when the person started using the item, why he/she uses it, and what he/she thinks it "represents" about self and society. How do people make the item a statement of uniqueness? Do they use the item for a form of "resistance" to mass culture? If not, how might you understand it?

Cultural criticism often examines popular culture as an important example of how "ordinary" people act back upon society, creating alternative statements through symbols of identity to ones intended by manufacturers or schools or families. Cultural critics write "broadly," drawing examples from many aspects of contemporary culture. They write with a "point of view," rather than beginning with "data" which they then attempt to interpret. Their point of view is usually a theory of social experience such as social class relations, or the operation of a mass culture, or the domination of society by the linked connections of ideology and power relations (hegemony). Cultural criticism depends upon the ability to weave together an abstract view of society with the details of cultural and symbolic expressions of ordinary life.

Your papers should, based on your readings in this section and your "data," state a view of personal adornment and then examine the specific example you have chosen. You should conclude with a broad discussion drawing on readings, data, and other examples you would like to include. Bring a draft to class on February 15.

Assignment Five--Analyzing Television

Method: "Textual" analysis

Writing form: Television Criticism

Due: March 8--6 to 8 pages

The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to closely "read" two television programs or videos. The readings for this section are divided between television criticism and the fictional treatment of the meaning of television in the lives of characters. Television is understood from the point of view of the "script," and from the viewer who actively interacts with it, often appropriating its meanings in innovative ways. Your paper will focus on the textual aspects of television, and by contrasting programs will allow you to understand contrasting and similar ways that programs communicate information, ideas, and images.

For this assignment you need to select a topic rather than particular programs. Your topic should be an aspect of everyday life--intimacy, the family, the workplace, consumption, or others. Look at two television or video representations of that topic. You might want to examine a sitcom and a news segment, a sports event and a dramatic series. You may choose different types of programs or similar ones for this assignment. If you can video the programs, all the better. The more closely you can analyze the "text" the better for your purposes. As in the examples of criticism you have read, you need to pay attention to the words, their order, commercial breaks, visuals, and every other aspect of representation you can find. In your paper, set up the problem you want to explore and then develop features of the programs that you have selected. What have you learned? How is this topic treated? What are the points of contrast? Why?

Media criticism, like all criticism, depends on the balance of illustration and perspective. Your writing should aim to integrate both well. Bring a draft to class on March 6.

Assignment Six--Final paper and evaluation.

Prell, Riv-Ellen. *Interdisciplinary Writing through Multidisciplinary Writing*. CISW: University of Minnesota, 1993.