

# American Identities

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## Course Description

What is an American? This question hardly seems trivial, especially in this troubled post-9/11 era. This course seeks to explore different answers to the question of American identity and American identities. As an introduction to American Studies, our guiding compass is the so-called “politics of identity”—that is to say, the different ways Americans past and present argue about how best to define ourselves.

American identity concerns lofty, elusive ideas and ideals about civic virtues, values, aspirations, loyalties, morality, obligations, and personal entitlements. Yet American identity also concerns the mundane stuff of life—the practical, everyday choices we make, the daily activities we do, and the many things we purchase as consumers.

Is an American primarily defined as a generic citizen? If so, what defines proper citizenship? Or is American identity largely shaped by socio-economic class, ethnicity, gender, religion, and race—that is, by our membership in particular groups? Are you self-made, or made by social and economic structures you yourself rarely chose or create? Do you tie your identity to individualism, or to some collectivity? Is ethnicity what you prefer, or how others see you? Can we shift and borrow ethnic identities? Is ethnicity primordial or an “invented tradition”? Can you have an ethnic identity that you yourself reject? Is ethnicity a burden or chic? Is America a “melting pot”—or a multicultural smorgasbord? Should we have a unitary sense of national identity, or embrace pluralism? And, finally, who has the power to shape identity—the power to assimilate, to resist, to compel others to conform, to be privileged, to be different, to choose, and to be accepted as a full citizen? We will explore all these questions, and others.

## Course Objectives

- learn different historical and contemporary configurations of American identity.
- reflect on how race, class, gender, religion, immigration, and ethnicity shape American identities.
- link certain definitions of American identity to inequality, power, and hegemony.
- link popular culture to course ideas and theories.
- critique, and not just study, forms of American identity.
- apply course ideas directly to our own experiences.
- investigate the power of consumer capitalism in shaping and manipulating identity.
- study the relationship between consumerism and American holidays.
- apply course ideas to an ethnic neighborhood or tourist location in Boston.

All aspects of the course are intended to achieve one or more of these objectives. If you are ever uncertain about the relevance of any portion of the course, re-read these goals.

## Course Texts

The following five books are available at the Wheelock online bookstore ([wheelock.textbookx.com/](http://wheelock.textbookx.com/)):

Gary Cross. 2002. *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*. A nice history of consumerism throughout American history, seeking to answer the question, Why did consumerism so triumph here?

Riv-Ellen Prell. 1999. *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men*. A study of how an American ethnic group uses negative stereotypes about itself—especially about men and women—to express anxieties over the relationship between Jewishness, assimilation, and American identity.

Eileen O'Brien. 2008. *The Racial Middle: Latinos and Asian Americans Living Beyond the Racial Divide*. For much of US history, the main paradigm for categorizing people has been White or Black. But how do folks who are neither White nor Black—say, Asian Americans and Latinos—fit in this system? And our they causing us to change how we think about race?

Elizabeth Pleck. 2000. *Celebrating the Family Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals*. A historical survey of major US holidays, showing the ways consumerism shapes how we celebrate our families.

Randall Kennedy. 2002. *Nigger The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. A history of what is often called the nastiest, most vile and violent word in our national language—but a word that, through a minor modification (nigga), seems ever so prominent in popular culture.

Please bring the relevant book to each class session. A copy of the books will be placed on library reserve. But it is obviously impractical for you to expect that the library copy will be available when you want to read it for class. If you wish to read the library reserve copy, my advice is that you do so far in advance. It is *not* excusable to come to class unprepared because you were unable to check out the library copy. (I must also add that I am unable to lend my own books. Sorry.) It is the primary requirement of this course that you are prepared for each class, and part of this preparation is that you have read the material. On this point, there are no exceptions. You must always read.

## **Student Commitment**

These are the requirements for this course—mandatory requirements, not recommendations or options:

- attend class
- be prepared for each class, as I discuss below
- participate actively in discussions
- ask questions (and tell me when I fail to answer them)
- read the texts carefully and on time
- synthesize course materials and think critically
- work regularly and insightfully on your assignments
- complete the assignments on time

The course incorporates a variety of learning styles: lectures, small group discussions, images, films, tests, essays, and different types of readings. It is possible that not everything we do in the course will appeal to all of you all of the time--but I hope to reach all of you more of the time.

## **Class Participation**

Class participation is vital to the success of this course. Class activities are not “bullshit sessions.” Class participation may include sharing homework, group discussions, non-graded quizzes, swapping outlines, note cards, and structured conversations. I expect to hear your voice! Your final grade for class participation will reflect the quality and frequency of your “voice.” I keep daily notes about who actively

participates, and who does not. Additionally, I will call upon you at times to speak during class—to comment on the readings, to answer questions, to offer insights.

I reserve the right to ask you each periodically to make a 2-3 minute oral presentation to a small group, or even the entire class. Instead of merely summarizing the reading, you should evaluate the text, offer new ideas, grapple with troublesome points, agree, disagree, connect the reading to assignments, and so forth. We will begin these presentations in small groups, and perhaps work our way to the entire class.

I should also add that speaking in class about the material and readings implies much more than simply talking. Asking questions about the mechanics of a paper, a due date, a test, and so forth, does not qualify as intelligent class participation. The same holds for off-hand comments that are detached from the readings and content of the class. In other words, your comments should evidence careful thinking about course material. It is *your* responsibility to make it clear to me that you are reading and contemplating course material.

Class participation requires you to be attentive and prepared. It is, to repeat, a requirement that you speak. You will notice that class participation accounts for 20% of your final grade. I know that some of you are reticent about speaking in front of the class. But public speaking is an important skill, one you will need in your professional lives (especially if you plan to teach!), so you should strive to overcome any anxiety about public speaking. We will work together to create an environment in which everybody feels comfortable speaking.

Let me offer a final note. A student on RateMyProfessors.com recently commented that I require you to read the assignments. To this I say simply, Darn right! This is the most basic requirement of the class.

### **Classroom Etiquette**

I will absolutely treat you with respect, fairness, courtesy, and professionalism. I expect you to do the same to me, to the course, and especially to your classmates. There is a proper way to comport yourself in a college classroom. You must be attentive, prepared, respectful, and willing to talk and engage the material. It is *not* okay to do any of the following—all of which I have experienced while teaching at Wheelock: nap, read material and work on assignments for other courses, scan the newspaper, chat with your neighbor, daydream, talk on your cell phone, fail to switch off your cell phone ringer, text-message, email, habitually arrive late, leave early, toss “attitude,” loudly yawn, be disruptive, pack up your things before the end of class, habitually visit the restroom during class (unless you have a medical condition), snack audibly, and so forth. I make note of these disrespectful and disruptive behaviors, and they will negatively influence your final grade for the course (as they would negatively influence your professional career if you so conducted yourself in the workplace). Basic courtesy is an important social skill.

Lately, students increasingly text during class, or pretend to take notes on their computers when they are actually doing other things. And students increasingly, albeit erroneously, think they can do so without my noticing—say, by holding the phone under the table. Please refrain from these activities. You may not email and text during class. Let me repeat this statement to avoid any ambiguity: You may not email and text during class. If you do so, you can expect your grade to suffer. Unless you anticipate an immediate life-and-death decision, I see no reason to read or send text-messages during class, to speak on your cell phone, or to leave the room to do likewise. I put my phone on “silent” during class; you will do likewise. I do not check my text-messages during class; you will do likewise. If you expect a dire emergency to arise during class that necessitates texting or telephoning, please let me know. But these requests must not be trivial. Again, basic courtesy is an important social skill. If you do these activities, you can expect your final grade for class participation to reflect this discourtesy.

Respect for others is essential to this class. I will not tolerate any intolerance in the classroom—nor will I tolerate any insults, nastiness, shaming, and so forth. We all have different, unique, and frankly limited experiences—experiences not often of our own making. Few college students actively choose their family, income, race, ethnicity, religion, neighborhood, and the body of their birth. If someone in the class does not fully understand your plight, experiences, outlook, and arguments, then you should find a compassionate, calm, and respectful way of conveying those differences.

Please bring all relevant materials to class, including paper, writing implements, and course texts for the day. Likewise, please complete all assignments before entering the classroom. It is absolutely crucial that you read in accordance with the schedule.

In short, I expect you to act the way a reasonable person would expect someone to act in a college classroom. (And you, of course, should me to act the way a reasonable person would expect a college professor to act.)

### **Diversity in the Classroom**

I want to add a note about diversity in the classroom—about ethnic, racial, religious, class, gender, and sexual differences. The official values of Wheelock College include “multiculturalism and diversity” (<http://www.wheelock.edu/about/abomission.asp>). We are a diverse community. We infuse what we do with an appreciation for diversity, and we seek to learn about diversity. And, to state the obvious, any course about “American identity” must clearly confront diversity head-on.

But diversity is an awkward topic, to be sure, especially in the classroom where, to say the obvious again, there are often majority and minority groups (say, 20 students from Fiji, but only 2 Papua New Guineans). We all need to make certain that everybody in the class is treated equally as a person. You should not listen less closely, or more closely, to what someone says *because* of their identity. (“Gee, she’s Latina, and I really want to know how *those* people think.”) You should listen equally closely to what *everybody* says! We must treat each student as an *individual*, and respect each student for what she or he is—not for what you think they represent. We must *never* make assumptions about a person based on the groups they appear to belong in. (“She looks Asian, so I guess she, like, eats dogs.” Or “he is African-American so I guess he, you know, speaks Ebonics or something.” Or “she is Brazilian so I guess she is an illegal.” Or “he is gay so I guess he’s, like, not good at sports.” Or “she is Jewish so I guess she’s rich.” Or “she is from Zimbabwe so I guess...”) Make certain that your language is inclusive. Make certain that you refer to other groups respectfully. (Don’t know how to refer to a group? Ask the class! Maybe somebody can answer. You might feel awkward asking, but one moment of discomfort today can help you avoid major embarrassment later!) Be cautious, too, when making assumptions about the “generic” person.

Nevertheless, I want you to feel that you can say what you want to say, and ask the questions you want to ask, without fear of ridicule or an angry response. We are all here to learn. We *must* censure ourselves from *intentionally* offending others, but we do *not* want to censor learning—even topics that are likely to inflame passions and anger. Any and all questions can be phrased respectfully. If you are not sure how to ask a question, please speak with me, and we can work on generating appropriate phrases.

Please, too, ask your questions to the entire class—do not direct a particular question, say about Samoan identity, to the one Samoan student in the class. He or she does not “speak” on behalf of all Samoans! He or she is not the elected representative of Samoa. Please do *not* put anybody on the spot. (“Heh, you’re Jewish. What do Jews think about that?”) Try not to make students feel as if they must act or say something on behalf of “their people.” How do you think the Samoan student feels when everybody passively listens to the white student, but then turns and stares at him when he speaks? Everybody enrolled in this class to learn; nobody enrolled as the spokesperson for an ethnic group. We must be

careful not to implicitly frame somebody's comments as representative of a particular group. And we certainly should not assign guilt or responsibility to students for historical events. We all inherit legacies not of our own making. Some of us may benefit more than others from history, but we ourselves did not create that history. And when we are discussing a particular ethnic group, do not expect a person from that group to necessarily want to comment. Likewise, the fact that each of you belongs to one or more groups does not really give you the privilege of speaking on behalf of that group—even if you want to do so. No group is homogenous. Every group, especially in the US, contains vast differences in wealth, experience, and outlook. You may be African-American. But you surely cannot speak for all other African-Americans.

We must also be sensitive to the fact that, in a highly multicultural and diverse society such as our own, it is almost impossible for any one person to be aware of all the ways she or he can offend someone who is different. We all have different experiences—and our experiences are all limited. It is one thing when a person intentionally says something offensive. But it is something entirely different when a person inadvertently says something distasteful due to limitations in their personal experiences. When this occurs, we can use the utterance as a “teaching moment,” and respectfully and helpfully guide the person and all of us to a new level of understanding.

What I am trying to say is that we want to enlist diversity in the classroom to enhance learning—to broaden our experiences. But we want to do so in ways that are courteous, respectful, and sensitive. This is not easy. But it is necessary.

A final note. If you are ever uncomfortable with the tone of class discussions, or how you are being treated by others in our classroom, please speak with me privately. We will work together to improve the situation...and I will do so in a way that maintains, if you wish, your anonymity.

### **Balancing Analytic Rigor with Emotional Self-Discovery**

Hopefully, many aspects of this course will resonate with your own personal experiences. After all, you are all consumers, you all belong to a particular socio-economic class, and you have a race and often an ethnic identity. So, in this obvious sense, the course is personal. Yet many of you have experienced discomfort, maybe even outright hostility, in regard to your ethnic, racial, religious, and class backgrounds. Let's face it, some of you struggle daily with feeling marginalized in our society—and many of you have relatives who were on some end of historical tragedies like slavery. At the very least, you likely know somebody who did. We do not live (yet) in a society designed by Disney. Studying identities can be fun. But it can also be anguishing.

I want you to bring your personal experiences—to the extent you feel comfortable—into the class and your coursework. But our class is not a therapy session. We still need maintain analytic rigor. I cannot give you any recipe for how to achieve this balance. But I would be happy to discuss your struggles. I would also be happy to suggest other resources on campus should you feel the need or desire to explore further certain aspects of your identity, personal experiences, and family histories that are important but not appropriate for the classroom. Additionally, as I discuss below, please seek out the Counseling Center if you feel the need to talk more personally with someone about difficult issues and situation.

### **Grades**

Your final grade will be determined from the following:

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| Test 1, 2                                   | 10%, 10% |
| Essay 1: The materialization of my identity | 15%      |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Essay 2: Morality, tourism, ethnicity, and consumerism           | 20% |
| Essay 3: Evaluating O'Brien's argument about the "racial middle" | 15% |
| Take-home final exam essays                                      | 10% |
| Class participation  | 20% |

I also reserve the right to quick pop-quizzes periodically, to be factored into your "class participation" grade. For these, there are no make-ups.

There are no extra-credit assignments.

Note that the dates on which I have scheduled the tests and assignments, as well as the films and readings, are liable to change if we need additional time to cover thoroughly the material.

Attendance is required at all class sessions. I view class participation as a crucial gauge of your commitment, preparation, and engagement with the course. Silence is not an option. Perfect attendance alone will not constitute satisfactory participation (and active participation will not compensate for poor attendance). If you must miss class (life often entails unforeseen contingencies), please inform me as soon as possible by email. There are reasonable and unreasonable absences. Reasonable absences arise from illness, emergencies, ill children who must stay home from school, snowstorms, deaths in the family, and so forth. For unreasonable absences, and more than a few reasonable absences, I reserve the right to lower your final grade by one-half or one-full letter grade. I am kind and reasonable but, to be fair to all students, I must penalize habitual absenteeism. If you miss more than the equivalent of two weeks of class, you may not be capable of receiving a passing grade.

If you miss class, it is *your* responsibility to obtain the material from other students. Moreover, it is unwise to email your professors with the question, "did I miss anything important?" Of course you did.

Anything said or done in class is 'fair game' for the tests, quizzes, and assignments. All material is important.

I like to think of each class as having two components. We will discuss the assigned reading. But I also want you to leave each class with new insights not from the reading. Hence, I will often give mini-lectures. But you should think of this class as a seminar. A seminar requires you actively to engage and discuss the material. The operative word here is "active." By enrolling in this class, you agree to become an active participant, not a passive spectator. I see my goal mainly to provide clarification and enhancement of the readings, to facilitate discussions, and to offer additional case-studies and topics.

We will discuss and review each assignment during the semester. If my expectations are ever unclear, please ask—and please do so early during the assignment.

I will post all assignments, and other course material, of Wheelock-CT. It is vital that you familiarize yourself with Wheelock-CT. Please make certain that you have your password early in the semester. On the course website at Wheelock-CT, moreover, I have posted two documents you should read: a general set of goals applicable to all courses in the American Studies department, and a general grading rubric that will guide my assessment of your assignments.

### **Grading and Honor Code**

Grading entails both subtraction and addition. I eliminate points for errors and deficiencies, and I award points for insightful statements, critical thinking, and imaginative thought. A correct essay or response does *not* guarantee an excellent grade. Some responses are correct. Other responses are correct *and* show evidence of synthesis, insight, and creative thinking. I also expect your writing (in the essays) to communicate clearly your ideas. If your grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary contain numerous

errors, thus making it difficult to understand fully your ideas, then I must factor those errors into your grade for that assignment. Clear writing is a crucial skill for college and your professional careers, and I would be remiss as a professor if I did not expect and promote a certain level of quality.

Generally speaking, grades in the A-range reward for *exceptionally high achievement*. Grades in the B-range correspond to *superior* work. C grades indicate *basic* achievement—work that fulfills the requirements of each assignment. I will also abide, as noted above, by the general grading rubric posted on the class website at Wheelock-CT.

Please read the Honor Code of Academic Honesty in the Student Handbook, which states:

As a citizen of the Wheelock College community, I am committed to acting honestly and with integrity in all aspects of academic life. I pledge to conduct myself ethically in my academic endeavors. I accept responsibility for what I write and what I say. In the spirit of trust, I will not misrepresent my academic work. I will not cheat and I will work toward creating a fair academic environment for all.

If you are *ever* uncertain about potential plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and questionable borrowing of ideas, it is *your* responsibility to speak with me or an appropriate on-campus academic resource. This is your only warning: all work in this class is your own. You may *not* cut-and-paste from the internet. Under *no* circumstances are you to consult *any* additional sources, persons, or coursework without permission. *Any* instance of plagiarism will result in an F for the assignment, and the lowering of your final grade by one whole letter grade. (As a policy, I file Academic Dishonesty Forms whenever I encounter an instance of plagiarism or cheating. You can see the form on the Wheelock website at <http://www.wheelock.edu/affair/acaddishonest.pdf>). You must fully acknowledge *any* and *all* sources that contribute to your essays. Forgetting to add a bibliographical endnote is *not* acceptable. I would be happy to chat about this issue further in class or individually.

Your work should represent your best effort. It should communicate that you are taking your studies seriously, and that you respect your professors, your education, and yourself. Your work should convey the values of effort, thoroughness, seriousness, care, and importance. If your work appears frivolous, then it suggests that you have a frivolous approach to your studies. Please do your best.

Late assignments will be accepted for only three extra days. I will also reduce your grade by one full letter. This policy ensures fairness to all students. The only exceptions are serious medical illnesses and related unforeseen events of considerable import. Conflict with an assignment in another class is not a valid reason for an extension—nor, for that matter, avoidable technological failures. Back-up your essays regularly and consistently as you write them.

If you miss an assignment, it is *your* responsibility to initiate conversation with me. Likewise, if I request, when I hand back an essay or quiz, a meeting with you, it is *your* responsibility to follow-up.

I do not give incomplete grades except for truly serious and extenuating circumstances—circumstances that require consultation by you with the Dean, Academic Services, or health/mental health professionals.

You should familiarize yourself with the policies and dates for drop/adds, withdrawals, pass/fail options, incompletes, and so forth, all in the Course Catalog.

## **Essays**

I will, of course, provide detailed instructions for each of the essays. But here are preliminary thoughts.

The first essay will ask you to analyze your possessions and consumption habits, including the décor of your room and/or home, for what these items and practices do (or do not) say about your ethnic and socioeconomic class identity. This is a much more difficult assignment than it might first appear, for it asks you to step outside your experiences, in a sense, in order to view your possessions as an outsider.

The second essay will ask you to visit a prominent tourist spot or famous neighborhood in Boston—say, the North End, Faneuil Hall, The Freedom Trail, the Black Heritage Trail, Chinatown, the Waterfront, Beacon Hill, Roxbury, Boston Women’s Heritage Trail, and so forth. Bring paper and pen to take notes, and ideally a digital camera to snap some photos. How are national, ethnic, and local identities presented and commodified as products, experiences, and souvenirs? How are these identities made authentic, emotional, and compelling? Why do people go to these locations, and why might they purchase things? Do these identities seem real, fictitious, (re)created? Do they highlight differences or coerce us into becoming generic consumers? Look at signs, slogans, shops, decals, flags, menus, historic monuments, 9/11 memorabilia (the transformation of tragedy into souvenirs and trivial slogans), etc. Do you think that the presence or absence of commodities is good—that is, ethical? The particulars of your essay will vary depending on the specific location you visit, and we will discuss this in class.

The second essay will ask you to write a scholarly assessment of O’Brien’s thesis in *The Racial Middle*. Your response will not consist of mere summary or mere ‘opinion.’ Rather, I want you to formulate and offer an academic argument. Evaluate the author’s thesis. Does her data sustain her contentions? Does the book encourage you to see things in a new way? Can you offer any alternative interpretations—or apply her thesis to a new set of experiences?

We will, to repeat, discuss each assignment in detail as the semester unfolds.

### **Email and Office Hours**

I will regularly communicate with the class by email. Please read your email regularly (but not in class!). My office hours are posted outside my office (Longwood 10). I also invite you to schedule an appointment to discuss the course, anthropology, American Studies, Human Development, and your own program of study.

### **Academic Support Services**

Wheelock College provides free academic support services to all students.

- **Peer Tutors** provide academic help with specific courses or with general academic skills such as studying or time management. Contact Julia Mears at ext. 2179 or at [jmears@wheelock.edu](mailto:jmears@wheelock.edu)
- **Writing Consultants** work with students on writing assignments on a drop-in basis most afternoons and evenings until 10 p.m. on the second floor of the library Contact Jenne Powers at ext. 2122 or at [jpowers@wheelock.edu](mailto:jpowers@wheelock.edu)
- **Peer Coaches in Oral Presentation** is available to all students. Contact coaches at [speakout@wheelock.edu](mailto:speakout@wheelock.edu) or Ellie Friedland at [efriedland@wheelock.edu](mailto:efriedland@wheelock.edu) or ext. 2172.

### **Other Campus Services and Important Information**

I recommend that you seek when needed the services of the Counseling Center in the basement of Riverway House (Rooms 13, 14 and 15; for an appointment, you can phone 617.879.2413). The Counseling Center offers compassionate, well-trained professionals who can assist you with relationship issues, sexuality and sexual orientation issues, adjustment to college, moving into more adult roles, grief

and loss, depression and anxiety, body image and eating concerns, etc. All services are free for Wheelock students. Counseling services has an excellent website with important information and useful resources ([http://www2.wheelock.edu/wheelock/Student\\_Life/Health\\_and\\_Wellness/Counseling\\_Center.html](http://www2.wheelock.edu/wheelock/Student_Life/Health_and_Wellness/Counseling_Center.html)).

College is a time of stress and anxiety. I sympathize with the emotional plight of college students. It is vital that you have some sort of emotional support system in college—friends, family, and so forth. The Counseling Center can assist you with finding an emotional support system. Please do not take offense if, after a conversation, I suggest that you visit the Counseling Center. We all need assistance from time to time getting grounded, working through issues, grappling with tensions.

Wheelock College Student Health Services is operated in conjunction with Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates, affiliated with Harvard Medical School, located a short walk from campus. For more information on services available to Wheelock students, visit the Harvard Vanguard web site for Wheelock students (<http://www.harvardvanguard.org/Wheelock/WheelockHome.asp#map>).

You should also familiarize yourself with our college Policies Against Harassment at:  
[www.wheelock.edu/hr/POLICY%20AGAINST%20HARASSMENT.pdf#search=%22harassment%22](http://www.wheelock.edu/hr/POLICY%20AGAINST%20HARASSMENT.pdf#search=%22harassment%22)

If you drink, don't drive. If you have sex, do it safely. Both the Counseling Center and Health Service can direct you to resources for sexuality and reproductive health matters, including contraception, pregnancy consultations, and professional advice on what to do after rape. If you do not know what constitutes consensual sexual relations, please contact Student Health Services for more information.

### **Disability Services**

It is the policy of Wheelock College to provide appropriate, reasonable accommodations to students who have documented learning, physical, cognitive, or psychiatric disabilities.

Students with disabilities are encouraged to meet with the course instructor. To receive appropriate accommodations students **must** request services. Please contact Paul Hastings, Director of Academic Assistance and Disability Services in Library 205, ext. 2304 or at [phastings@wheelock.edu](mailto:phastings@wheelock.edu)

### **How to Read and Take Notes**

When reading, do not just underline or highlight text in book (and never do so in a library book). You need also write notes on the reading, and to bring them to class. Your notes can be brief—a few sentences, key phrases, important terms, responses, questions, etc. You can type your notes, or scrawl them on paper, but address at least some of the following:

- What are the key themes, terms, and concepts of the reading. What is the author's point? Summarize each chapter or sub-chapter.
- What is unclear?
- What is particularly persuasive or insightful?
- What did you learn?
- Can you offer alternative interpretations of the material?
- Do you think the author erred, or missed something crucial?
- Did you read something shocking or objectionable? Were you uneasy? Why?
- How does the reading relate to other course ideas, discussions, and readings—and even material from other courses?
- How does the reading pertain to class assignments? Can you tie it to your essays?

Your notes will become the basis of group discussions and class presentations.

## **Course Schedule**

Note: Anticipate that this schedule will change. In addition to possible errors in the schedule, some topics may require more time (or less) than I anticipated to address your questions, uncertainties, and interest.

**F Jan 22.** Introduction to the course. Writing exercise: What are quintessential American values, character traits, behaviors, and aspirations? How does one identify as an American? What things or products communicate that one is an American?

**T Jan 26.** Today we begin discussing gender and assimilation among 20<sup>th</sup>-century Jews, focusing on Prell's *Fighting to Become Americans* (for today, read chap 1). We also begin our discussions of consumerism (read, too, chap 1 in Cross). I will also discuss over the next few days the rise of citizenship and the nation-state in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, and the transformation of European and American Jews from "Jews" to "citizens," and the general traits of modernity.

Reading: Prell chap 1; Cross chap 1.

**F Jan 29.** Consumerism, modernity, citizenship, and modern Jewish history (continued).

Reading: Cross chap 2.

**T Feb 2.** Jews and gender (continued). I will also discuss women, clothing, and consumer goods in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Reading: Prell chaps 2-3.

**F Feb 5.** Jews and gender (continued). I will also discuss social and cultural changes in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century America in regard to teenagers, forefathers, women, the family, work, and sex.

Reading: Prell chap 4.

Next class, bring a brief statement of your identity. By identity, I refer *not* to how you define yourself as a unique biographical individual. Rather, I want you to think of yourself as a member of one or more groups that have shaped, and continue to shape, your experiences and also how others see and treat you (intentionally or not). Minimally consider your "class" (e.g., working class, middle-class, upper-class). But think, too, about race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, heritage, region, etc. Like it or not, we are not merely defined through our own intentionality—that is, how we wish to be seen by others. We do not only create ourselves; we are also created by experiences and structural considerations that are not of our own making and choosing. Think both about how you define yourself, and how others and various institutions define you.

**T Feb 9.** Jews and gender (continued). I will also discuss the history of race in America, US census categories, the concept of ethnicity, and the "melting pot" theory. We will also hold group discussions of our identity statements.

Reading: Prell chap 5.

Don't forget to bring to class your identity statement.

For Tuesday Feb 23, please bring a preliminary inventory of your possessions—the things you own, and the things in your room and/or off-campus residence: clothing, furniture, shows, food, religious objects, books, art, décor, music, etc. Think, too, about how your things are arranged and presented, where these things were purchased, and the occasions on which you acquired these items. If I walked into your living space, what would I be able to learn about your identity from the 'material culture' that surrounds you?

**F Feb 12.** I will be out-of-town attending a professional conference of anthropologists. However, I want you to view the film *Postville: When Cultures Collide*. This film centers on Hasidic Jews from New York City who relocate to a small, white, Christian, rural town in Iowa to open a kosher meat plant, and then hire Mexican workers. It is a cute, often humorous film that nonetheless presents some interesting dilemmas about multiculturalism and folks who do, or do not, wish to ‘fit in’ with the dominant American culture. It is my assumption that most of you are unfamiliar with Hasidic Jews. If so, I strongly urge that you spend about ten minutes reading a few online paragraphs about the group, which I have posted at Wheelock-CT. Please bring to class any and all questions about the film, and especially how the Hasidim act and dress.

**T Feb 16.** Class discussion about the film. JAP jokes. And, we will review for the test.  
Reading: Prell chap 6.

**F Feb 19. Test 1.**

For next class, bring your list of possessions—with some preliminary ideas on how they communicate your identity.

**T Feb 23.** Consumerism (continued). I will also discuss the idea of socio-economic class, present startling figures about inequality in American, and discuss ideology.

Reading: Cross chap 3.

Don’t forget to bring to class a list of your possessions.

**F Feb 26.** Consumerism (continued). We will also start viewing the film *People Like Us: Social Class in America*. I recommend that you read three online essays at the PBS website to the film (links to the essays are on Wheelock-CT).

Reading: Cross chap 4.

**T Mar 2.** Consumerism (continued). We will also discuss postmodern identity, and contemporary expressions of postmodern Jewish identity on humorous t-shirts worn by folks your own age.

Reading: Cross chap 5.

**F Mar 5.** Consumerism (continued).

Reading: Cross chaps 6-7.

Note: Only one more week until your first essay is due.

**T Mar 9, F Mar 12. No class: Spring Break**

**T Mar 16.** Today we begin reading and discussing the complex relationship between consumerism, the family, and various national, ethnic, and private holidays.

Reading: Pleck chaps 1-2.

**F Mar 19.** Film (titled not yet determined...).

**Turn in Essay 1.**

**T Mar 23.** Family celebrations (continued). I will also discuss the allure of bottled water, extra-virgin olive oil, and other culinary fantasies. And we will discuss the second essay.

Reading: Pleck chaps 3-4.

**F Mar 26.** Family celebrations (continued). I will discuss the “invention of tradition” in regard to ethnic food, including bagels, Jews and Chinese food, spaghetti and meatballs, and Irish pub food.

Reading: Pleck chaps 9-10.

**T Mar 30.** Reading: Pleck chap 4, 5, or 6 (pick two).

**F Apr 2. Test 2.**

**T Apr 6.** Today we begin discussing O'Brien's thesis about the transformation of racial thinking in the US, focusing on her book about Asian-Americans and Latinos, *The Racial Middle*. We will also discuss the review of this book, which will serve as your third and final essay.

Reading: O'Brien chaps 1.

**F Apr 9.** Racial middle (continued).

Reading: O'Brien chaps 2.

**T Apr 13.** Racial middle (continued). We will also start viewing *Bling: A Planet Rock: Blood, Diamonds, & Hip-Hop*, which follows hip-hop artists seeking the source of all those diamonds that are so central to the jewelry and culture of Hip-Hip: war-torn Sierra Leone in West Africa.

Reading: O'Brien chap 3.

**F Apr 16.** *Bling* (continued).

**Turn in Essay 2.**

**T Apr 20.** Racial Middle (continued).

Reading: O'Brien chap 4.

**F Apr 23.** The Racial Middle (continued).

Reading: O'Brien chap 5.

**T Apr 27.** Finish the Racial Middle.

Reading: O'Brien chaps 6-7.

**F Apr 30.** Today we begin discussing the so-called "n-word." What is the history of the words "nigger" and "nigga"? Is the latter a positive, empowering transformation of the former—a means of cultural reclamation and resistance? Or is it a trivial token of the typical 'generation gap' that serves only to demean the very ethnic group that so often utters the word? And who can say it? We will also view the film *"The N-Word: Divided We Stand."* This film interviews prominent African-Americans and white Americans on the use of the word "nigga," including George Carlin, Whoopie Goldberg, Samuel L. Jackson, Chris Rock, Ice Cube, Regina King, and Cee-Lo Green.

Reading: Kennedy chap 1.

**T May 4.** The n-word (continued).

Reading: Kennedy chap 2..

**F May 7.** Last class: The n-word (continued).

Reading: Kennedy chap 3-4.

**M May 10.** Turn in your essay on O'Brien (even though we have no class on this day).

**F May 14.** Due date for graduating seniors to submit final essays.

**M May 17.** Due date for non-graduating students to submit final essays.