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Office Hours: *by appointment only*  
T,F 11:30a-12:20p  
W afternoons, time varies

## **USA301/HON301: CORE SEMINAR – AMERICAN CULTURAL CRITICS**

Spring 2006  
T, 4-6:50 pm in SSB340

**Course Purpose & Description:** This is the core seminar for TCNJ's interdisciplinary minor in United States Studies. This minor examines the United States "from the bottom up and the outside in," to give students the fullest possible perspective on the USA. In this version of the core seminar (topics vary by instructor and year), students will

- read and discuss a range of American cultural critics – including Upton Sinclair, Thorsten Veblen, Betty Friedan, Martin Luther King, Jr., Vance Packard, Barbara Ehrenreich, David Reisman, Robert Bellah, Amitai Etzioni, Robert Putnam, Vincent Harding, and Juliet Schor,
- evaluate these critics as "saints" or "scoundrels,"
- learn with and from outstanding TCNJ faculty, including Susan Albertine, Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle, Rachel Adler, Janet Gray, and Chris Fisher,
- identify and introduce classmates to other cultural critics, and
- work toward an individual, integrated perspective on American cultural critics and American culture at large.

This is an academically-challenging, graduate-school-like seminar for students who are serious about learning and seek an engaging opportunity to consider the U.S.A. from a wide array of perspectives.

### **Required Readings:**

About 50% of the course readings will be pdf files found on the course website. In addition, the readings below are available in the college bookstore

Helen Bannerman, *Little Black Sambo* (any edition with authentic illustrations is ok)

Julius Lester & Jerry Pinkney, *Sam and the Tigers* (Sagebrush)

Helen Bannerman & Fred Marcellino, *The Story of Little Babaji* (Harper Trophy)

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (Bantam)

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Laurel)

David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd* (Yale U Press)

Robert Bellah (et al), *Habits of the Heart* (U California Press, Harper & Row)

Vance Packard, *Status Seekers* (TCNJ Bookstore has an abridged version of this book, under the title *American Social Classes 1950s* (Bedford Publishers))

Martin Luther King, Jr, *Where Do We Go From Here?* (This book is no longer in print, but the TCNJ Bookstore has James Washington's anthology of all MLK Jr's writings, titled *A Testament of Hope* (Harper San Francisco))

Rachel Adler, *Yucetans in Dallas* (Allyn & Bacon)

**Course Requirements:** This is a readings and discussion course, modeled after a graduate-level seminar, and aimed at disciplined, diligent, capable, intellectually-engaged, and verbally expressive undergraduates. I have structured the course requirements accordingly. This course is designed to minimize “schooling” and “maximize” learning. No quizzes or exams are required. Instead, students will spend their time and efforts on rather heavy readings, short reflective papers, class discussions, and a synthesizing final paper.

With a knowledge of the structure and demands of this course, students commit--in good faith with the professor and their classmates--to contribute fully their part to the collective learning process of this course. This involves:

1. Reading all of the assigned material for each week,
2. Spending time reflecting on the reading material sufficient to significantly and intelligently contribute to the week’s discussion,
3. Writing a 2 page reflection paper each week on the week’s readings,
4. Contributing to the group’s learning and growth by participating in a positive way in the weekly discussions and actively contributing questions, perspectives, and insights (and guiding this discussion on the assigned week),
5. Using this course as an opportunity to learn better how to read and analyze texts and how to actively learn through group discussion, and
6. Writing a 12 page synthesizing paper (*double-spaced, 1” margins, 12 pt type, and not more than 12 pages*).

This course is unlike most other courses at TCNJ. Clearly, it is not for everyone. It deals with complex, difficult issues; it requires a heavy reading load; it necessitates active participation by each person; it demands to be made a schedule priority by those who take it; and it requires a kind of paper that many students find difficult to write. Only those students prepared to undertake this kind of academic project and do it well--by spending the time and effort necessary--ought to take this course. To be frank, while I definitely want the students who belong in this course, I absolutely do not want those that don’t.

### **Specific Requirement Details**

*Professor’s Role:* Other than my introductory lecture and leading of the first and second class discussion, my role will be like that of a coach--getting involved only to help you play the game better, get out of a tight situation, or consider further information. Do not look to me for “the right answers” or to keep the discussion going. It is your responsibility to actively engage yourselves with the material and to learn together as a group. A coach can neither practice for you nor play for you; he can only guide you in better ways to practice and play.

*Attendance:* You are granted one absence only from this class, to be used for illness, sport activity, or field trip. Any further absences will cost you 3 points each off your final grade (though harsh, keep in mind that 1 absence in this class is equivalent to 2 absences in a MR or TF class).

*Class Discussion:* Your participation in class discussion will be graded each week, by a ✓+ (A), a ✓ (B), a ✓- (C) (or a D or F, if necessary). Your participation should be helpful, stimulating, informative, and thoughtful. I especially appreciate a “Devil’s Advocate” contribution--for example, when the class has come to consensus on an issue too easily or quickly.

*Weekly Reflective Papers:* These 2 page papers should show evidence of critical and thoughtful engagement with the week’s readings. (For example, identify the author’s key thesis, her evidence, her presuppositions, her implications, etc., and your own assessment of these

things in light of your own learning, experience, etc.) These should be written well, with appropriate text page notations (that is, put the appropriate page number in parenthesis), and free of spelling, grammatical, and stylistic errors. These papers will be graded by a ✓+ (A), a ✓ (B), a ✓- (C) (or a D or F, if necessary).

*Discussion Leader Assignment:* You will indicate on the form distributed in class your top four reading preferences for which you will lead the class in discussion. This is a very important role, and I expect you to take it very seriously. You (and your partner, if assigned one) should 1) develop an extensive set of critical discussion questions based on the assigned reading, 2) identify key quotations for us to discuss together, 3) find background information on the author to set the context for us, and 4) even review the scholarly reception the text has received (via book reviews, scholarly articles, etc.) Above all, you will need to keep the discussion moving and focused. Please feel free to meet with me to discuss your plans for the class. (I also want a copy of your discussion materials at the end of the class.) You will receive a letter grade for this assignment.

*Toy Store Visit & Attendance at Public Lecture.* A) For the second week of class, I want each student to visit a toy store of their own choosing. Imagine that you are an archaeologist from the year 3000, who has just dug into the toy store, and are seeking to understand what U.S. culture is about by analyzing the artifacts you have found. B) At a later point in the course, I will announce a special lecture sponsored by the USA Project (which runs the USA Studies minor and this course). You are required to attend, and to fully engage yourself with this lecture, Q&A, reception or dinner, etc.

*Synthesizing Paper:* This paper should synthesize your thoughts on the following issues: 1) whether American culture is in decline or not, in what way(s), and why, 2) what are the cultural preconditions and manifestations of a free, virtuous, and just society, and 3) how ought the U.S.A. prioritize its attentions to become a free, virtuous, and just society. You may meet with me in advance to go over outlines or brief sections of your draft. Please strictly maintain the standards of good academic writing and stay within the page limit. No paper will receive an A if it includes spelling, grammatical, stylistic, or documentation errors.

*Assignment Policy:* Students demonstrate their academic seriousness by turning in all assignments on time, and by rigorously maintaining the highest standards of academic writing. This includes (but is not limited to) spelling, grammar, style, documentation, and format (thus, papers & assignments should be, except where noted, typed on 8.5x11 inch white paper, double-spaced, with 1 inch margins and a 12 point typeface, stapled in the upper left-hand corner--*no manila/plastic/cardboard covers, please*). Dedicated students for whom this presents a challenge will avail themselves of the Zinsser text, and the college's tutoring center. *Please note I have strict paper limits:* it is far harder to write a brief, focused paper than to write a long one – allow plenty of time for editing and rewriting. I have VERY high standards about written work!

*Late Assignments:* Overwork, personal struggles, and the like are important issues, and I encourage you to avail yourselves of your residence staff, student development staff, or the college's counselors for help in these matters. Such issues, however, do not constitute a valid excuse for lateness. Neither do variations on “the computer ate my paper,” “I can't get the computer to print,” or “Didn't you get my paper in the mail?” count as valid excuses. Valid excuses are a death in the immediate family or severe illness (which I will confirm with family members, the Dean of Students, &/or the Health Center). Late papers are *severely* penalized (i.e., 5 points for papers not turned in *at the start of class*, 10 points for papers

arriving after class on the day assigned, 20 points the following day, 30 points the day after that). Papers and assignments must be turned in on time.

*Final Grade Determination:*

Weekly discussion participation	25 points
Weekly reflective papers	25 points
Discussion leading assignment	15 points
Toy Store visit & Attendance at Public Lecture	5 points
Synthesizing paper	<u>30 points</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100 points</b>

Grade distribution is the traditional 0 to 100 point scale:

95-100=A, 90-94=A-, 87-89=B+, 83-86=B, 80-82=B-, 77-79=C+, 73-76=C, 70-72=C-, 65-69=D, less than 65=F.

**Course Calendar – Spring 2006** \*Schedule is tentative; professor reserves the right to adjust as desired

<b>When</b>	<b>What's Happening</b>	<b>What's Due</b>
Jan 24	Course Orientation Critic Sampler	Jack Nackbar, "Culture and Continuity: Three Myths in the Prints of Currier & Ives" Bruce Lohof, "The Higher Meaning of Marlboro Cigarettes." Madonna Marsden, "The American Myth of Success" Marilyn Ferris Motz, "I want to be a Barbie Doll when I grow up"
Jan 31	Children's Literature and Cultural Critique Guest: Dr. Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle  Children's Toys and McDonaldization	Helen Bannerman, <i>Little Black Sambo</i> (any edition with authentic illustrations) Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney, <i>Sam and the Tigers</i> Helen Bannerman and Fred Marcellino, <i>The Story of Little Babaji</i> <b>Toy Store Visit &amp; Reflection</b> <i>The McDonaldization of Society</i> , Chapters 1 & 2, by George Ritzer Charles Derber, excerpts from the <i>Pursuit of Attention</i>
Feb 7	Class & Consumption, part 1	Vance Packard, <i>The Status Seekers</i>

Continued ...

Feb 14	Class & Consumption, part 2	Juliet Schor Ch 1,5 from the <i>Overworked American</i> and Ch 1 from the <i>Overspent American</i> David Brooks, Intro, Ch 1 from <i>Bobos in Paradise</i> . Barbara Ehrenreich, Ch 3 from <i>Nickel and Dimed in America</i> .
Feb 21	Individualism & Community, part 1	David Reisman, <i>The Lonely Crowd</i>
Feb 28	Class & Consumption, part 3 Guest: Dr. Susan Albertine	Upton Sinclair, <i>The Jungle</i> Thorsten Veblen, excerpts from <i>A Theory of the Leisure Class</i>
Mar 7	Individualism & Community, part 2 Video: <i>Individualism in America</i>	Robert Bellah et al, <i>Habits of the Heart</i>
Mar 14	Spring Break	Relax, please!
Mar 21	Individualism & Community, part 3	Vincent Harding, "Toward a Darkly Radiant ..." Jeffrey Stout, "Liberal Society ..." Amitai Etzioni, Introduction to <i>The Spirit of Community</i> Robert Putnam, excerpts from <i>Bowling Alone</i> Robert Wuthnow, excerpts from <i>Loose Connections</i>
Mar 28	Race & American Cultural Criticism, part 1 Guest: Dr. Christopher Fisher	Martin Luther King, Jr. <i>Where Do We Go From Here?</i>
Apr 4	Race & American Cultural Criticism, part 2 Guest: Dr. Rachel Adler Video: <i>bell hooks, cultural criticism, &amp; transformation</i>	Rachel Adler, <i>Yucatan in Dallas, Texas</i>
Apr 11	Gender & American Cultural Criticism Guest: Dr. Janet Gray	Betty Friedan, <i>The Feminine Mystique</i>
Apr 18	Religion & American Cultural Criticism	Stephen L. Carter, excerpts from <i>Culture of Disbelief</i> Jim Wallis, excerpts from <i>God's Politics</i>
Apr 25	Taking it apart or putting it together?	<b>Synthesis Papers Due</b>
Final Exam Period	Closing Discussion & Evaluation	