Introduction to American Studies: A Humorous (Dis)Course
AM 103 (4 credits)
Fall 2012

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Course Time: Tu/Th 9:40-11:00 pm
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Course Location: Tisch Learning Center, Rm 301
Office Hours: Mon: 4:30-5:30; Tu/Th: 11-12:30

REQUIRED TEXTS:
All required texts are available electronically on our course site under “Course Readings.” The documents are organized by weekly readings and full citations are available under “Weekly Assignments” below. To access the course site, go to: http://learn.skidmore.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION
In this course we will use stand-up comedy to think critically about American culture and to explore key moments and transitions in American history. As burgeoning Americanists, we will examine the history of comedy as the history of the United States—that comedy reflects the institutions and ideologies shaping cultural production; the same institutions and ideologies that prompt us to warfare, that determine who has rights and who does not and that influence our consumptive practices. This course will examine the history of cultural production in America, specifically through the cultural form of comic performance and how it has been influenced and shaped by shifts in social consciousness, changing economy, industrial and technological innovations, political events, public/popular discourses and global conflict and relations.

This interdisciplinary course will unpack the history, theories, and functions of laughter and humor in the US since the early 19th century, drawing from humor studies, cultural studies and performance studies. We will examine many forms of comedy such as blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville, screwball comedy film, and stand-up comedy as well as styles of comic performance such as shock comedy, self-deprecat ing humor, satire/political humor, charged humor and performing marginality arising from contemporary comics such as Kate Riggs, Dave Chappelle, Sarah Silverman, Maria Bamford, Chris Rock, Margaret Cho, Ralphie May, Sam Kinison, Hari Kondabolu, Louis C.K., Maz Jobrani, Dean Obeidallah, Wanda Sykes, Paul Mooney, the Yes Men and many more. Reading comedy as a cultural text, we will discuss popular discourses and debates about humor exploring questions about women in comedy such as: what does the public say about women’s humor; who is best suited to produce humor; who is considered funny and why? The course will culminate with a final project allowing students to work independently or together to create a vodcast (video podcast) putting into practice a theory or key term salient to the course.

Course Objectives:
1. To understand introductory concepts and theories associated with the field of American Studies.
2. To explore concepts in cultural studies, humor studies and performance studies, its theories and praxis in order to better understand comic performance through interdisciplinary lens.
3. To explore humor, its many functions and uses, the cultural economy—i.e, production and consumption—of humor, and the various ways comics can use humor, i.e., to berate, to instruct, to mock, to set the record straight and comment on social issues.
4. To explore how greater world forces such as politics, global issues, culture, business and the economy shape comedic cultural forms and inform humor production and vice versa.
5. To create an original comic text/performance using humor to communicate key terms, theories and ideas presented in the course.
6. To develop writing skills and research and technological literacy; to understand the difference between primary and secondary sources and appropriate use of both in scholarly writing.
7. To laugh and to learn… simultaneously, that both should complement and enhance the other.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

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Class Attendance and Participation: 15%

The format for the class will be a mix of discussion, lecture, class and group activities and video clips with an emphasis on dissecting course readings. Class attendance is critically important and you are expected to be an active and informed participant in class discussions. I will call on you in class and I do expect that you will be prepared to discuss the readings. If you miss a class, you are responsible for getting notes from a classmate, including any altered assignments or announcements that were made. All course handouts and materials are available on the course site. Involvement in class is critically important and will enrich your experience in this course. In order to make contributions to these scintillating discussions, you should have the text(s) read by the date on which it first appears on the syllabus. At times, we will have in-class activities that will also count towards your class participation grade. All participation should reflect comprehension of course readings.

On another note, we will use the course site to exchange information about course deadlines and work, and you may post to ask me technical questions about assignments, readings or the final project on the discussion board where I have created a forum called “Space Cadets, Report Here,” which will be our online forum for questions about the course and its assignments. If someone who knows the answer to a question sees it before I do, please answer it.

Foundations Paper: 15%

Early in the semester I will give you a prompt for writing your foundation paper drawing from course readings. Detailed instructions will be disseminated in class. The foundations paper should be (in final form) a 5-page synthesis of the readings addressing the articles based on the reading prompt I assign. We will use this paper to strengthen writing and grammar skills and as reflection on the readings. Final papers should be posted online and hard copies submitted in class on the due date. I have you post these online because your summaries and critical thoughts, connections and questions will be useful to your peers, aiding in productive discussions, more thorough knowledge acquisition and lending to the creation of a learning community. The foundations paper is worth 15% of your total grade.

Popular Discourse Analysis: 20%

In this course, we will examine the way public opinion affects the cultural economy or the production and consumption of cultural practices; in this case the gender gap in stand-up comedy. The specific popular debate that arises regarding humor is that women are not as funny as men. You will look for where this debate crops up in the print media since the early 20th century. In order to do so, we need to assemble as many print media sources as possible that address gender preferences, gender differences and opinions when it comes to humor. You will need to conduct research (I recommend starting with the Skidmore Library research databases, i.e., Pro Quest and Lexus Nexus (only from 1980-current) to find at least five domestic sources (i.e., sources should come from US popular publications like magazines and newspapers and address US comedy) from the time period
assigned that broach issues of gender and humor in comedic performance in popular media for the decades you are assigned. This assignment is paired with readings that get you started in assessing contemporary public opinion and thoughts on gender and humor. Please read the assigned readings (in the order they appear in the syllabus) BEFORE beginning this project.

The popular discourse analysis paper is worth 15% and the annotated bibliography worth 5%, for a total of 20%. On Thursday, October 11, you should bring the five popular sources (in hard copy) you found for the time period assigned, which should be accompanied by an annotated bibliography of the sources. On Tuesday, October 16 you need to submit a 5-6-page popular discourse analysis (using Chicago style annotations) examining two things:

1. Analysis of how women were perceived as comedic performers (compared to men) in the assigned decades based on the popular primary sources you gathered.

2. A comparison of this popular debate from the period selected (men are funnier than women) to the 21st century, using the popular sources assigned from Vanity Fair. This means you should incorporate evidence from the Vanity Fair articles along with evidence from the articles you selected for your research.

The objective here is to establish, based on the discourses circulating in American popular culture, how are women received and evaluated in the realm of comedy? Based on the sources you submitted for the time period assigned and the print media dialogues we read for class, what does the general public believe about women or men’s capacity to produce humor; is there a general consensus to this and what evidence can you supply to support your claims? Has the public’s opinion towards women’s humor shifted over time (if it has)?

**Class Historian Assignment: 25%**

Students are required to write a historical context paper (8 pages), which you will use as the basis for a class presentation on the major findings of your historical research and connections to the development of comedic cultural forms (i.e., minstrelsy, burlesque, vaudeville, variety, Dada theatre, musical comedy, stand-up comedy, sitcoms, comedic films, late-night talk shows, etc.). Each course section will have 4-5 historians (you!) assigned to one of the following areas: economy; culture; global relations; business; and politics. Your analysis should focus on whichever category you have been assigned (i.e., politics) and its influence on the production of humor during that time period. For example, if you are examining the economy in the 1980s, you might want to illustrate how economic trends shaped the development of stand-up comedy as an industry in the US. Think about the time period and category in which you would be most interested and go sign up as soon you know. A sign-up sheet is available on the course site—first come, first served.

Each paper should have a minimum of 4 scholarly sources (i.e., sources like non-fiction books and journal articles) and include proper footnotes and a Works Cited page (Chicago Style). You are encouraged to utilize course texts as some of those scholarly sources for the paper. This assignment has a minimum page length of 8 pages. A cover page may not count as a page, which means that you should be writing no less than 7 pages, with the eighth page being the Works Cited page. I do not give full credit for papers not meeting minimum length requirements. All papers are to be posted on the course site in the appropriate forum on the day of your presentation. Students can use these research analysis papers to help inform vodcasts and synthesis paper opportunities assigned throughout the semester, i.e., these papers will offer useful contextualizing information about periods in the US that can prove helpful for
other assignments. We want to think about the course site as a space for building course resources for everyone as the semester proceeds.

On the day of your presentation (I will assign dates for presentations and post them on the course site), students should submit papers in hard copy (and post the paper to the appropriate discussion forum) and be prepared to give no more than a 4-5 minute presentation on your findings (this includes any video clips). The presentation should include some sort of visual aid or creative element to engage the class. The paper is worth 20% and the presentation is worth 5% of your overall grade, for a total of 25%.

**Vodcast Project – 25%**

The final project will put to use the terms, theories and major issues we have been learning about throughout the semester. Using one or more terms or theories from our texts, you should creatively explore a humorous or engaging way of defining or illuminating those terms to an audience in lay(wo)man’s terms, developing a script or storyboard and recording your own vodcast (video podcast). The final comic performance text should be equal to approximately 2-3 minutes per person working on the vodcast (NO more than 8 minutes long!) and should be scripted (typed). The script is due on Thursday, November 15th in hard copy in class and posted to the appropriate forum. The script is worth 5% of your grade.

You may work in groups (no more than four students per group); however, for groups of 3-4, I expect that your vodcast will reflect the work of more people. These vodcasts should be illustrated creatively to disseminate your message, i.e., you can employ voice-over, PowerPoint, moving image, audio/voice, music, etc. Once you are finished editing the vodcast, you will upload it to YouTube prior to the final viewing. Be advised that the editing process can be a time-consuming one. You will not be able to film, edit and upload this project a day before it’s due.

Besides these parameters, you are at liberty to interpret and create this final project in a way that is meaningful and useful for you and your future path(s) of study. You may want to work independently and create a short stand-up routine or sketch comedy that defines and explains a term or concept; or you can work in a group to create a mock episode of *The Daily Show*; or use PowerPoint to develop a variation on Stephen Colbert’s well-known segment called ‘the word,’ featured on his show *The Colbert Report*. Be assured that even if you are not tech-savvy, we will dedicate class time to learning how to create and upload your vodcast to the appropriate site. We will work with imovie software to create the vodcasts. Skidmore’s IT department will provide cameras and there are a number of mac computers in the Media Services Lab. This course offers you the opportunity to create something humorous and edifying that can be useful to others in the future! Who knows, your projects could become teaching tools for future courses at Skidmore College or across the nation… We can and will discuss the assignment in more detail throughout the course and I will provide additional handouts along the way to assist you in developing this project.

**In general about your papers:**

Because improvement of your writing skills is an important goal for this course, your grades for these assignments will emphasize this objective. I also encourage you to utilize the services of the Writing Center located in the Lucy Scribner Library, Room 440. Please feel free to stop in or make an appointment to see me to discuss drafts or to address any problems or questions you might have about the class.

All papers should be posted to the appropriate forum on the course site on the due date. Papers not posted punctually will lose points.
Unless otherwise specified, all papers are expected to be submitted in hardcopy: typewritten (12 point font) in Times New Roman or Garamond, and double-spaced and should consistently follow the Chicago citation style guide. **Full credit will not be given for papers that do not meet minimum length requirements.** There should be a definite thesis and thesis statement, supported by sources specific evidence, with a clearly recognizable order of discussion. For your own protection, please make certain that you continuously save your document as you work and back that up on a flash drive or external hard drive.

Skidmore College has an online [guide to writing](#) including style guides for popular styles used in the humanities. For further reference you may also see: [The Chicago Manual of Style Online](#). If you are unfamiliar with Chicago style of citation, and would like an additional aide for employing the proper style, please see [Research and Documentation Online](#) by Diana Hacker. If you borrow material from an online source, information about proper citation is also included at that site.

**Please note that assignments are due on the dates designated on the syllabus.** All reading and other assignments should be completed for the day they are assigned. If an emergency arises and you make arrangements with me ahead of time, I may agree to accept a late assignment. If I do not agree or if prior arrangements with me have not been made, you will receive a lowered grade for that assignment. You should know that my definition of an emergency includes words and phrases like “kidnapped,” “having twins,” or “elected President” and does not include words like “hung over” and “swamped.” Failure to complete all course assignments will result in failing the course.

**Plagiarism:** To preserve the integrity of Skidmore College as an institution of higher learning, to maintain your own integrity, and to avoid jeopardizing your future, **DO NOT PLAGIARIZE!!** That means any work not your own should be cited accurately, including ideas and concepts. As with the rest of your coursework here at the Skidmore College, you need to know and follow the [Honor Code](#). Please pay particular attention to Skidmore’s policies on [documentation and plagiarism](#). While it is becoming easier and easier to find useful information on the Internet, it is also that much more tempting to “borrow” work that is not your own. You should also learn, however, that there is a great deal of misinformation on-line, and it’s a good idea to use a guide to [evaluating web sites](#) to check the sources you are thinking about using and be sure to [cite internet sources properly](#) to avoid any confusion.

**A Word on Special Needs:** Skidmore College is committed to making reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities attending this institution. The Office of Student Academic Services (Starbuck Center; x8150) employs Meg Hegener, the Coordinator for Students with Disabilities. A disability should be discussed with the coordinator so we can work together to ensure students’ needs are met. Students who wish to have an accommodation for disability are responsible for contacting me as soon as possible. The coordinator for students with disabilities verifies the need for accommodations and assists in the development of accommodation strategies. Please be assured that I am willing to help you achieve your best in this class. If you should have any other special needs, please let me know so that we can make arrangements if necessary. For more information, view college policies on [disability and accessibility services](#).

**Weekly Assignments**

*I reserve the right to make changes in the schedule if the need arises.*

**Thursday, September 6 – Course Introduction**
• Please spend some time later today familiarizing yourself with the online course space. Review the syllabus, make sure you can access the articles, print out the articles for next class, and review the course assignments.
• Consider which historical period and which area of interest you would like to pursue for the Class Historian Project (you can sign up online on the course site).
• Review the description of the Popular Discourse Analysis and think about which decades you would like to research (you can sign up online on the course site).
• Read for Tuesday, September 11

Tuesday, September 11 – Introduction to American Studies
• Read:
  o Read ahead for Thursday…

Thursday, September 13 – Introduction to American Studies cont’d.
• Read:
• Due: Make sure you are signed up for a the class historian project and popular discourse analysis assignment (see sign-up sheets on the course site)

Tuesday, September 18 – Studying Popular Culture Forms: History, Theory and Method
• Read:
• Supplemental Reading:

Thursday, September 20 – Cultural Studies and Reception Theories
• Read:

Tuesday, September 25 – Performance Studies
• Read:

• Supplemental Reading:

Thursday, September 27 – Situating Humor in American Culture

• Read:

• Supplemental Reading:

• DUE: Foundations Paper

Tuesday, October 2 – Laughter and Theories of Humor

• Read:

• Supplemental Reading:

Thursday, October 4 – You’ve Been Served: Comedy Stylings and Techniques

• Read:

• Supplemental Reading:

Tuesday, October 9 – Performing Marginality & Charged Humor

• Read:

• Supplemental Reading:
Thursday, October 11 - American Popular Discourses: Who and What is Funny?

- Read (in this order):

- DUE: Annotated Bibliography!

Tuesday, October 16 – Women Vs. Men? The Conversation Continues

- Read:
  - Select popular culture articles posted

- DUE: Popular Discourse Analysis!

Thursday, October 18 – Origins of Blackface Minstrelsy: 1800-1860

- Read:

- Supplemental Reading:

Tuesday, October 23 – History of Blackface Minstrelsy

- Read:

- Supplemental Reading:

Tuesday, October 30 – Ethnic Humor on Stage

- Read:
Thursday, November 1 – Early Twentieth Century: Women in Vaudeville

- **Read:**
  - Dolores Albin transcript

- **Supplemental Reading:**

- **Due: Vodcast Concept Blurb:** Please type or write a paragraph clearly indicating which term(s), ideas or concepts you will be focusing on for your vodcast and your thoughts for how you intend to accomplish this via the vodcast. The final paper blurb should indicate your focus and function as a research proposal. For both, this paragraph should include your objectives and clear thesis statements about what you want to show and how you will do so. Be sure to let me know whether you will be working independently or in groups (i.e., list the members of your group).

Tuesday, November 6 – The Screwball Comedy…

- **Read:**

- **Supplemental Reading:**

Thursday, November 8 – …It Happened One Night

- **Read:**

Tuesday, November 13 – Performance Text Jam Session!

Thursday, November 15 – The Emergence of Stand-up Comedy: 1950s & 1960s

- **Read:**

- **Supplemental Reading:**

- **DUE: Vodcast Script** in hard copy in class and posted to the appropriate forum

**Tuesday, November 20 – Social Movements and Striking Comics- 1970s**
- **Read:**
  o Select print media articles are posted online

**Thursday, November 22 – Thanksgiving!**

**Tuesday, November 27 – Tech Day: Vodcast “How To” Workshop**
- **NOTE:** Class will meet from **9:00 – 11:00 in Harder Hall, Room 103.** Please adjust your schedule accordingly!

**Thursday, November 29 – Reaganomics and the Comedy Boom – 1980s**
- **Read:**
  o Selections from: I Killed: True Stories of the Road from America’s Top Comics

**Tuesday, December 4 – Political Satire in the Age of Infotainment – 1990s**
- **Read:**
  o **Supplemental Reading:**
    o Baym, Geoffrey. “Serious Comedy: Expanding the Boundaries of Political Discourse.”

**Thursday, December 6 – Comedy and 21st Century Global Conflict**
- **Read:**
  o **Supplemental Reading:**

**Tuesday, December 11 – Course Wrap-Up!**

**Final Exam Period: Vodcast Viewing!**
- **Date:** December 18th
- **Where:** Tisch Learning Center 302
- **Time:** 1:30 – 4:30 pm
Supplemental Articles