Sociology 310W: Ethnic Humor

Course Description

In this course, we will scrutinize ethnic humor in the United States. We will examine derogatory ethnic humor directed at different outsider groups in America and humor produced by different outsider groups: protest humor that satirizes the attitudes and behaviors of members of the mainstream culture and humor that intimately examines their own culture. In particular, the course seeks to understand the messages of ethnic humor, the social and cultural contexts that produce ethnic humor, and also how ethnic humor is received by audiences. In order to do so, we will look at novels, television shows, films, and standup performances.

Course Requirements/Grading System

Grades will be calculated as follows:

- 2/4 Papers - 34% (120 Points)
- Research Project - 26% (90 Points)
- Presentation - 9% (30 Points)
- Quizzes - 9% (30 Points)
- Response Papers - 11% (40 Points)
- Attendance/Participation - 11% (40 Points)

Using this system:

- A = 325-350 Points
- A- = 315-324 Points
- B+ = 304-314 Points
- B = 290-303 Points
- B- = 280-289 Points
- C+ = 269-279 Points
- C = 255–268 Points
- C- = 245-254 Points
- D+ = 234-244 Points
- D = 210-233 Points
- F = Less Than 210 Points

There will be four 4 page paper assignments during the semester. You will be required to do at least two of them. A choice of essay questions will be given out a week prior (and I will also accept student proposals for papers, but you must clear them with me first!) to the due date. After submitting the paper, the paper will be returned to you with comments. You then have one week to, based on the comments, revise the paper and resubmit it.
For the final project, you will be required to conduct your own original research. This will typically involve either an 1) **audience reception study** (specifically how do viewers interpret and understand the particular type of ethnic humor they are watching or listening to) or a 2) **content analysis** (wherein you analyze the meanings and messages of a particular type of ethnic humor). While you may decide to do the research with another person, you must write your own paper (approximately 5-6 pages) summarizing and analyzing the findings. Like the two other papers, you must revise the paper and resubmit it. You must also present your findings to the rest of the class during the last two weeks of the semester. More details will be provided in a future handout.

As a means of encouraging you to keep up with their weekly readings, there will be a quiz every week consisting of two multiple choice questions based on that week’s readings. Each question will be worth 2 points. Only your best eight (of 12) grades will be counted.

In addition to the weekly quizzes, you must also submit at least 10 (*one page, double spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins*) response papers. For these assignments, you are required to write a reflection on some aspect of the reading for that week – i.e. something you found particularly interesting about the reading, how the author’s argument relates to a recent example of ethnic humor, or even a disagreement you have with the author. These will be “low stakes” writings as you will not get a formal grade for them, only a check to indicate that you sufficiently considered the week’s readings.

Your attendance, participation, citizenship, and in-class exercise grade will be determined by:

1) Your attendance in class
2) Participation in class discussions and activities
3) The quality of your participation (especially your ability to discuss the readings for that day)
4) Your citizenship (respecting the opinions of others, not interrupting or making faces when others are talking, and not playing with your CELLPHONE, COMPUTER, or other electronic devices, etc.)

Lastly, course grades may also be influenced by improvement over the course of the semester.

**Required Texts**

1) *Portnoy’s Complaint*: Philip Roth

2) Readings on Angel (Denoted by Asterisk (*) (See end of syllabus for Angel instructions)
   You can also download these readings at http://minus.com/mbeA4qHMqz

**Topical Outline** (All Dates Are Subject to Change.)

January 23-25: **Introduction to Ethnic Humor**
   Readings: Boskin: “The Humor of Oppression” from *Humor and Social Change* (pps. 27-43) (*)
January 30- Feb 6: **African-American Humor and Early Ethnic Humor: Minstrelsy, Vaudeville, and Radio**

Readings: Levine: “Black Laughter” in *Black Culture and Consciousness* (pps. 304-325) (*)
Watkins: “Black Minstrelsy to Vaudeville” in *On The Real Side* (pps. 123-133) (*)
Rosen: “Yonkle Doodle Dandy” in *Guilt and Pleasure* (pps. 1-7) (*)
Watkins: “Radio and Early Television” in *On The Real Side* (pps. 272-280) (*)

February 8-13: **Jewish Humor and Humor in Novels**

Roth: “In Response to Those……” in *Reading Myself and Others* (pps. 29-37) (*)
Roth: *Portnoy’s Complaint*. (pps. 40-86, 105-142, 160-195)

February 15-20: **Women’s Humor:**

Rowe Karlyn: “Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess” in *Critiquing the Sitcom* (pps. 251-261) (*)
Parker: “A Telephone Call”, ‘The Waltz” (pps. 41-50, 171-178) (*)


Watkins: “Radio and Early Television” in *On the Real Side* (pps. 312-322) (*)

February 29 – March 5: **Ethnic Humor on Television: Part 2 – The 1970s and 1980s**

Readings: Acham: “This Ain’t No Junk” in *Revolution Televised* (pps. 85-86, 93-99) (*)

March 7-14: **Ethnic Humor on Television (and Gay Humor): Part 3 – The 1990s - Present**

Readings: Cooper: “Decoding Will and Grace” in *Sociological Perspectives* (pps. 513-533) (*)
Dyer: “It’s Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (pps. 110-116) (*)
Pimentel: “All-American Girl Stirs Debate Among Bay Asians” in *The San Francisco Chronicle* (pps. 1-3) (*)
Schulman: “Laughing Across the Color Line” in *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. (pps. 2-7) (*)
Kellogg: “Changing the Game” in *The American Prospect* (pps. 1-2) (*)
Brooks: “Italian Americans and the G Word: Embrace or Reject?” in *Time*. (pps 1-3) (*)
March 19 – 26: **Ethnic Humor: Standup Comedy 1950s – 1970s**
Readings: Del Negro: “The Bad Girls of Jewish Comedy: Gender, Class, Assimilation, and Whiteness in Postwar America” in *A Jewish Feminine Mystique*. (pps. 144-159) (*)
Watkins: “Pryor and Thereafter” in *On The Real Side* (pps. 537-550) (*)

March 28 – April 11: **Ethnic Humor: Standup Comedy: 1980s - Present**

April 2 – 4: **Spring Break: No Classes!!**

April 16 – 23: **Ethnic Humor in the Movies**
Taylor: “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” in *Salon*. (pps 1-2) (*)
Dunne: “Drag Addiction” in *The Hartford Courant*. (pps 1-4) (*)

April 25 – May 7: **Student Presentations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRADE WORKSHEET</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Papers (need 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quizzes (need 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Papers (need 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Paper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Angel Instructions:
Your login username is created when you first register for classes so you can find it on your schedule. Usernames begin with the first four characters of your last name, your first initial and your middle initial (if available), and is followed with a dash and FAR (Farmingdale’s Angel code). For example, Kelly Dodd would have a username of doddk-far. See [http://www.farmingdale.edu/distance_learning/sln_angel.html](http://www.farmingdale.edu/distance_learning/sln_angel.html) for more help. Your initial password will be the Farmingdale ANGEL code “far” followed by your date of birth. For instance, if you are born on July 4, 1988, your password will be far030988.