American Studies 396 (POSC 367)

American Studies 396 will explore the people, the environment, and the values associated with American suburbs, particularly in the post-WWII era. We will pose questions about the social, political, economic, gender, and racial implications of suburbia. We will consider why, given the ubiquitous criticisms of suburbia, so many Americans continue to strive to live there. Over the course of the term, we will analyze the evolving patterns of suburban life from a variety of perspectives: history, political science, literature, film, journalism, sociology, architecture, and material culture.

This course also has an explicit agenda of building formal research skills and is intended to be a preparatory course for the comprehensive exercise process. A number of assignments will focus on research skills (as opposed to substantive findings).

A seminar is a collaborative enterprise. In a seminar, students take important responsibility for producing stimulating discussions and presenting the results of their research and thinking. For most of the term, we will discuss a common set of readings and viewings in order to build our understanding of suburbia and its historical and contemporary relationships to American politics and culture. As well, nearly everyone has some familiarity with suburbia or suburban culture; your background and experiences are a treasure of resources from which we can all learn. But you must follow the rule of framing your experiences through the class materials rather than merely emoting about your past and your experiences.

The success of the course (and whether it is a fun learning experience) will depend both on your willingness to complete the reading and viewing assignments on time and your eagerness to participate. Read actively, consider keeping a journal of your impressions, record ideas you aren't prepared to evaluate yet but want to think about further. To insure that you come to class having connected with the authors and ready to contribute your thoughts on the issues raised, you are required to prepare a one page, double spaced set of talking points for each class. This will be two or three paragraphs (not an outline) about two or three ideas from the readings and viewings that you think are interesting, irritating, worthy of further research, or represent a connection to previous topics. Bring one copy to class for yourself and send me one copy by e-mail by noon of the class day.

Grading: Film analyses 1-3, Lit. reviews 1-2, and causal sequencing assignment are each 10% and lowest two will be dropped, total of 40%; Material Culture analysis will be 20%; Literature 1990s will be 10%; Film/Music 1990s will be 10%; and class discussion (including talking points) will be 20%. Late assignments will be penalized two letter grades per day. Page limits will be strictly enforced in the name of fairness. Read ahead on the syllabus and plan accordingly for athletic events, holidays, and conflicts with other classes.

Office Hours will be announced during the first week of classes. My office is 417 Willis and my phone is 4122. I am glad to take calls at home but please do not call after 9 pm.

9/11: K. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, chs. 1-3. The author is discussing changes that can accurately be called revolutionary. What are the agents (causes) of change? Is change the result of individual and democratic decisions (following Tocqueville or an economic invisible hand), cultural predispositions (rooted where?), governmental decisions, entrepreneurial profit-making activity, technological changes, or some other non-constant?

9/14: Jackson, chs. 4-6; Clark, ch. 3

9/15: Film "The City"

9/16: Jackson, chs. 7-8
9/17: Film "Mr. Blandings"

9/18: Jackson, ch. 9; Clark, ch. 6

9/21: ASSIGNMENT DUE: Film #1 -- Comparative analysis of two films (2 pages, double spaced). No introduction or conclusion, pick two or three themes and compare/contrast/make an argument.

Jackson, chs. 10-11.

9/22: Film "Avalon"

9/23: G. Wright, Building the Dream, ch. 13; B. Kelly, Expanding the American Dream, ch. 3.

9/25: Jackson, chs. 12-13


ASSIGNMENT DUE -- Lit. Review #1: 2 pages, single spaced. One page explaining both why David Riesman's The Lonely Crowd would be a natural addition to this class and where you discovered all of your information about the book and one page of formal bibliography of books or articles that discuss Riesman's analysis. I don't want you to read the book, I want you to discover how you would determine if it was worth reading for a particular project.

9/30: No Class

10/2: Roth, "Eli, the Fanatic" in Goodbye Columbus, and ASSIGNMENT DUE -- Lit Review. #2: Citations & sources, not substance (two full pages, single spaced), plus a narrative of the steps you took to find these (one page or less).

10/4: Film "A Raisin in the Sun"

10/5: Jackson, chs. 14-15. ASSIGNMENT DUE -- Causal Sequencing: Look at the questions posed back on 9/11. After reading almost all of Jackson, how would you rank order the causes of suburbanization? Justify your rankings (One to two pages, double spaced).

10/6: Film "To Sleep With Anger"

10/7: Jackson, ch. 16.

10/9: ASSIGNMENT DUE -- Film #2: Comparative analysis of three films (2 pages, double spaced). Themes, contradictions, gaps.

10/12: Midterm Break


10/15: Film "Serial Mom"

10/16: Open class, no talking points. Begin reading B. Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, chs. 1, 2, 10, 12.

10/19: Discuss Friedan (yes, talking points)

10/21: Incorporate Friedan with class materials.

10/22: Film "Heathers"

10/23: TBA [ACM Meeting]
10/25: Film "The Alleged Texas Cheerleader Murdering Mom"

The readings for the last three weeks will be influenced by what I perceive to be the interests of the class (which I don't know yet because I don't know you).

10/26: NOTE: All students must have communicated with me about the artifact they will analyze for the material culture component of the course and have received formal approval for the selection of their artifact.

10/28:

10/29: Film "Suburbia"

10/30:

11/2: MATERIAL CULTURE ASSIGNMENT DUE: 4-5 pages, double spaced, formal paper with title, introduction, conclusion, and appendix items and citations if appropriate. Your argument about why the artifact is so illuminating and illustrative should be based on and reflect the knowledge you have acquired about suburbia and suburban culture. The argument that you present is, in essence, a test of your understanding of the material in this course.

Recommended reading: T. J. Schlereth, "Social history scholarship and material culture research" and J. D. Prown, "Mind in matter: An introduction to material culture theory and method."

11/4:

11/6: ASSIGNMENT DUE: Film analysis #3 (four films, three pages).

11/9: ASSIGNMENT DUE: Literature 1990s. Find a book of fiction that captures some salient aspect of suburbia of the 1990s. The book must be dated 1992 or later. Explain how you found this book, what sources you used (or if you previously knew of this book, what resources could have helped you find this book). How do you know it will be appropriate (justify your belief that it indeed captures some aspect of 1990s suburbia), what information do you have about this book (and from where) that leads you to believe that it speaks to suburbia of the 1990s? Two to three pages, double spaced.

11/11:

11/13: ASSIGNMENT DUE: Select one film OR one song released after 1992 that captures some salient aspect of suburbia of the 1990s. Explain how you found this film or song, what sources you used (or if you previously knew of it, what resources could have helped you find this film or song). How do you know it will be appropriate (justify your belief that it indeed captures some aspect of 1990s suburbia), what information do you have about this film or song (and from where) that leads you to believe that it speaks to suburbia of the 1990s? For a song, provide complete lyrics and a tape; I can provide a blank. Two pages, double spaced (plus lyrics).

No Final Examination