

# BECOMING AMERICAN

HONS 381.01

College of Charleston, Spring 2019

TR 9:25-10:40AM

Maybank Hall, 320

## CONTACT

Professor Matthew Cressler

Office: 4C Glebe St., Rm. 105

Office Hours: MW 3-4:30pm

Professor Shari Rabin

Office: Jewish Studies 303

Office Hours: Tu 1:30-3:00pm

(Sign up at [tinyurl.com/profrabin](http://tinyurl.com/profrabin))

## DESCRIPTION

What is America? What does it mean to be "American"? How does one "become" American? These questions rest at the heart of some of the most popular and provocative debates in the history of the United States, debates ultimately about what binds a nation together and what defines the boundaries of citizenship. In this course we will engage these questions from the vantage point of three particular communities. African Americans, Catholics, and Jews have each been characterized as outsiders at various points in American history. And yet, at other moments, each have been heralded as the epitome of the American Dream. This course will situate this seeming paradox in historical and cultural context. We will explore our three opening questions through a close engagement of a variety of primary sources, ranging from memoirs to court cases. Students will become familiar with significant scholarly work in the fields of African American Studies, American Studies, History, Jewish Studies, Political Science, Religious Studies, and Sociology. We will think through the consequences of these questions for our contemporary moment. In collaboration with faculty, students will present and facilitate discussion on how a contemporary source relates to the themes of the course.

## COURSE STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOs)

- Students are familiar with how ideas and practices are represented, interpreted or valued in the United States of America broadly and in African American, Catholic, and Jewish communities in particular.
- Students analyze primary source materials using the tools of American cultural studies.
- Students analyze problems from more than one disciplinary perspective.
- Students engage intellectual problems through engagement with contemporary controversies and in an intensive creative project.

These are evaluated in the final "Unessay" project.

## HONORS COLLEGE SLOs

1. Demonstrate ability to create and communicate analytic arguments supported by evidence

2. Evaluate complex issues using an interdisciplinary perspective
3. Analyze and synthesize information within and/or across disciplines

#### GENERAL EDUCATION IN THE HUMANITIES SLOs

1. Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture.
2. Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the humanities area under study and interpret the material in writing assignments.

These are evaluated in the “Unessay” introduction.

#### REQUIRED TEXTS

1. Bruce Burgett & Glenn Hendler, eds., *Keywords for American Cultural Studies, Second Edition*
2. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
3. All additional required readings can be found in OAKS

#### RECOMMENDED TEXT

Paul Harvey, *Bounds of our Habitation: Race and Religion in American History*  
(Available in the CofC Bookstore and on reserve in the library)

#### ASSIGNMENTS

*A Note on Assignments:* All assignments must be written in Times New Roman, 12-point font, double-spaced and using APA citation style. They should be submitted as Microsoft Word files to the designated OAKS Dropbox by class-time on the due date.

*A Note on Questions/Communication:* All emails should be sent to both professors at [rabinsl@cofc.edu](mailto:rabinsl@cofc.edu) and [cresslermj@cofc.edu](mailto:cresslermj@cofc.edu).

#### **Participation - (20%)**

This seminar requires you do the readings and actively participate in discussions and activities.

#### **Keyword Analysis (15%)**

Find a news article about a contemporary event that interests you. In 3-4 double-spaced pages, you should offer an analysis of the event informed by an entry of your choice from *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. **Due March 7**

#### **Historians for the Day (15%)**

At the start of class on one of the following Tuesdays, in groups of two or three, you will present in class on the recommended Harvey reading: January 22, January 29, February 5, March 26, April 2. In 20 minutes, you should introduce the historical context and connect it to the topics for discussion that week. - **Sign-Up in Class on January 15.**

### Unessay (50%)

What is an unessay?: “Almost anything, as long as it seriously and meaningfully engages with the themes that we discuss together in class. This an opportunity for you to draw on the questions at the heart of our course, and to reflect on them in ways that empower and interest you on a personal and intellectual level. In addition to producing the creative project itself, you will be asked to write a creator’s statement explaining what you tried to accomplish, the sources behind you project and how you interpreted them and their creative process.” - Adapted from [Sarit Kattan Gribetz](#)

Your unessay will seek to answer the following questions via a creative project: Is it possible to become American? What are the costs, the benefits, and the limits of becoming American? More details will be provided later in the semester.

- ***Preliminary Unessay Introduction (10%)***  
In 3 pages, define the genre your unessay will take and offer some preliminary thoughts about the question: Is it possible to become American? What are the costs and/or benefits of becoming American? - **due April 14**
- ***Presentation (10%) - In Class April 16 and 18***
- ***Unessay + Introduction (30%) - due 12:00pm April 30***

### GRADING SCALE

A = 93-100	B+ = 87-89	C+ = 77-79	D+ = 67-69	F = 0-60
A- = 90-92	B = 83-86	C = 73-76	D = 63-66	
	B- = 80-82	C- = 70-72	D- = 60-62	

### POLICIES AND RESOURCES

#### **Absences**

You will be excused for up to **FOUR (4)** absences during the semester. If you miss more than four classes, you should not expect to pass this course. We do not require you to submit paperwork when you do miss a class, but please be aware that we will enforce this policy strictly.

#### **Honor Code**

You are expected to abide by the Honor Code of the College of Charleston. **The Honor Code of the College of Charleston forbids cheating, attempted cheating and plagiarism.** A student found guilty of any of these offenses will receive a grade of “XF” in the course, and may be subject to additional penalties such as suspension or expulsion from the College, at the discretion of the Honor Board. See the *College of Charleston Student Handbook*, for definitions of these offenses ([www.cofc.edu/generaldocuments/handbook.pdf](http://www.cofc.edu/generaldocuments/handbook.pdf)).

## **Disability Accommodations**

If you have a documented disability and have been approved to receive accommodations through the Center for Disability Services / SNAP, please come and discuss this with us during our office hours.

## **Religious Accommodations**

The College acknowledges that religious practices differ from tradition to tradition and that the demands of religious observance in some traditions may cause conflicts with student schedules. In affirming this diversity, like many other colleges and universities, the College supports the concept of “reasonable accommodation for religious observance” in regard to class attendance, and the scheduling of examinations and other academic work requirements, unless the accommodation would create an undue hardship on the College. Faculty are required, as part of their responsibility to students and the College, to ascribe to this policy and to ensure its fair and full implementation. Our full Statement on Religious Accommodations Policy can be found here: <http://president.cofc.edu/community-relations/rlc/accommodation.php>

SCHEDULE (Subject to Change with Notice)

## **Part I: What is America and what is an American? (Theories)**

### **Week 1 - What is a Nation? What is Religion?**

Tu Jan 8

Keyword: Nation

Th Jan 10

Keywords: Religion

Secondary: Harvey and Lum, “Introduction,” *Oxford Handbook of Race and Religion in American History*

### **Week 2 - The Birth of a Nation**

Tu Jan 15

Keywords: America

Primary: *Declaration of Independence; Bill of Rights*

Secondary: Harvey, *Bounds of Our Habitation*, 11-42

Th Jan 17

Keywords: Exceptionalism

<http://keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/essay/exceptionalism/>

Videos: “Hamilton: A founding father takes to the stage”; “Hip-hop and history blend for Broadway hit Hamilton”; “Alexander Hamilton” and “The Battle of Yorktown”

from Hamilton: An American Musical

Secondary: Lyra D. Monteiro, “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Hamilton”

Further Recommended Reading: Responses to “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Hamilton,” History@Work

## **Part II: Law and the State**

### **Week 3 - Bible Wars**

Recommended: Harvey, *Bounds of Our Habitation*, 43-79

Tu Jan 22

Keywords: State

Secondary: David Sehat, “Introduction: The Myth of American Religious Freedom,” *The Myth of American Religious Freedom*, 1-10; R. Laurence Moore, “Postscript,” *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, 201-210

Th Jan 24

Keywords: Secularism

Primary: “John Hughes Condemns the New York Public School Society” and “Instruction of the Propaganda Fide Concerning Catholic Children in American Public Schools” *American Catholic History: A Documentary Reader*, 45-8, 54-7

### **Week 4 – Black Bodies, Black Religion**

Recommended: Harvey, *Bounds of Our Habitation*, 97-127

Tu Jan 29

Keywords: Law

Primary: [Supreme Court Opinion, Plessy v. Ferguson](#) (1896)

Th Jan 31

Keywords: Freedom

Primary: [Moorish Science Temple FBI Files](#)

Secondary: Sylvester Johnson, “The FBI and the Moorish Science Temple of America, 1926-1960,” in *The FBI and Religion*, 55-66

### **Week 5 – Immigration Restriction**

Recommended: Harvey, *Bounds of Our Habitation*, 129-158

Tu Feb 5

Keywords: Immigration

Primary: “The Temporary Restriction of Immigration (1920),” *Jew in the Modern World*, 568-70

Th Feb 7

Keywords: Racialization

Secondary: Libby Garland, “Not-quite-closed Gates: Jewish Alien Smuggling in the Post-Quota Years,” *American Jewish History* (September 2008), 197-224.

Due: **Primary Source Analysis**

## **Part II: Race and Citizenship**

### **Week 6 – Catholics**

Tu Feb 12

Keyword: Citizenship

Secondary: Orsi, “How Catholics Are American”

Th Feb 14

Keyword: Latino, Latina, Latin@

Secondary: Timothy Matovina, “Remapping American Catholicism”

### **Week 7 – Jews**

Tu Feb 19

Keyword: Diaspora

Primary: Jonathan Sarna, “The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish History”

Th Feb 21

Keyword: White

Secondary: Laura Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism,” *American Quarterly* (September 2007), 807-32.

### **Week 8 – African Americans**

Tu Feb 26

Keyword: Black

Primary: James Baldwin, “My Dungeon Shook” in *The Fire Next Time*

Th Feb 28

Primary: James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross" in *The Fire Next Time*

## **Media and Culture**

### **Week 9 – Film: *The Godfather* (1972)**

Tu Mar 5 - No class

### **Film Screening - TIME TBA**

Th Mar 7

Keyword: Media

Carlo Rotella, "Praying for Stones Like This," *The Godfather Trilogy* (1972, 1974, 1990)," *Catholics in the Movies*, 177-196

### **Week 10 – The Family Sitcom: *The Goldbergs* and *Blackish***

Tu March 12

Keyword: Family

Secondary: "The Goldbergs," Museum of Broadcast Communications, <http://www.museum.tv/eotv/goldbergsth.htm>

Th Mar 14

Secondary: Muriel G. Cantor, "The American Family on Television: From Molly Goldberg to Bill Cosby," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* (Summer 1991), 205-2016; Matt Zoller Seitz, "In It's Own Sweet Way, ABC's *black-ish* Is a Landmark Show," *Vulture*, September 24, 2014, <https://www.vulture.com/2014/09/tv-review-black-ish.html>.

## **SPRING BREAK**

## **Contemporary Debates**

### **Week 11 – Postracialism**

Recommended Reading: Harvey, *Bounds of Our Habitation*, 159-182

Tu Mar 26

Keyword: Identity

Primary: Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union" (2008); Ta-Nehisi Coates, "We Were Eight Years in Power"

Th Mar 28

Keyword: Politics

Primary: “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement”:

<http://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory>

Secondary: Impolite Conversation Podcast #5, “#BlackLivesMatter and Black Protestant Activism,” Marginalia Review of Books, <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/impolite-conversation-5-blacklivesmatter-and-black-protestant-activism/>

### **Week 12 – Catholics and Religious Liberty**

Recommended Reading: Harvey, *Bounds of Our Habitation*, 183-204

Tu Apr 2

Keyword: Government

Primary: Catholic Docs

Th Apr 4

Keyword: Border

Primary/Secondary: Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration and the Movement of Peoples  
Podcast: *Jesuitical*, ep. 82: “You have to visit the border to understand the migrant caravan”

### **Week 13 – Jews and Anti-Semitism**

Tu Apr 9

Keyword: Liberalism

Primary: Jewish Docs

### **SPECIAL EVENT: Marcie Cohen Ferris and Michael Twitty, April 9**

Th Apr 11

Podcast: “The Alt-Right Rises,” Episode 4, A12

### **SPECIAL EVENT: Jalane Schmidt (UVa), April 15-16**

### **Week 14 Unessay Presentations**

Tu Apr 16

Reading: Classmate Unessay Introductions

Th Apr 18

Reading: Classmate Unessay Introductions

### **Unessay Due April 30**