Introduction to American Studies: A Humorous (Dis)Course

AM 103 (4 credits)

Spring 2011 - Tisch Learning Center 201

You want to know what's going on in our community? Watch our comedy.
—Sommore[1]

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 stand-up 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 stand-up comedy/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, drawing from historical comedic texts and contemporary stand-up comedy while also documenting the myriad ways comic performance proliferates. We will examine styles of comic performance such as shock comedy, self-deprecating humor, satire/political humor and performing marginality from contemporary comics such as Kate Riggs, Dave Chappelle, Sarah Silverman, Maria Bamford, Chris Rock, Margaret Cho, Ralphie May, Pablo Francisco, Kate Clinton, Jimmy Dore, Wanda Sykes, Paul Mooney and many more. Reading comedy as a cultural text, we will discuss popular discourses 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 film a comic performance or text that puts into practice a theory or key terms germane to American studies, humor studies, performance studies or cultural studies.

[1] *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy*, DVD. Directed by Robert Townsend (Code Black Entertainment, 2009).