Instructor:
Afia Ofori-Mensa
aoforime@oberlin.edu
King Building 141D

Office Hours:
Tuesdays and Thursdays
11:20am – 12:20pm
And By Appointment

How to Win a Beauty Pageant
Race, Gender, Culture, and U.S. National Identity

Comparative American Studies 240 / Africana Studies 240
This course counts as a gateway course in the Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies major.

Fall 2013
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:00 – 2:50 pm

Course Description
In the past few years, beauty queens have appeared with increasing regularity in mainstream U.S. media. In 2007, Miss South Carolina Teen USA’s 30-second response about Americans and maps grew to such heights of popularity that it became one of the most watched YouTube clips of its time. Three years later, the crowning of the first Arab American immigrant Miss USA drew criticism from some conservative bloggers who questioned her abilities to represent the nation. In the summer of 2012, the successful entry of a transwoman in the Miss Universe Canada Pageant pushed the U.S.-owned Miss Universe organization to lift its worldwide ban on transgender contestants, for the first time in the pageant’s sixty-year history. And at this very moment, a Change.org petition is circulating to encourage the Miss Universe organizers to move their November 2013 pageant away from Russia, because of that country’s retrograde anti-LGBTQ laws.

Since the Miss America Pageant began in 1921, the popularity of beauty pageantry in the United States has ebbed and flowed. In that time, hundreds of other pageants have sprung up around the country, each with its own title and its own kind of claim on representative Americanness. This course examines that history, from the 1920s through the present, by focusing on a variety of pageants—from Miss America and Miss Universe to Miss Gay America and Miss Black USA—and key moments in 20th- and 21st-century pageantry.

The aim of this course will be to use pageants as our case studies to understand the changing identity of the United States of America over time. We will travel through U.S. pageant history by decade, considering contemporaneous cultural happenings and applying relevant academic theories. Our investigations as a class will also consider what it takes to win a pageant and how notions like “beauty,” “poise,” “fitness,” “the full package,” and “the girl next door” relate to concepts of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation. In addition, we will learn about cultural studies methodology, including literary close reading, cultural history, critical discourse analysis, and ethnography, and use those methods to “read” beauty pageantry intellectually, as a pop culture phenomenon that tells us stories about ourselves.
Course Objectives
To synthesize readings, videos, and ethnographic experiences with/in classroom conversations
To gain exposure to critical theories and analyses of gender as these relate to race and nation
To identify, in our discussions and your written assignments, the academic arguments of scholars in various disciplines
To understand how to make and sustain an academic argument in your own writing
To look critically at things in your world, which seem common or frivolous, as sites for understanding privilege, oppression, and inequality

Expectations
The requirements in this course are designed to be manageable so that you can finish them completely and on time, and arrive at each class session fully prepared to engage in productive conversation. Our class is a teaching-learning community. That is not to say that I am exclusively the teacher and you are exclusively the learners. Instead, we all come in with different experiences and various perspectives on the course material. So your presence and participation, both as a listener and as a vocal contributor, are necessary for everyone else to learn. It is not possible to build a community of trust and learning if the population of that community is always in flux. Because of that, I expect you to be at every class session.

Laptops, cell phones, iPads and other tablets are not allowed out in class.

Attendance
Attendance at every meeting of our class is absolutely mandatory.

That said, I know we all exist outside the classroom, and things sometimes happen to us that are outside our control. So if you need to be out one day for a health or family emergency, get in touch with me about it in advance. In addition, if you ever need to be absent, you must make an appointment with me to discuss one-on-one in office hours the text(s) relevant to the missed class session.

Participation
In-Class Participation (Required)
The success of our teaching-learning community depends on your willingness to actively and voluntarily share your analyses of the assigned texts. As a member of the community, you should take personal responsibility for contributing toward an exciting and productive conversation every class.

There are a number of reasons I’ve learned why some people don’t speak up in classroom discussions. But formulating thoughts based on something you’ve read, and putting those thoughts in conversation with others’ ideas in the context of an ongoing discussion, is a necessary academic skill—just like writing essays and taking exams. In order to demonstrate that skill, you need to participate actively, meaningfully, and regularly in our discussions.
Co-Facilitation (Voluntary)
In the second half of the term, students will have the opportunity to volunteer to co-facilitate. Individuals or pairs of co-facilitators will meet with me in my office at least two days in advance of the class session they’ll be co-facilitating. During that meeting, we will develop a lesson plan and then work together to facilitate that lesson plan on the day of class.

Office Hours
Office hours are an integral part of this course. They are times when you can ask for help with any concepts from readings or lectures that you don’t quite get, seek guidance in advance of turning in graded assignments, talk to me about any future interests of yours that may be relevant to the course (or to American Studies, Africana Studies, or Gender Studies in general), and give me an opportunity to get to know you and your individual style and needs better. You are required to attend office hours at least two times this semester, once within the first couple weeks of the class and again at the middle of the term, after Fall Break, to discuss your progress and participation in the course.

Major Assignments
Capstone: Miss Gay America Pageant
This course includes a mandatory field visit to the Miss Gay America 2014 Pageant at the Millennium Hotel in St. Louis, Missouri on Sunday, October 13. There will be three written assignments associated with our trip. You cannot pass the course if you do not attend the pageant.

Research Questions
An annotated list of questions you will draft in advance of the field visit. The questions are designed to help you synthesize knowledge you have gained up to that point from course readings and lectures, and to use that knowledge to guide your participant-observations during the field visit. Due Monday, September 23 – Friday, September 27, 2013.

Fieldnotes
Notes you will submit, based on jottings you made during the Miss Gay America 2014 Pageant, that describe in detail your observations during the field visit. Due Monday, October 14 – Friday, October 18, 2013.

Miss Gay America Ethnographic Essay
An essay in which you choose a topic relevant to your experience at the Miss Gay America 2014 Pageant and analyze how that topic played out at the pageant, in conversation with course readings and lectures. Due Monday, November 11 – Friday, November 15, 2013.
Final
A research paper, group presentation, or video in which you develop a pageant of your own—including title, eligibility criteria, rules, judging criteria, and prizes. Your pageant design should identify a community you are attempting to construct or define, give some background on that community, and describe a rationale for articulating that particular group identity within the context of the United States of America. **Presentations and videos due Thursday, December 12, 2013. Papers due Wednesday, December 18, 2013.**

**Evaluation**
We'll talk about grading on the first day of class. These are the basic guidelines:

- You earn an **A or A-** if you do everything you are supposed to do outstandingly.
- You earn a **B+, B, or B-** if you do everything you are supposed to do well.
- You earn a **C+, C, or C-** if you do everything you are supposed to do.
- You earn a **D** if you do not do everything you are supposed to do.
- You earn an **F** if you do not do most or any of what you are supposed to do.

**Plagiarism**
I take plagiarism very seriously. I have also found that it is not always clear to students what constitutes plagiarism. To clarify that, you should take this very helpful quiz at Indiana University’s website: [http://www.indiana.edu/~tedfrick/plagiarism/index2.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~tedfrick/plagiarism/index2.html). To familiarize yourself with Oberlin's Honor Code, which has bearing on plagiarism and other issues of academic integrity, you should go to: [http://new.oberlin.edu/students/policies/honor](http://new.oberlin.edu/students/policies/honor). An incident of plagiarism initiates procedures that no one wants to go through—not you, not me, not the administrators. So avoid all that by using the resources above to understand what plagiarism is and, most importantly, by giving yourself time to come to me for help if you need it, well in advance of when an assignment is due.

**Disabilities**
If you need accommodations for any sort of physical, psychiatric, or learning disability, please talk to me about it the first time we meet during office hours. Also, I encourage you to contact the Office of Disability Services in Peters G-27/G-28 (440.775.5588 or [http://new.oberlin.edu/office/disability-services/](http://new.oberlin.edu/office/disability-services/)), if you have not already done so. The office provides accommodation plans, documentation, and support for students who are blind, deaf, hard of hearing, or who have AD(H)D, Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, head injury or Traumatic Brain Injury, learning disabilities, orthopedic or mobility disorders, or psychological disorders. If something unforeseen happens during the semester—like injury, debilitating illness, or clinical depression—please let me know so that we can discuss arrangements for appropriate accommodations. If you experience a medical emergency that interferes with any work for our class, you should contact your class dean or the Dean of Studies Office in Peters 205 (440.775.8540 or [http://new.oberlin.edu/office/dean-of-studies/index.dot](http://new.oberlin.edu/office/dean-of-studies/index.dot)).
Texts
Comparative American Studies 240 / Africana Studies 240 Fall 2013 Readings
The readings are available via links on our course Blackboard site.

Videos
Miss America Pageant 2013.
American Experience: Miss America.
Miss Navajo.
Miss Universe.

Schedule

Week 1: Introduction

Thursday, September 5  Miss America Pageant 2013.
View In Class

Week 2: Overview

Read Before Class

Thursday, September 12  American Experience: Miss America.
View In Class

Week 3: The 1920s

Read Before Class

Read Before Class
Week 4: Performativity
**MAJOR ASSIGNMENT DUE**

**Monday, September 23** – **Friday, September 27**
*Miss Gay America Pageant Research Questions Due No Later Than 4:00pm on Blackboard*

**Tuesday, September 24**
View In Class

**Thursday, September 26**
Read Before Class

**Week 5: The 1930s**

**Tuesday, October 1**
Read Before Class

**Thursday, October 3**
Read Before Class

**Week 6: How to Study a Beauty Pageant**
**FIELD VISIT**

**Tuesday, October 8**
Read Before Class

**Thursday, October 10**
Read Before Class

**Sunday, October 14, 6:00am – Monday, October 15, 9:00am**
*Miss Gay America 2014 Pageant Field Visit, Millennium Hotel, St. Louis, MO*
Week 7: The 1940s

MAJOR ASSIGNMENT DUE

Miss Gay America Pageant Fieldnotes Due No Later Than 4:00pm on Blackboard

Monday, October 14 – Friday, October 20

Tuesday, October 15
Read Before Class


Thursday, October 17
Read Before Class


Week 8: Fall Break

NO CLASSES

Week 9: The 1950s

Tuesday, October 29
Read Before Class


Thursday, October 31
Read Before Class


Week 10: The 1960s

Tuesday, November 5
Read Before Class


Thursday, November 7
Read Before Class

Week 11: The 1970s and 1980s

**MAJOR ASSIGNMENT DUE**

**Monday, November 11 - Friday, November 15**

*Miss Gay America Pageant Ethnographic Essay Due No Later Than 4:00pm on Blackboard*

**Tuesday, November 12**
Read Before Class


**Thursday, November 14**
Read Before Class


Week 12: The 1990s

**Tuesday, November 19**
Read Before Class


**Thursday, November 21**
In Class

Mandatory Library Research Session.

Week 13: The 1990s

**Tuesday, November 26**
Read Before Class


**Thursday, November 28**

NO CLASS.

Week 14: The Early 2000s

**Tuesday, December 3**
View In Class

*Miss Navajo.*

**Thursday, December 5**
Read Before Class

Week 15: The Present

**MAJOR ASSIGNMENT DUE**

**Tuesday, December 10**  
In Class  
*Miss Universe* and Other Contemporary Pageant Examples

**Thursday, December 12**  
In Class  
*Final Group Presentations and Videos*

**Final Exam Period**

**MAJOR ASSIGNMENT DUE**

**Wednesday, December 18**  
*Final Written Assignments Due No Later Than 4:00 pm on Blackboard*