Unit 2 Analysis—Reimagining the Normal

In Unit 2, you will develop an analytical perspective on what our culture deems as the norm—about gender, race, class, ability, beauty, and many other categories we will explore together. What are the borders of the normal? What systems are in place to establish borders of normalcy? What happens when those borders are challenged or crossed?

“Normal” is not a fixed category in any culture; it’s always changing and is often contested. My example of normal, for example, differs from someone else’s based on my own subject position, experiences, and beliefs. The purpose of this unit, then, is to analyze ab/normality in our culture. I’m asking you not just to identify what is normal or abnormal, but to analyze how these constructs are produced—why they are considered to be normal or abnormal.

Nicki Minaj and Gaga play with alter egos & taboos of mental illness (more here)

Topics and Methodologies

In your unit 2 essay, I would like you to identify and analyze a “hot spot” in American culture where 1) the normal is produced or policed, or 2) the normal is performed or legitimated, or 3) the abnormal is constructed. You will select a topic to research and analyze from a range of cultural representations: film, TV, advertising, music, sports, extracurriculars, family life, etc.

You should select something specific in order to engage critically with your topic. You can do more with a narrow topic than a broad one—delve more deeply, make sharper claims, look

---

1For our purposes, a “hot spot” is a cultural phenomenon that generates attention, illuminates our assumptions and expectations, and results in “tension” or “rawness.”

ahhitt@syr.edu
more closely at examples and evidence. Different topics will require different methodological approaches on your part. For example…

- If you’re interested in something local—like SU’s reactions to the news that Muslim students were being tracked by the NYPD—you could interview subjects, read responses, look for patterns and anomalies, and interpret what your data means.
- Or, if you select a topic that is representational—like how women (and men) are hypersexualized in music videos—you would want to watch a few, take notes, and consider what is normalized about sexuality across the videos.
- Or, if your topic is far removed from your experiences—like head injuries in football—you could examine recent instances and conversations around them and how they are situated within a larger discussion of masculinity and ableism.

Chris Brown & a culture of domestic violence (more here)

This assignment produces certain rhetorical challenges for you: First, you need to be mindful of your audience as you contextualize your subject and introduce your source. Not everyone will recognize your source or understand it in the same way that you do. Second, you’ll also need to historically situate your subject: What is its relevancy? What issues and discussions are circulating about it? How does it contribute to a contested understanding of normality?

The paper should ultimately include:

- contextual information that situates your topic
- an evolving thesis that offers an interpretive perspective on your cultural artifact
- claims that illuminate how and why the normal is constructed, policed, and/or resisted
- specific examples to support your claims
- one secondary source
- a conclusion that opens avenues for further thinking & questions about normalization

The Nitty Gritty

Your analysis essay should be 6-8 pages, 12-point font, double-spaced. Please use proper MLA citation and compose an appropriate title for your essay. Your essay and its corresponding reflection are due on Thursday, October 25.