Honors Freshman Composition and Rhetoric: Critiquing and Celebrating Contemporary America—Self, Family, Nation

I. Course Intro

As most of you know Borat is a recently released “documentary” about revealing America to itself. Little Miss Sunshine, the 2006 independent movie blockbuster, takes on beauty contests as well as representations of the American family. The reader/book of essays Rereading America challenges our more complacent or comfortable assumptions about race, gender, family and nation. Family Guy satirizes family sitcoms and serves as intertext to much American popular culture. Middlesex, the 2002 Pulitzer Prize winning epic novel is narrated by its intersexed main character. Finally, Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim, deadpan essays about family/contemporary life in 1960’s to twenty-first century America, is the latest comic best-seller of a once homeless, homosexual meth addict who has made millions, with a career beginning with his “Santa Diaries” on National Public Radio.

But what do they have in common and why am I talking about them?

Ok—the easy answer is that they are all works used in this course! Another smart response would be that many of these works use the notion of epic or quest to discover and uncover uniquely American selves and ideas. A “higher-order,” critical thinking response is that they are multi-media texts that tease out, complicate, celebrate, parody and critique a definition of modern America. Directly or indirectly, all of these works look at dominant American social myths and challenge mainstream representations of self, family life, and nation. In our reading, writing and discussion, we will both critique and celebrate America through examining these linked and various texts.

All three responses win you a place in this class and so I welcome you to English 30, the honors freshman rhetoric and composition class for good writers and smart and motivated students! If “Rereading America” is our course topic, what, exactly, is our medium, the “composition and rhetoric” stuff through which we will filter and develop our classroom discussion and essay responses?

Or-- what is rhetoric, anyway? Rhetoric is the conscious use of language to persuade in a particular context and for a particular purpose. We use it with our families and friends to persuade/allow them to see our views; Bush is using it daily to convince Americans that we need to “surge” against the “insurgents,” or to increase our troops in Iraq; The Simpsons and South Park and the 007 and Indiana Jones series are cinematic/video rhetorics as well as entertainment, arguing for a particular way of seeing or subverting popular issues and ideologies. To the rhetorician, all writing and speech