Sophomore Inquiry - University Studies 212 C
Introduction to American Studies

Assignment, October 24, 2003                        DUE: October 31, 2003

We’ve just seen two video presentations. One describes the process of immigration to this country of people who we might now (mostly) identify as Euro-Americans, the great majority of whom would now also be considered white. The other recounts a tragic and symbolic touchstone event in the relations between some of those early (white) Euro-Americans [and interestingly some people who we would now call (black) African-Americans]. As they now interact with one another on the cusp of the 21st century, these two/three groups of people draw on very different cultural histories and collective memories.

You have already been asked to review and draw out your own family genealogies, going back at least four generations (to your great grandparents). Perhaps you’ve been able/interested in tracing your genealogy back even further, but four generations would very likely take your family lineage back at least to the first several decades of the 20th century, a period in which immigration to this country was still at a high point.

Many of you will have discovered or been reintroduced to what has come to be seen as the classic, and in some ways representative (whether accurate or not), American immigrant background—one that is resonant with the first video. Others of you have more recent and/or perhaps quite different immigration histories (perhaps more like the immigration that Rodriguez briefly described). But it is very likely that few or none of us will have the historical background that has been depicted in the second video.

You now have a two part assignment. Using the materials that you’ve read and those that you may already be familiar with, together with the second video, the first part is to imagine what your family genealogy and history would be like if you were Native American (a member of one of the indigenous peoples who inhabited this land when the very first European settlers landed here). The second part is to parallel this imaginary historical reflection with what you’ve learned about your own family history. You might do this by contrasting the differences (and perhaps identifying the similarities) between how you might—looking back—now think of yourself as a Native-American and how you actually now—looking back—think of yourself as who you are. You might do this by creating two autobiographical accounts, one fantasized, the other based on your own experience. However you go about it, what this assignment asks you to do is to use your own creative, introspective, and imaginative powers to think about and express how these two persons might now see the “same” world quite differently because of those very different historical pasts. (As you go through this process, you might find it helpful to do something similar with the autobiography you are reading.)

The finished form of this assignment will be your family tree description attached to the writing described above. The latter portion should be typed/word processed and long enough to be adequate to the task (only you know how long that is). Try to have some satisfaction in and take some risks with this activity—an inherent part of learning about pluralism and its perplexities is struggling to really understand and accept the different worlds that are socially constructed and maintained by others—by people who are quite different from ourselves.