

May 14, 2024

Seeing America in London

In 1980 historian Philip Gleason wrote:

To be or to become an American, a person did not have to be any particular national, linguistic, religious, or ethnic background. All he had to do was to commit himself to the political ideology centered on the abstract ideals of liberty, equality, and republicanism. Thus the universalist ideological character of American nationality meant that it was open to anyone who willed to become an American.

("American Identity and Americanization," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*)

The last few weeks we have considered sites of spectatorship from the perspective of thinking about the ethics of looking, positionality, and intersectionality. Today we will think about our collective identity as college students from Vanderbilt University in London. We have stepped into this collective identity of traveling across the pond as an abroad program from the United States of America. When and if you come across conversations with folx in London, what are common assumptions, questions, or understandings you've come across? As you walk around the city notice how images of the United States (whether that's politicians, celebrities, shows, food) show up in a non-American context. In thinking about your own relationship with the United States and spending time outside of our home institution, do you agree with Gleason's statement published thirty-four years ago?



Stephen Adly Guirgis and New York City Identity

This evening, we will be seeing Stephen Adly Guirgis's *Between Riverside and Crazy* which won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The play surrounds the story of Walter "Pops" Washington, retired police officer, who is in process of filing a discrimination suit against the NYPD because he was accidentally shot by a fellow policeman. The play includes Pops' son, Junior, who has just been released from jail, Junior's girlfriend Lulu, and Oswald, a recovering addict. The play takes place in a rent-controlled New York City apartment on Riverside Drive in Manhattan. This play, which is so site-specific has garnered wide appeal. Variety magazine reviewed the

Broadway show: “You have to wonder what those out-of-towners will make of 'Between Riverside and Crazy', the scribe’s latest love/hate song to this impossible town and its outlandish citizenry. Some might be baffled by the rancorous real-estate battles between landlords and tenants of Gotham’s rent-controlled apartments. But everyone’s bound to be captivated by Guirgis’s loudmouthed locals and the terrific ensemble players... If anyone can handle the scribe’s idiom — a warm, rich dialect that comes right off the city streets — these are the guys.” (Marilyn Stasio)



Stephen Adly Guirgis

Echoing this review, as a playwright, Guirgis is known to be identifiably “New York” in which his plays, characters, and content are from pockets of American society that are often overlooked. As you watch this performance think about if you believe Guirgis captures something quintessentially “American”. Moreover, reflect on how you might define “Americanness” in 2024, and how the British spectators around you might similarly or differently define "Americanness."

Assignment: For this meal or snack, order something typically “American”. Take a photo of your meal, post to Instagram, and provide a brief (1-2 sentence) critique of this “American” dish consumed in London. Some suggestions

- [Buffalo American Grill](#)
 - [Legends American Grill & Bar](#)
 - [Texas Joe's Slow Smoked Meats](#)
 - [Pizza Hut](#)
 - [McDonald's](#)
 - [Waffle Jack's American Diner](#)
 - [Five Guys](#)
 - [Tommi's Burger Joint, Berwick St, Soho](#)
 - [the mac factory](#)
 - [Cincinnati Chilibomb](#)
 - [The Orange Buffalo](#)
 - [Dada's Diner](#)
 - [Other Side Fried](#)
 - [Habaneros](#)
2. After watching *Between Riverside and Crazy* either write a post or self-record the answer to this question: Do you see *Between Riverside and Crazy* as a “typical” American play? Why or why not?