

Emory Report
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MARIAL's Paxton asks students out to the prom

By Cathy Byrd

Just how important is ritual in a culture where new equals better and the pace of life is measured in gigabytes?

In fact, British-born scholar Felicity Paxton, one of five postdoctoral fellows at the University's MARIAL (Myth and Ritual in American Life) Center, has found Americans overwhelmingly tenacious in honoring certain rites of passage. She has invited Emory students to consider the significance of ritual in their society through a course titled "From Birth to Prom Night and Beyond: Rituals of Modern America."

Paxton's own first encounter with this unique American ritual occurred at the age of 21. "I remember coming to America for the first time [and] a 22-year-old friend showed me her prom pictures," she recalled. "I knew nothing about prom and found it absolutely fascinating."

It was the family investment in that high-school ritual that struck Paxton, who began to explore the social event during her graduate studies in the mid-1990s. She completed her doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania last year; her dissertation, "America at the Prom: Ritual and Regeneration," is at the heart of her Emory course.

Cross-listed in anthropology and interdisciplinary studies, the class drew so much interest that initially it was overenrolled. Paxton has found undergraduates eager to examine American rituals.

"They've studied other cultures and what they do but never get a chance to talk about what they themselves do," Paxton said. "They are open and excited about that. To me, America is foreign. There are huge overlaps culturally between the United States and the United Kingdom, but there are staggering differences, too. I share with my students a desire to look up close at life here."

Starting with birth and working chronologically through a series of case studies, students look at personal beliefs and practices and respond to theoretical questions about the status of ritual in America. They investigate celebrations of the human lifecycle, as well as competitive sporting and political rituals—both those they have personally experienced and those that may be mediated through television.

Paxton's students consider the importance of birthday parties, bar and bat mitzvahs, Halloween, Quinceañeras (Latino celebration of a young woman's entry into adulthood), proms, graduation, rodeos, homecoming, weddings, beauty pageants, reunions and funerals.

“The inhabitants of Western, postindustrial nations tend to think of themselves as less invested in ritual than ‘those people’ [in more traditional cultures],” Paxton said. “But rituals are important to all cultures; they provide a sense of national identity. The more you look at American life, the more rituals you find.”

Consulting texts such as Robbie Davis-Floyd’s *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* and Chrys Ingraham’s *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*, Paxton encourages the class to observe, describe and analyze individual and societal responses to ritual demands.

Students have their choice of televised rites to investigate: the Bush inauguration, the Super Bowl and the Academy Awards. Also, each student has interviewed a woman about her experience of giving birth; as a group, the students have scrutinized a spectrum of observed variables in the birth ritual.

Finally, class participants will select a ritual to examine in depth for their research papers. They have the opportunity to delve into the historical origins of a contemporary ritual, to conduct personal “fieldwork” (interviews, participant observation and surveys) or investigate how a particular ritual is represented in literature, on television or in film.

Back in England, Paxton reported that Prime Minister Tony Blair is recommending graduation ceremonies be instituted as ceremonial closure for secondary studies. He sees graduation as a way of encouraging students to stay in school. “Will that mean British students will start staging proms?” wondered Paxton, who sees the two rituals going hand-in-hand.