

AS.100.240: American Cultural Criticism**Tuesdays, 3:00 – 5:30****Instructor: Chloe Hawkey**

Gilman 219

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Office Hours:

Tu., 5:30 – 6:00, Th. 1:00 – 3:00

Gilman 346

Course Description:

This course explores 20th American cultural and intellectual history through the work of artists and writers. We will read, analyze, and discuss paintings, performances, novels, and essays. As we do so, we will work to understand the ideas and aspirations that motivated the artists, the nature of the culture(s) to which they responded, and the roles they envisioned for themselves as cultural critics. What concerns for the present and the future motivated their writings? How did their works speak to the concerns of their audience? Who were they responding to, what thinkers and writers and politicians—and why did they think that they needed to respond? As we answer these questions as historians-in-training, we will work to set aside our own views at first, to be sympathetic to ideas that we don't and can't understand. But we will also, inevitably, approach these works as critics ourselves, as readers with our own preferences, fears, and hopes. We will be attentive to our experiences with these works and the way that the years since their publications have changed how we read them now. As we work to understand American history through the lens of criticism, we will discuss the strengths and limitations of our intellectual-historical methodology. Whose voices have privilege in this approach, and whose do we tend not to hear? What parts of historical change do we miss? Finally, as we contemplate the responsibility of the intellectual, we will grapple with our own positions within the university and ask about the ways that history can inform our own lives and civic engagement.

Course Objectives:

Students in this class can expect to gain

- A deeper understanding of the major cultural movements of the 20th-century United States
- The ability to analyze written, visual, and performing art in historical context
- Confidence comprehending difficult critical texts and analyzing visual and performing arts
- Experience speaking in front of a group and participating in discussion
- The ability to express complex ideas in clear and compelling written forms

Class Format and Participation:

The course will meet weekly for seminar-style discussions. Students will be expected to arrive to class not only having read the assigned material but having taken the time to prepare some written remarks (1-2 minutes) on it, which they will turn in. We will begin each class by sharing some of those initial thoughts. During the course of the conversation, students will be responsible for monitoring their own participation, neither dominating the discussion nor remaining silent, and for contributing to an environment that makes all students feel supported.

Grading and Assignments:

30% Attendance and participation in discussion and class activities, including initial written remarks

20% Book Review (3 – 4 pp. reviewing an academic history book on the period chosen for the final assignment, draft due in class week 4, final copy due week 6)

50% Final assignment: Journal symposium

For the final project, you are going to write a journal symposium. Pick an issue that was central to a particular historical moment, and invite four writers and critics to weigh in on it. You will need

to write an opening editorial statement, explaining to your readers why this is such an important issue in their own time, laying out the questions that you asked contributors to answer, and introducing the four contributors. Then, citing their own work, you will write four short essays by the contributors, responding to the editorial prompt. Make sure that your choice of contributors and your central issue are all historically appropriate (i.e. all the contributors need to have been alive and writing at the time of the symposium, you cannot refer to events or publications yet in the future, etc.). The opening editorial (including questions and contributor introductions) should be approximately 1,500 words, and each response essay should be 500 - 750 words. (Formatting: your assignment should be written in 12 pt., Times New Roman font, double-spaced, and cited with Chicago-style citations.)

- 10% Proposal (3pp, double spaced, including intended topic, list of contributors, and bibliography, due in class, week 8).
- 10% Questions (5 – 8 questions, pre-circulated before class, week 11)
- 10% Editorial statement draft (due in class, week 12)
- 20% Final Project (due via email during our final exam period)

Late Assignments: Please note that late papers will be penalized by one grade level (e.g. from a B+ to a B) for every day that they are late.

Absences: Absences may be made up by arranging a meeting with me to discuss the assigned materials and your thoughts on them.

Required Course Books:

In addition to the essays below, which will be available via library e-reserves, students should acquire the following books:

Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring* (1932)

Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)

Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)

All of these books, as well as the books from which excerpts are drawn, are available for free from the library. *Should you decide to purchase the books, I encourage you to buy from an independent used or new bookstore.*

House Rules:

Students are expected to arrive on-time for class and to stay for the entire class meeting.

You must wear a mask (N95, KN95, or surgical-plus-cloth) over your mouth and nose at all times. I will remind you to wear it properly once before asking you to leave class for the day.

Please don't eat in class (drinks are okay)

Writing:

Good writing is an essential skill for the successful communication of ideas, and it will be taken seriously in this course. Your grade on all assignments will depend on grammar, punctuation, syntax, style, and organization, in addition to argument and use of evidence. We will discuss basic elements of writing in class, but students should consult Strunk and White, *Elements of Style* and Christopher Lasch, *Plain Style* for additional guidance.

Academic Integrity:

The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Ethical violations include cheating on exams, plagiarism, reuse of assignments, improper use of the Internet and electronic devices, unauthorized collaboration, alteration of graded

assignments, forgery and falsification, lying, facilitating academic dishonesty, and unfair competition. University policy: <https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/student-life/student-conduct/academic-ethics-undergraduates>.

Disabilities:

Students needing accommodations for disabilities should register with the Office for Student Disability Services and alert the instructor to their needs as soon as possible.

Student Disability Services: 103 Shaffer, (410) 516-4720, studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu.

Mental Health:

Elite universities can create environments of enormous pressure. The work can feel overwhelming and unrelenting. Please reach out for help if you need: I am always available to talk, as is the staff at our counseling center: <https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/counselingcenter/>

Schedule of Assignments:

Week 1, Jan. 25: What Is American Culture?

In class:

- WEB Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” and “The Sorrow Songs” from *Souls of Black Folk* (1903)
- Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas” (1871)

Week 2, Feb. 1: Antimodernism

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892)

Henry Adams, “The Dynamo and the Virgin,” from *The Education of Henry Adams* (1905 private; 1918 commercial)

Week 3, Feb. 8: New York Modern: Greenwich Village

“Armory Show at 100” exhibit, available online at <http://armory.nyhistory.org/category/artworks/>

Randolph Bourne, “Transnational America” (1916)

Mabel Dodge, “Speculations, or Post-Impressionism in Prose” (1913)

Week 4, Feb. 15: New York Modern: Harlem Renaissance

Draft of book review due in class (hard copy if at all possible)—*these will be returned by 2/21*

Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring* (1932)

In class:

- Alain Locke, “The New Negro” (1925)
- Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926)

Week 5, Feb. 22: The New Criticism

John Crowe Ransom, “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” (1930), TBD excerpt from *The New Criticism* (1941)

F.O. Matthiessen, “New Standards in American Criticism” (1952)

Week 6, Mar. 1: The Depression and Proletarian Art

Final book review due in class (hard copy if at all possible)

Los Tres Grandes, short film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsjxVSc9M08>

James Agee, excerpt *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941)

Meridel Le Sueur, “I Was Marching”

In class:

- Discussion of symposium as a form

Week 7, Mar. 8: The Anti-Stalinist Left

Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939)

Lionel Trilling, “Reality in America” (1950)

In Class:

- Film: *Arguing the World* (1998)

Week 8, Mar. 15: Mid-Century Modern Art

Proposal due in class today, hard copies for workshop—*these will be returned by 3/22*

Slideshow, Abstract Expressionism;

Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters” (1942)

Video, Balanchine ballet;

Lincoln Kirstein, “The Nature of American Ballet” (1959)

In class:

- Proposal workshop

Spring Break!

Week 9, Mar. 29: Mid-Century Modern Literature

Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)

In Class:

- James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949)
- Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug” (1964)

Week 10, Apr. 5: New Left

Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic,” from *Sister Outsider* (1984)

Paul Goodman, Preface to *Growing Up Absurd* (1960)

Vine Deloria, “Indians Today: The Real and the Unreal” from *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969)

Week 11, Apr. 12: Black Arts Movement

Questions due in class, hard copy for workshop

Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)

In class:

- Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), “The Negro as Non-American” from *Blues People* (1963)
- Workshop questions

Week 12, Apr. 19: Postmodernism #1

Draft of editorial statement due in class--*revisions returned by 4/25*

Pop Art slideshow

Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” (1964)

Video of Kaprow’s happenings

Allan Kaprow, essays from *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (1993)

Week 13, Apr. 26: Postmodernism #2

Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)

In class:

- bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness” (1990)