

American Cultures after 1945

ENGL 258 | MDST 270

FALL 2020

TUESDAY/THURSDAY 9:30-11:30AM & FRIDAY 10:15-11:15AM

ZOOM LINK FOR TU/TH: [HTTPS://BELOIT.ZOOM.US/J/95620683318](https://beloit.zoom.us/j/95620683318)

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Course Description

This course is a survey of United States literary and cultural production from 1945 to the present, organized by specific publics and cultures that these products have precipitated, mediated, or represented. In particular, we will consider three loose groupings: Protest Cultures (especially antiwar and antiracist art and literature from the 1950s-1960s), Sex Cultures (1960s-1970s work from the “sexual liberation,” including in its feminist and pro-queer varieties), and Migration Cultures (work exploring diaspora and immigration in the United States from 1980 to the present). The course is therefore structured both chronologically and thematically, inviting students to make historically specific but culturally expansive connections across media, identity categories, political affiliations, and the high/low art divide.

Dealing with themes of sex, violence, and trauma, much of the material of this course can be upsetting. So, too, may be our class discussions, because difficult material can produce conversations whose trajectories are not knowable in advance. Careful attention to the material and to each other as we participate in the co-creation of knowledge will be our rule, but even this cannot make a guarantee against surprises. Please read through all of the syllabus now so you know what lies ahead. I urge you to come talk with me about any concerns you may have about participating fully in this class as soon as possible.

Learning Outcomes

Our goals for this course are triple:

1. to acquire skills in “reading” novels, poems, photographs, comics, films, and music videos alike for cultural evidence;
2. to develop a historical consciousness of the major social, political, and aesthetic events of the past 70 years; and
3. to evaluate and construct arguments relating aesthetic objects to their historical worlds.

The three major writing assignments for the course build on each other so that by the end of the course you should be able to create “archives” that group together related cultural objects and connect them to each other and to history.

The skills developed have importance beyond your ability to do well in the class. By asking you to engage in creative and critical ways with the texts and with each other, this class aims to prepare you to be an effective communicator and collaborator. Learning to think about cultural objects from multiple perspectives, and learning to share these with others, will make your mind versatile and adaptive to multiple future workplace and intellectual settings.

Course Format

This course is designed to run entirely online. On Tuesday and Thursday mornings, we will meet as an entire class over Zoom. These synchronous meetings are mandatory. Additionally, students will have group projects in weeks 1, 2, and 4 (the three weeks when we do not have an individual essay due). I encourage groups to use the scheduled Friday time slot (10:15–11:15am) to meet in their groups, but I leave it to you to decide the best times to get together.

The aim of the Tuesday and Thursday sessions is to discuss novels, essays, videos, poems, and plays from post-1945 American culture. Most of this material was written before the year 2000. To provide a more post-2000 perspective, the Friday/group sessions invite students to work in “new media” such as memes, YouTube videos, and blogs. Groups will “convert” or “translate” a reading from the week into this new medium, for instance making a YouTube video that summarizes feminist manifestos from the 1970s or making memes that express the culture of disaffection from the 1960s.

Course Requirements

Grade Determination

For this course, you are required to:

- participate regularly in class discussions on Tuesday and Thursday (20%);
- participate equally in three group projects (10% each);

- complete one 4-page writing assignment due week three (15%);
- complete one 4-page writing assignment due week five (15%); and
- complete one 6-page writing assignment due week seven (20%).

Participation

This class is structured as a seminar, and discussion will be our common activity. Class participation is essential and mandatory for us to succeed—and that means not just showing up, but actively listening to and engaging with each other. I know it can be hard to put yourself out there and to think out loud in a room of your peers, but it's essential to our aims in the course. If you're finding it difficult to participate in class, come chat with me in office hours and we can brainstorm points of entry for you to make the discussion more accessible.

If you're going to be absent for a good reason, please let me know 48 hours ahead of time. More than one absence will make it much harder for you to develop the skills and knowledge you need to succeed in this course; more than two absences will directly lower your grade by 1/3.

As part of participation, I'll also be holding student conferences in week 6 (the week of Thanksgiving). This is not an oral exam! The point of the conference is discuss your final paper, so I can give you feedback as you develop it.

Group Work

In weeks 1, 2, and 4, students will meet on their own in small groups with the aim of providing new media “translations” or “conversions” of the pre-2000 material assigned that week.

The groups will be randomly assigned, and I will make an effort for students to be able to work with as many other students as possible, i.e, the group breakdown will change each time to re-distribute students.

Here are my expectations:

- Your group should demonstrate substantial engagement with the material assigned. Your media production should also indicate substantial effort. For instance:
 - In week 1, you are making memes. Because this is something that is easy enough to websites like <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator> or <https://memegenerator.net/>, you should endeavor to show deeper thinking and time spent by making at least a dozen memes as a group.
 - In week 2, you can make a YouTube video, TikTok videos, or a podcast. A YouTube video is going to be harder than a TikTok video. Therefore, your group should probably make 3-4 TikTok videos if you go that route, instead of one longer YouTube video or podcast.
 - In week 4, you will make something in the format of a text-based platform, such as a Blogger blog, a Tumblr microblog, or a Twitter post. Because Twitter limits you to 280 characters per tweet, you will have to think creatively in making a thread, 280 characters at a time.

- Your group should introduce your creation with a paragraph explaining what you were translating and why you chose to do things the way you are doing.
- Each group member will, individually, submit a short reflection on the group process. This is so I can ensure work is being evenly divided among members. If you do not fill out the reflection, I will assume you contributed no work and you will receive a 0.

Papers

The formal writing for this course consists of three papers, due Thursday before class in weeks 3, 5, and 7. All papers will be submitted through Google Classroom.

Assignment #1: Magazine Culture Object

The purpose of this assignment is to get you familiar with searching for cultural objects and developing arguments that connect them to larger historical situations. You will be evaluated according to your ability to (1) write a clear thesis statement, (2) structure your paper so that subsequent paragraphs contribute to your thesis in a clear way, and (3) gather specific pieces of evidence from the object that supports each paragraph's contribution. Note that gathering evidence is very similar to what you do every week in Chalk posts.

On the first day of class, we looked at magazine covers from *TIME*, *New Yorker*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *LIFE*. For this assignment, you will be asked to write a 4-page essay on an article of your choice from one of these magazines that supplements the materials on our syllabus for "Protest Cultures."

- First, find a magazine article, essay, or photojournal. *TIME*, *New Yorker*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *LIFE* are each available to search either through our library's website or Google Books. Restrict your search to the years 1945–1968 and consider using keywords drawn from the other materials we have read in class. The article must address Protest Culture in one of the manifestations we have addressed, for instance anti-war or anti-racism.
- Write a paragraph introducing the object and arguing for why or how it participates in Protest Culture. This paragraph should provide the basic details of the object (its title, author, publication, length, and date) and conclude with a thesis statement. A thesis statement would say something along the lines of "This article protests X by showing/depicting/calling attention to/visualizing/articulating Y."
- Write 3–4 pages that develop this argument. Each paragraph of your essay should unfold/defend your thesis statement by quoting from the article or picking out elements in it that show what it is doing and how.
- Please download a copy of your object to turn in with the essay.

Due: by 11:59pm on Sunday of 3rd week (November 8).

Assignment #2: Visual Culture Object

For this assignment, you will write up a 4-page essay based on findings from spending no fewer than 60 minutes with an art object of your choice. The purpose of this assignment is to build on the previous assignment in building your skills at creating an archive, this time trained on visual analysis. I'm also asking you to "leave" your bedroom to explore culture through other institutions. To do so, take a virtual tour of one of the art museums currently offering online exhibits. The steps below will guide you through how to do visual analysis, and you will be graded equally on each step.

- First, select an object made by an artist in the United States after 1945 (preferably a painting or photograph) that is currently housed in an art museum.
- Second, spend an hour with the object, observing: its size, what it is made of, the shape of its brushstrokes or materials, what it depicts, and how. How are elements in the object arranged? What is the relation between these elements and the properties of the painting like color?
- Third, reflect on what these observations might mean for the artist's relation to their subject matter and to the cultures and audience that might have produced or were intended for the object. How do the shapes, color, and contents of the material work together to create moods? What are the emotional responses enabled by the object?
- Fourth, interpret or evaluate what these effects of the artwork do in terms of intervening into or representing American culture or the conditions of social groups in American society.
- Finally, using these notes, write up the essay. Consider using about 1-2 pages for each of the steps above: description, reflection, and interpretation/evaluation.

Due: by noon on Friday of 5th week (November 20).

Assignment #3: Proposal for an Addition to the Course

This course makes no claim to exhaust the field of post-1945 literature or culture in America. Therefore, I invite you to propose another cluster to add to a future version of the course. The purpose of this assignment is to complete your mastery of creating archives, building historical arguments, and making cultural commentary. At the same time, it invites you to take what you have learned in the course outside of the course, so that you practice the ability to process other cultural materials in American society.

Your task will be fourfold:

- Designate a "Culture" that you claim is of importance for understanding American culture after 1945. For instance, you might consider Nuclear Culture, Celebrity Culture, Pop Culture, Urban Culture, Suburban Culture, Environmental Culture, Faith Culture, Patriotic Culture, Military Culture, Digital Culture . . .
- Select 3 objects that participate in this Culture. An object could be a novel, a poem (or collection of poems), an essay, a photograph (or collection of photographs), a film, a music video, or a painting. You must include at least one object that is primarily textual (e.g., a poem) and one object that is primarily visual (e.g., a photograph). For instance, you could have two novels (textual), and a film (visual).

- Provide bibliographic information (Chicago style preferred) for each object and annotate them, with 200-300 words each (or about a paragraph) describing what they are and where they come from. This should amount to about 2 pages total.
- Write a 4-page essay that introduces and describes your Culture, using your objects as evidence. Questions you might explore in the essay include: What features of American society does your Culture bring to the fore? What is its (racialized, gendered, sexualized) relation to groups of people? How does it connect with other Cultures we have studied in the course? To what social and historical pressures does your Culture respond?

The evaluation of the essay will be similar to the first writing exercise: have a clear structure and use evidence drawn from your materials to support a central argument. In your introduction, preview what you'll be writing in the rest of the essay by mapping out the trajectory of the paper. Give a sense of where your paper is going, and how. Then, frame each of your paragraphs as a step in that trajectory and provide introductory sentences and transitions that flag this accordingly. Within each paragraph, bring in specific pieces of evidence to support the step you are making.

Due by noon the Thursday of the last week of class (December 3).

Class Policies

Academic Resources

College-level analysis and writing pose challenges to all students. To help you meet these challenges, you may find it helpful to utilize some of the services provided by the college. Various professional staff and advanced students are committed to helping you address academic challenges in a variety of ways. Please let me know if there are any resources I can help you find to ensure your success in this class.

I strongly encourage you to visit the Writing Center website at <https://www.beloit.edu/writingcenter/> to learn about tutoring and mentoring options, guidance on study skills and time management, and one-on-one assistance to ensure that you are using the best possible strategies for success in your course work. The Writing Center has appointments available Sunday-Thursday 3-10pm. Try not to wait until the last minute—there is often a lot of work to be done after a session. At an appointment, you will bring in the assignment, related reading, and any previous work on which you've received feedback. Please try it out! It is so helpful to be able to sit down with somebody to dissect your assignment prompt, discuss the related reading, generate ideas and make a plan, revise drafts, and edit sentence-level issues. And you don't need to have writing done to find a session useful—sometimes it's great to have an appointment just to get started!

Accommodations

I aim to make this class accessible and inclusive by meeting the needs of each student. That means I'm happy to meet with you or respond to your e-mails if you have any concerns about the class. I just ask that you get in touch sooner rather than later so we can work toward solutions together as soon as possible. I also welcome requests for accommodation; just check out <https://www.beloit.edu/dss/enrolledstudents/accommodations/>.

Late Papers

Turning in papers on time allows me to provide feedback in a timely manner. However, I understand things come up in life and sometimes a couple extra days to work on a paper can make all the difference. If that happens, what's most important to me is that we stay in good communication so we have a plan on when you can turn in a paper and when I can return it to you. Please reach out to me sooner rather than later if you foresee a challenge.

Office Hours

I love talking with students and having the opportunity to think out loud with you in real time. That means the best time to discuss any questions you have with me is in class or during office hours. I am available over e-mail to answer brief clarification questions or to set up office hour appointments, but please come to office hours or set up an appointment to discuss anything more substantive. Please make an appointment here: <https://tinyurl.com/dangomt>. If none of the available times work for you, please e-mail me 48 hours in advance to schedule a different time.

Please also note that this syllabus gives you detailed information about due dates and readings. Read it and refer to it often. Answers to many questions are already provided here.

Please note I do not usually check e-mail after 5pm on weekdays and only rarely over the weekend. Please do not expect prompt replies at this time. However, I will make every effort to reply to your e-mail within 24 hours.

Books & Readings

Almost all of the readings for this class will be made available as PDFs or other digital files in Google Classroom. However, I am also asking you to buy/rent/borrow a copy of James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (ISBN 978-0307275936).

Reading Schedule

Below is our reading schedule. For a given class meeting, read all the readings listed under that day *before* class, and come prepared to discuss.

1 Introductory: “America” in Post-War America

Tuesday, October 20: American Dreaming

- Henry Luce, “The American Century” (1941)
- Selected magazine covers from *TIME*, *New Yorker*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *LIFE* (1945)

Thursday, October 22: American Disillusion

- Norman Mailer, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster” (1957)
- Joan Didion, “Slouching Toward Bethlehem” (1967)
- Kenneth Anger (director), *Fireworks* (1947)
- Allen Ginsberg, “Howl” (1955)

Friday, October 23: Group Work—Memes

- On Thursday, we will divide into 5 groups. Each group will be responsible for making memes that express the mood or ideas of the objects we explored on Thursday. A total of 12 memes, with a paragraph introducing them, are due by Sunday at 11:59pm.

2 Protest Cultures: Vietnam & the Sexual Revolution

Tuesday, October 27: Photographic Witness / Comic Protest

- *Please look for the following photographs on the Internet. Take notes of where you find them, as we will discuss in class the circulation and context of the images. Please also read the Associated Press 50th anniversary story on the first image (available on Google Classroom).*
 - Malcolm Browne, “Self-Immolation of Thich Quang Duc” (1963)
 - Toshio Sakai, “Dreams of Better Time” (1967)
 - David Hume Kennerly, “Easter Sunday” (1968)
 - Eddie Adams, “General Nguyen Ngoc Loan Executing A Viet Cong Prisoner in Saigon” (1968)
 - Ron Haeberle, “My Lai Massacre” (1969)
 - Nick Ut, “Napalm Girl” (1972)
 - Slava Veder, “Burst of Joy” (1973)
- Jules Feiffer, *Feiffer on Vietnam* (1964)
- Ron Cobb, “*Mah Fellow Americans*” (1968) (selections)

Thursday, October 29: Varieties of the Sex Manifesto

- Valerie Solanas, “SCUM Manifesto” (1967)
- Carl Wittman, “A Gay Manifesto” (1970)
- Radicalesbians, “Woman-Identified Woman” (1970)
- Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic” (1978)

- “The Combahee River Collective Statement” (1978)
- Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1984)
- Susan Stone, “A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1987)
- “Queers Read This” (1990)
- Gloria Anzaldúa, “La Conciencia de la Mestiza” (1999)

Friday, October 30: Group Work–Video or Podcast

- On Thursday, we will divide into 5 groups. Each group will be responsible for making a YouTube video, TikTok video, or podcast that summarizes and interprets one of the manifestos. These will be due on Sunday at 11:59pm.

3 Protest Cultures: Black Power

Tuesday, November 3: Baldwin 1

- Read the first half of James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974)
- James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1949)

Thursday, November 5: Baldwin 2

- Read the second half of James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974)
- *LIFE* photo-essay on Baldwin, “Telling Talk from a Negro Writer” (1963)
- Gordon Parks photo-essay in *LIFE*, “The Restraints: Open and Hidden” (1956)

No group work this week – Essay #1 due on Sunday by 11:59pm

4 Sexual Cultures and the Cold War

Tuesday, November 10: Sexual Liberation and Historical Trauma

- Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* (1991)

Thursday, November 12: AIDS and the 1980s

- Paul Monette, “Worrying” and “Manifesto” from *Elegies for Rog* (1988)
- Walter Holland, “Sheridan Square” from *A Journal of the Plague Years* (1992)
- Thom Gunn, “The Hug,” “Philemon and Baucis,” and “The Missing” from *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992)

- Tim Dlugos, “Parachute” and “Sleep Like Spoons” (1990)
- Timothy Liu, “SFO/HIV/JFK,” “Sodom and Gomorrah,” and “The Quilt” from *Vox Angelica* (1992)
- Essex Hemphill, “American Wedding,” “For My Own Protection,” and “Heavy Breathing” from *Ceremonies* (1992)
- Melvin Dixon, “Silent Reaper” and “Into Camp Ground” from *Love’s Instruments* (1995)
- Reginald Shepherd, “Two or Three Things I Know About Him” and “Paradise” from *Angel, Interrupted* (1996)
- Félix González-Torres, “Untitled” (billboard; 1991)

Friday, November 13: Group Work–Twitter

- On Thursday, we will divide into 5 groups. Each group will be responsible for “adapting” Kushner’s play as a series of tweets, a weblog, or some other textual Internet form. These will be due on Sunday at 11:59pm.

5 Migration Cultures

Tuesday, November 17: Linguistic Barriers

- Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, selections from *Dictée* (1982)

Thursday, November 19: Traumas of Dislocation

- Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017)

No group work this week—Essay #2 due Friday at noon

6 Conferences

In lieu of classes and in light of Thanksgiving break, I will schedule individual conferences with students this week to discuss your final project.

7 Class Choice

Tuesday, December 1: TBD

- In week 5, students will propose and vote on a topic for our final class discussion. I will assign texts that speak to this topic.

Final essay due Thursday at noon