

History 231, American Cultural Traditions (3 credits)  
Cedar Crest College  
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Spring 2009

#### COURSE CONTENT: Objectives, Format, Evaluation, and Outcome

This course examines the culture of ordinary Americans from the colonial period to the present. Because the field is vast, the lectures will generally confine themselves to the evolution of popular painting and illustration; to such literary efforts as the dime novel and the magazine; to nightlife and stage entertainment like burlesque, vaudeville, and minstrelsy; and to the advent and evolution of radio and television. African-American culture will be explored in the lectures, and in readings by John Blassingame. The course will also explore two of the leading topics of popular culture: the myth of the frontier, and the myth of the urban crime fighter.

By means of assigned readings, classroom lectures, and films, students will gain a great deal of information about American popular culture. But the purpose of the course goes well beyond the accumulation of data. Classroom discussion and the research project will encourage the student to ask intelligent questions about the history of popular culture, to think critically about evidence, and to apply the principles of logic to historical facts and theories.

Students often ask: What good is knowledge about the history of popular culture or, for that matter, any historical subject? There are many answers to such a question. But one need only think of men and women who know nothing of the past. For them governments rise or fall, wars are fought, nations are disposed—seemingly without explanation. Trapped in the small world of their own experience, such people are similar to the superstitious folk of past ages. They feel prey to forces beyond comprehension. At best they are given to apathy, at worst to paranoia.

Students who successfully complete this course will be well on their way to escaping such a condition. This knowledge will be useful as the student is bombarded by popular culture for the rest of her or his life.

#### READINGS:

Steven Biel, *Down With the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster*  
Thomas J. Brown, *The Public Art of the Civil War*  
Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*

John B. Gatewood and Catherine M. Cameron, "Battlefield Pilgrims at Gettysburg National Military Park," *Ethnology*, Summer 2004, pp. 193-216 (on reserve in the library)

John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, pp. 105-148 (on reserve in library)

David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, pp. 180-187, 195-202, 508-520 (on reserve in library)

#### TESTS:

There will be a mid-term test and a final exam. The mid-term will be on March 17.

#### PAPER:

You will write a paper on some aspect of American popular culture. Your work should be historical in nature; it must be based on an extensive use of primary sources; and it should reflect the use of on-line and traditional sources (for example, books found in the library). Your paper will be graded on the quality of the argument, the quality of the research, and the quality of the writing. I shall discuss this project at length in class. This paper is due in class on Thursday, April 2. For every unexcused day it is late, it will lose a letter grade.

The text of this paper should be about eight double-spaced pages in length. In addition, your work should include a cover page and a bibliography. On the cover page should appear your name, the title, the date, and the following statement signed by you: "I have carefully read and understand the handout entitled 'Citations.'" Your paper's citations should be placed at the bottom of the page or at the end of the test. They should not appear within the text itself.

For security purposes, please keep a second copy of your work.

#### GRADING:

|               |                |
|---------------|----------------|
| Paper         | 30% (April 2)  |
| Final         | 30% (TBA)      |
| Mid-Term Test | 30% (March 17) |
| Discussion    | 10%            |

#### CLASSROOM ATTENDANCE:

Students are required to show up for the exam, for the test, and for book discussions. In addition, students should realize that they cannot do well in their classroom discussion grade if they do not attend class and regularly take part in discussion. If you miss required work such as the test, or the exam, you will only be allowed to get a makeup with a legitimate excuse. Illness or other problems must be documented with a note from the Dean of Students office. I don't, however, expect you to risk your life or damage to your car trying to make it to a test in terrible

weather. If weather conditions make it impossible to get to school, you should call my office and leave a message.

#### MISSED CLASSES:

If you are unable to attend a class, it is your responsibility to get the missed notes. It is also your responsibility to be aware of any announcements—for example, assignments, schedule changes, etc.—that may have been given during class.

#### DISABILITIES:

Students with documented disabilities who may need academic accommodations should discuss these needs with me during the first two weeks of class. Students with disabilities who wish to request accommodations should contact the Advising Center.

#### OFFICE HOURS:

Office visits are welcome. If you have questions or problems with the course, or if you just want to chat about history, please feel free to drop by. My hours are Wednesdays and Thursdays 11:00-11:30 a.m. I am also available, by appointment, on Monday evenings from 9:30-9:45 p.m. If these times are not convenient, please call me or see me after class for an appointment.

**THIS COURSE WILL BE TAUGHT IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE CEDAR CREST COLLEGE HONOR SYSTEM AND THE CLASSROOM PROTOCOL CODE FOUND IN THE BUSTOMS BOOK. CHEATING AND/OR PLAGIARISM WILL RESULT IN FAILURE OF THE COURSE. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS, PLEASE SEE ME.**

## COURSE OUTLINE:

- I. Introduction: Elite Culture, Folk Culture, Popular Culture, and Mass Culture  
Reading: Down With the Old Canoe
  
11. Elite and Folk Culture During the Colonial period and the Early Republic
  - a. Painting and Sculpture  
Portraits in the Grand Manner: Charles Willson Peale to Gilbert Stuart  
Prints and Primitives  
The Landscape, the Still Life, and Genre Painting
  
  - b. American Domestic Architecture from the Vernacular to the Second Empire (Early Colonial Period to the 1870s)  
Readings: Blassingame, The Slave Community, pp. 105-148  
Brown, The Public Art of the Civil War  
Gatewood and Cameron, "Battlefield Pilgrims"
  
- III. American Popular Culture in the Modern Age
  - a. A Revolution in Printing: Lithographs, Dime Novels, Magazines, and Cheap Newspapers—the Comics
  - b. Radio  
"Amos 'n' Andy"—Race and Racism Over the Air Waves
  - c. Television
  - d. American Domestic Architecture from the Victorian to the Post-Modern (1880s to the 1990s)  
Reading: Halberstam, The Fifties, pp. 180-187, 195-202, 508-520
  
- IV. American Popular Culture on the Stage
  - a. Venues: the Circus, the Theater, the Saloon, the Oyster Palace, the Cabaret, and the Nightclub
  - b. Entertainment: Minstrelsy, Vaudeville, and Burlesque
  - c. Edification: Shakespeare and Chautauqua  
Reading: Erenberg, Steppin' Out
  
- V. Topics in the History of Popular Culture
  - a. The Cowboy from the Virginian to Clint Eastwood
  - b. The Private Eye from C. August Dupin to Mike Hammer