

Popular Culture in America, 1800 to Present

HIST 449; Spring 2021; MW 9:45-11:00am; Online through Canvas

Instructor: Prof. Richard Popp (popp@uwm.edu)

Office hours: Mondays, 12pm-2pm and by appointment

Course Description

This class explores the development of popular culture in the United States. Surveying more than 200 years, we'll cover everything from the music of enslaved people in the Early Republic to the early years of social media in our own digital age. In between, we'll examine the rise (and sometimes fall) of such phenomena as the popular theater, the saloon, daily newspapers, spectator sports, the circus, urban amusements, comics, magazines, advertising, film, music, radio, television, and video games.

A key precept of the course is that the commercialization of pop culture over the course of more than two centuries has been one of the most important long-term historical processes in the nation's formation, influencing everything from its political culture to its social and economic structures. A second key idea is that popular culture has long served as a resource through which ordinary people have laid claim to a sense of dignity, happiness, and self-concept in everyday life and that it is a site upon which power has been contested at a societal level. As such we'll pay very close attention to how popular culture has indelibly shaped conceptions of class, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality in dynamic ways across various eras.

Though the focus will be on the US, the course will pay close attention to how American culture took shape in a transnational context, whether it be through the hybridized influence of dozens of immigrant cultures to the global export of American films, fashion, music, and television.

Course Objectives and Goals

By the end of this course, you will:

1. learn an overview of the cultural transformations that have shaped US society over the past two centuries; become familiar with the leading arguments historians have made about how to understand these changes;
2. gain a more sophisticated understanding of the complex roles played by cultural dynamics in historical processes of change; understand how culture serves as a field of conflict and contestation in and around social movements;
3. improve your ability to interpret, discuss, and analyze primary and secondary sources, especially the sorts of popular texts and artifacts commonly utilized by cultural historians; and
4. improve your research, writing, and analysis skills through class discussions and assignments.

Readings

Eric Avila, *American Cultural History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). This book costs about \$12 on Amazon.

All other course readings are available as e-books through the library or will be posted as PDFs to the course Canvas page. If you have any issues accessing online course material, please call the campus help desk (414-229-4040) or email: help@uwm.edu.

How the Course Will Work

On **Mondays**, you'll work through a set of recorded lectures and examples I've created and curated for the course Canvas site. On **Wednesdays**, we'll meet synchronously via Collaborate Ultra on Canvas for discussion. To facilitate discussion, the course will be divided into several groups. At the midway point of the semester, we'll reshuffle the groups.

Please note that our Wednesday class sessions will be **audio-visually recorded** for students who are unable to attend at the scheduled time. Students who participate with their camera engaged or who utilize a profile image are agreeing to have their audio/video or image recorded. Likewise, students who un-mute during class and participate orally are agreeing to have their voices recorded.

Course Requirements

Discussion Posts

These involve finding and analyzing an example that speaks to themes in that week's material. You'll write a post and a response to another student's post.

- 4 @ 9 points each: 36 points total
- Due dates: Feb. 12, March 5, March 19, April 30

Reading Responses

100-125 word response responding to questions and summarizing the author's primary argument. Over the course of the semester, you must turn in 6 response papers. There will be 13 opportunities to turn these in.

- 6 @ 4 points each: 24 points total
- Due: Wednesdays by 9am

Syllabus Quiz

Short quiz testing you on your knowledge of the syllabus and course Canvas site.

- 2 points
- Due: Feb. 1

Realtime Meeting Participation

This portion of your grade is based on your contributions to class discussions. To receive full credit, students should plan on contributing at least 2 informed comments or questions per meeting.

- 4 points for the first half of the semester + 4 points for the second half of the semester:
8 points total

Short Paper

4-6 page work of historical analysis engaging course themes and using primary and secondary sources.

- 15 points
- Due: April 16

Final Exam

Take home exam in which you'll answer 2 of 4 essays. Each answer should run 3 paragraphs in length.

- 15 points
- Due: May 19

Schedule of Topics and Readings

Jan. 25 & 27: Intro: Understanding History Through Pop Culture

Readings:

- Avila, Introduction
- Lawrence W. Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences," *American Historical Review*, 97, no. 5 (Dec. 1992): 1369-1399.

https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/1ng3aq9/TN_cdi_crossref_primary_10_2307_2_165941

Feb. 1 & 3: The City and the Country: Amusements in the Early American Republic

Readings:

- Avila, Chap. 1: "American Culture in Red, White, and Black"
- Lawrence W. Levine, "William Shakespeare and the American People: A Study in Cultural Transformation," *American Historical Review*, 89, no. 1 (Feb. 1984): 34-66.

https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/1ng3aq9/TN_cdi_proquest_journals_12896818_63

- Week 2 Evidence Set
- Due: Syllabus Quiz (Feb. 1); Reading Response

Feb. 8 & 10: Southern Folk Life: Plantation and Backcountry Culture

Readings:

- Simon Joyner, "Chap. 6: All de Bes' Story," from *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984). **PDF**
- Elliott J. Gorn, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch": The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review*, 90, 1 (Feb. 1985): 18-43.

https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/1ng3aq9/TN_cdi_crossref_primary_10_2307_1_860747

- Week 3 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response; Discussion Post 1 (Feb. 12)

Feb. 15 & 17: Minstrels, Penny Papers, and the Age of Barnum

Readings:

- Avila, "Chap. 2: Mass Culture and Mass Politics: 1800-1860"
- Eric Lott, "Chap. 2: Love and Theft: Racial Production and the Social Unconscious of Blackface," from *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class*, 20th Anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993/2013).

<https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/v84fe3/UWI51457008900002121>

- Week 4 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response

Feb. 22 & 24: Parlor Life: The Middle Class & Sentimental Culture

Readings:

- Karen Haltunnen, "Chap. 3: Sentimentalism and the Problem of Etiquette," in *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). **PDF**
- Louise Stevenson, "Homes, Books, and Reading," from *A History of the Book in America, vol. 3, The Industrial Book, 1840-1800*, ed. by Scott Casper et al (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 319-331.

<https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/kn20uh/UWI51450549590002121>

- Week 5 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response

March 1 & 3: Mechanized Entertainment: Circuses, Fairs, and Wild West Shows

Readings:

- Avila, "Chap. 3: The Age of the City, 1860-1900."
- Janet Davis, "Chap. 3: Spectacular Labor," in *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2002).

<https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/kn20uh/UWI51451214540002121>

- Week 6 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response; Discussion Post 2 (March 5)

March 8 & 10: Ads, Magazines, and Consumer Culture

Readings:

- Avila, "Chap. 4: The New Mass Culture, 1900-1945."
- Carolyn Kitch, "Chap. 2: The American Girl" and "Chap. 3: Dangerous Women and the Crisis of Masculinity," in *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2001).

<https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/v84fe3/UWI71490883590002121>

- Week 7 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response

March 15 & 17: Entertaining the Immigrant City: Dance Halls and Moving Pictures

Readings:

- Kathy Peiss, "Chap. 4: Dance Madness," in *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986). **PDF.**
- David Nasaw, excerpts from *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). **PDF.**
- Week 8 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response; Discussion Post 3 (March 19)

March 22 & 24: No Class – Spring Break

Week 10: March 29 & 31: Electrified Sounds: Records and Radios

Readings:

- David Suisman, "Chap. 4: The Traffic in Voices," in *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/v84fe3/UWI51449820470002121>

- Alison McCracken, "Introduction," in *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

<https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/v84fe3/UWI71400666320002121>

- Week 10 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response

April 5 & 7: Bright Lights, Big City: Urban Culture, 1920-1950

Readings:

- Lary May, Excerpts, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). **PDF.**
- George J. Sanchez, "Chap. 8: Familiar Sounds of Change: Music and the Growth of Mass Culture," in *Becoming Mexican-American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/v84fe3/UWI51451557580002121>

- Week 11 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response

April 12 & 14: Moral Panics: Comic Books and Rock & Roll

Readings:

- William Graebner, excerpts from *Coming of Age in Buffalo: Youth and Authority in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). **PDF.**
- Bradford W. Wright, "The EC Challenge" and "Turning Point" in *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). **PDF.**
- Week 12 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response; Short Paper (Apr. 16)

April 19 & 21: Living Room Culture: Television and Suburbia

Readings:

- Avila, "Chap. 5: The Suburbanization of American Culture."
- Lynn Spigel, "Chap. 1: Domestic Ideals and Family Amusements" and "Chap. 5: The People in the Theater Next Door," in *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), excerpt.

<https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/v84fe3/UWI71367168410002121>

- Week 13 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response

April 26 & 28: Hip-Hop, Punk, and the Birth of Contemporary Culture

Readings:

- Robin D. G. Kelley, "Looking to Get Paid: How Some Black Youth Put Culture to Work," in *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997). **PDF.**
- Michael Nevin Willard, "Cutback: Skate and Punk at the Far End of the American Century," in *America in the Seventies*, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004). **PDF.**
- Week 14 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response; Discussion Post 4 (Apr. 30)

May 3 & 5: Digital Culture: Video Games and Web 1.0

Readings:

- Michael Newman, "Video Games as Computers, Computers as Toys," in *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017). **PDF.**

- Alex Sayf Cummings, “The Global War on Piracy,” in *Democracy of Sound: Music Piracy and the Remaking of American Copyright in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<https://uwi-primoalma-prod.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/v84fe3/UWI51451486440002121>

- Week 15 Evidence Set
- Due: Reading Response

May 12: Wrap Up

Reading:

- Avila, “Chap. 6: The World Wide Web of American Culture.”

Final exam: Wed. May 19, 7:30-9:30am

Note: Schedule is subject to change during the semester.

Tech Help

If you’re running into issues with Canvas, contact the UWM Help Desk.

<https://uwm.edu/canvas/support-request/>

If you need a quiet and wi-fi friendly place to work outside the home, the Student Union has been rearranged to create socially distanced workspaces for students. It will be open until 10pm. The Learning Commons at Golda Meir Library will also feature socially-distanced workspaces. Please check the Library’s webpage for hours of operation:

<https://uwm.edu/libraries/about/hours/>

Course Policies

Late papers will be penalized 10% per day after the due date. If your paper is more than one week late (7 calendar days), you will receive a zero on the assignment. *Note: students cannot turn in reading response papers or discussion posts late.*

No extra credit assignments will be given.

Acts of academic misconduct, including plagiarism and collaborating on quizzes and individual assignments, will be treated severely. Students are responsible for the honest completion and representation of their work and for the proper citation of sources. Please familiarize yourself with the university’s policies and procedures regarding academic misconduct.

<https://uwm.edu/deanofstudents/conduct/academic-misconduct/>

If you need accessibility accommodations in order to meet the requirements of this course, please contact your instructor as soon as possible, preferably during the first week of the semester. You must have an Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) visa to receive any accommodation. For more see: <http://uwm.edu/arc/>

University Policies

Please familiarize yourself with the university's policies on accessibility, religious observances, active military duty, incompletes, discriminatory conduct, Title IX/sexual violence, academic misconduct, complaint procedures, grade appeal procedures, LGBTQ+ resources, tobacco use, and final examinations. Information on these policies can be found at:

<https://uwm.edu/secu/wp-content/uploads/sites/122/2016/12/Syllabus-Links.pdf>

Allocation of Student Time for the Semester

- Time in class (Canvas lectures and meetings): 37.5 hours
- Time taking exams: 2 hours
- Time completing assignments: 62 hours
- Time for preparation and study: 42.5 hours
- Total: 144 hours

Grade Breakdown

93-100 A	90-92 A-	88-89 B+
83-87 B	80-82 B-	78-79 C+
73-77 C	70-72 C-	68-69 D+
60-67 D	less than 60	F