

KAP AMERICAN STUDIES 108

Intro to American Studies: The United States at Mid-Century

Instructor: Matt Meister - m_meister@chuh.org

Cleveland Heights High School

2016-2017

This course is designed to allow students to explore the culture of the United States in a period of transition - the 1950s and early 60s. Although this course is being offered in the Social Studies department at Cleveland Heights High School, it is not a history class. American Studies is an interdisciplinary field incorporating History, Literature, Arts and Critical Theory in order to gain a greater understanding of History, Society and Culture. Further, this course is not a high school class, but is an introductory level postsecondary course from Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio.

Students are expected to do all assignments with enthusiasm and without exception. This course will not work if students do not make it work, so there will be little room to tolerate inadequate effort. You will be expected to read a lot. There is also a heavy writing requirement for this course. Additionally, you will need to be creative in producing work collectively. In short, this course is on your shoulders.

Students will work in two groups this semester. We will have one large seminar group of everyone, and two to three working groups, tba, which will produce two or three class presentations. Students will be self-evaluating and peer-evaluating these presentations. We will debrief as a seminar group at the end of presentations. This will account for 50% of your course grade. Your group has the option to revise your first presentation, and that would count as your optional final exam.

The other half of your grade will come from a journal you will keep on Google Classroom. This journal should never be treated as busywork. It is the most important part of the course because it is your version of the course. It is what you are getting out of this class. It is what you choose to share. I take your journal entries very seriously and you must as well. In your journal please reflect openly about the readings, discussions, and films. Try to make connections as the course evolves between where you are and what you have already encountered. I will offer reflections, criticisms and push-back to keep you thinking, probing and engaging.

We may not always talk about some of the material I have assigned, but you still need to reflect on, comment on, and struggle with the meaning of all the films and books and music. That said, journals that read like checklists will not be treated kindly.

At the end of each unit (there are five of them) make your final entry inclusive; take student presentations into account; apply the context of the previous weeks to understanding the text (artifact) at hand.

Work Small and Think Big. Use small and vivid details, "from the text" to find a way to ask larger questions about meaning. Do not retell plot.

Think about the relationship between any given text and artifact and its social, political, and cultural context. Always be asking "What more would I need to know to get a more full understanding of this issue?" Then, spend some time answering that question.

Write beautifully. While this is not a formal writing assignment, think about how you express yourselves, not by avoiding vernacular (after all this is probably a first person account) but by writing clearly. Edit your work for readability. Don't offer a stream-of-consciousness brain dump on a paper, but instead thoughtfully

present your work. Avoid very unnecessary and extraneous words that neither add to nor detract from your central point while obscuring what that point initially was in the first place, with added clauses to fill space and I forgot what I was saying. Please do not use the passive voice.

In all of your work, astonish me. Be original, take some chances, find the connections!

Do NOT tell me

- a. What I've already told you.
- b. What you think I want to hear.

Although it would be flattering to hear my voice mirrored back at me as your thoughts, I am not interested in hearing my thoughts in your voice. If you and I agree on something, give me your reasons why. I can almost guarantee they will be different from mine, and thus more interesting to read. My goal is not to get you to think like me, but to be engaged and thoughtful. You are encouraged to have your own analysis so long as you can back it up with a good argument.

Please write about films and books BEFORE we discuss them in class. Believe me I'll know otherwise. Write two solid entries each week (no fewer than 750 words, no more than 1500 words **EACH!!**). Journals should be on separate subjects. Don't write about the same topic from slightly different angles. Don't allow yourselves to fall behind; if you try to play catch-up it will read like a middle-school worksheet, which will annoy me (more on this below).

I will read and evaluate your journals regularly. You should submit them **before** they are due. Journals that come in late will not be considered. They are NOT to be your class notes. Your evaluation is cumulative: if you end up with an A that's what you will receive. Conversely, a C at the end is a C.

I will try to tell you on the way what to work on, what to improve, and expect that a good journal will respond to my critique. It is a gigantic time commitment for me to engage with your journals. If your journals are not worth my time, I will be annoyed. If your journals are deeply engaging, from the heart and struggling with the material, I will be happy. You would prefer me to be happy.

Course units and readings - This is an incomplete list of the materials we will examine in the class. Please remember that this is college. Some of the materials we will examine would not be appropriate in a high school setting due to language or even content. We will be viewing films with R ratings. Please see me as soon as possible if this presents a problem for you. I will do what I can to be flexible to your needs, but only if I have been made aware in advance.

Later in the course, you will receive a syllabus that has the course broken down by the day and to the content. Until I know what we can handle as a class, I will hold back on that. The following is an INCOMPLETE list of the essential parts of the course. This will be supplemented with artifacts of all sorts (music, ads, television shows, memorabilia, etc). At a minimum, you will be expected to work through the following items.

Unit 1 - Constructing History, Creating Culture (Historiography and Methods) - An introduction to the process of how we view the past, methods by which we construct historical narratives and an overview of critical analysis.

- Monographs
 - Something Has Gone Very Wrong and Historic Sites Are Always a Tale of Two Eras - James Loewen (excerpts)
 - That Noble Dream - Peter Novick (excerpt)
- Video

- You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train

Unit 2 - Race - An exploration of the role race plays in constructing American culture, as well as the fragility and tenuous definitions of race. We will examine the root assumptions of race and analyze the effects of those roots in this period through various means.

- Monographs
 - Whiteness of a Different Color by Matthew Frye Jacobson
- Articles
 - The Case for Reparations by Te'Nahasi Coates
- Film
 - Blackboard Jungle

Unit 3 - Gender - The dynamic changes to the conception of gender in the early 20th century illustrates the strong challenges to tradition as modernity advances. The idea that women are people is still difficult for some. It was explosive in this period.

- Monographs
 - The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath
 - The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood
- Film
 - Roman Holiday
 - Rosemary's Baby

Unit 4 - Class - Class conflict was muted in the 1950s due to several factors, but class differences were still quite stark. Further, the blindness to class discord under the surface created alienation and breaking points in the larger cultures.

- Monographs
 - Derelict Paradise by Daniel Kerr
- Film
 - Salt of the Earth
 - Man in the Grey Flannel Suit

Unit 5 - War - The post-war prosperity dovetailed into the Cold War at mid-century, as America celebrated a victory in Europe and Asia while going to war again in Asia (and threatening a war in Europe). The questions of war and peace in a time of prosperity continues to ignite conflicts.

- Monographs
 - Johnny Got His Gun by Dalton Trumbo
 - The Crucible
- Film
 - Trumbo
 - Dr. Strangelove