

Senior Seminar Topic Proposals Fall 2011

Adam Becker: American Military Conflicts and Technology

I am researching and writing about how new advances in technology have affected the way that the American public learns about the wars in which the country is involved. I'm especially interested in comparing how the ways that photography influenced perceptions of the Civil War with how television affected impressions of the Vietnam War and how the Internet and social media are impacting how we view Iraq, Afghanistan and other current wars. I plan to show how the modernization of certain technologies proved to be both cause and effect of their uses in documenting war. Because of the way that technology has evolved, the public has been able to feel closer and closer and more involved in war. How did this affect the public's perception of American wars? How does the change from still pictures, to video, to a 24/7 stream of pictures and information change the way that wars have been reported? What changes have been made in military and government policy regarding the dissemination of images and information as the technology has evolved? Who were the people creating and disseminating war images and how have their priorities changed over time? Do we get a better idea of what goes on in war when the images we receive come from people who are doing the fighting rather than journalists? How have war images been used to sway or change public opinion? How, if at all, are the members of the military affected by the changed in documentation technology?

Jessie Garretson: Tomorrow is a Latter Day: Exploring Representations of Mormons in Popular Culture

This past spring a new musical premiered on Broadway entitled "The Book of Mormon," featuring the story of two Mormon missionaries on their mission to Uganda. The musical was a tremendous financial and critical success, earning nine Tony awards, and selling out all shows for the next eight months. The majority of praise for the musical came from non-Mormon audiences, and "The Book of Mormon" is just one of the Mormon themed popular culture sources that have been released with the intent of entertaining secular audiences in the past few years. For my seminar paper, I would like to explore how this religious faith, one of the only true American religions, has become so prevalent in mainstream popular culture. I would like to examine the nature of these Mormon depictions, especially their comic elements, and the common perceptions of the elements of the faith they often feature. Some of the questions I hope to answer include: What are the common elements of the religion that are featured? Are they accurate? What makes Mormonism so financially successful and critically acclaimed by secular audiences? How do these representations differ from other religious focused popular culture? How have these depictions shaped the public concept of Mormonism?

How has the Mormon community responded to these representations? How is humor achieved in these portrayals, what is it about Mormonism that people find so funny? How do the interpretations differ throughout various forms of media? How do they differ by gender, race, age and sexual orientation of the character, and how does this reflect Mormon practices in regards to these categories of difference? Has Mormonism's role in popular culture increased in the past decade, if so, why? How do these trends correspond to the growth of the religion itself? What has made some representations prominent than others? In addition to "The Book of Mormon," I hope to use things like HBO television series "Big Love," reality television show "Sister Wives," cartoon program "South Park: All About Mormons," film "Latter Days," and best-selling novel, "Under the Banner of Heaven," as some of the representations I will examine. Additionally, I hope to speak with Mormon community members, audience members of the "Book of Mormon" and examine blogs, web sources, and other popular press on topic.

D'Juan Gilmore

My senior seminar paper treats hip-hop music as a genre. I want to focus on the distinctions between underground and mainstream hip-hop artists, noting how each type of artist has the ability to transform lives through their lyrical content, which will be the scope of my paper. I will pay attention to the following questions: How exactly does Hip-Hop have the capability to transform lives? Why do underground artists, such as Blue Scholars, stay underground and not become mainstream artists? How do these underground artists make a living by not being in the popular mainstream? How do artists such as Common, for example, generate the power to do whatever they want as artists and still remain popular but not mainstream? What roles do the record labels play in the business of mainstream artists? What role does the Internet play in creating a fan base large enough for underground hip-hop artists? Does not going mainstream benefit the artist? Does being a mainstream artist necessarily mean less meaningful lyrics? I intend to interview Wendy Day, the founder of Rap Coalition, which is a non-profit organization that helps artists protect themselves from being exploited by the media and record labels. The sources I will use include blogs, magazines, possible interviews, books, journals, and documentaries.

Izzy Kagan

For my senior seminar paper I will look at the role government has played in shaping how and what Americans eat as well as why Americans might need government to play this role. I will also examine the influence corporations and individuals from the business world have had on national policies regarding food. Finally, I will try to determine whether government policies have helped or harmed Americans and what solutions to our current health crises may be.

Questions I will ask in my paper include: Do Americans need government regulation of food? What about our culture of eating makes us so willing to listen to food scientists and government health guidelines? Does the United States have a national cuisine or a culture of eating? How have our eating habits changed from generation to generation? What are the effects immigrant populations on our 'eating culture' or lack thereof? How have corporations (and former ADM CEO Dwayne Andreas in particular) changed government policies on food? How have federal food bills benefited or harmed Americans' health? How can we improve government food legislation?

Kathryn Lazell: Saratoga Springs: Beacon of Change or Tourist Attraction?

Since the Revolutionary War, Saratoga Springs has been a consistently important part of American history and culture, drawing a diverse crowd from all over the United States and even the world. I believe Saratoga's distinctive history and consistent tourism put it in a unique position to create movements and inspire larger changes within the United States. However, Saratoga's draw as a tourist destination (both the springs and the racetrack) could also be detrimental to some movements depending on the values of the community. In this paper, I will examine Saratoga Springs and the movements that have taken place in the area from roughly the Civil War period to the present. I will ask the question: does Saratoga use its influence and diversity to inspire social and cultural change, or does it forgo social activism in order to attract and please tourists?

In exploring Saratoga's activism, I will examine Saratoga's position as more than a tourist destination by looking at movements that have occurred within the community. Specifically, I will focus on Saratoga in terms of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and the Sustainability Movement in Saratoga Springs (the latter of which is currently active and growing). While researching these topics, I will ask questions such as: how has Saratoga used its cultural power to influence the United States? Why did these movements take place in the community when they did? Does Saratoga have a history of conformity to larger social trends or a history of revolution and activism? How have the springs and racetrack influenced movements, and have they ultimately been helpful or detrimental in inspiring change within the community?

Rebecca Meyer: A Comparative Study of the Approach to Educational Special Needs of Children in the United States, Denmark, and the United Kingdom

For my Senior Seminar paper, I want to compare and contrast American education to education in selected first world countries, specifically with an eye to understanding how schools deal with students with special needs. The countries I explore and compare to America are Denmark and the United Kingdom. In my paper, I hope to get a better understanding of people's attitudes towards special needs populations and look at the methods that educators use for their students who have special needs. Additionally, I hope to answer the questions: "Are the special needs

programs that are currently being used both in the United States and abroad addressing the needs of their populations? Are they realistic programs or are there some countries that deal with the problem more effectively and efficiently than others? If there are some countries that have found better or more effective ways of dealing with their special needs populations, can other countries learn from these examples and apply them to special needs education in the United States? As for my sources, I want to incorporate observations I had done in Denmark and observe a class in America. I also want to interview educators that specialize in special education. Newspaper articles, case studies, and other texts will be useful as well.

Allison Dell Otto

For my thesis project, I plan to study the public discourse surrounding the possible non-normative sexuality of Malcolm X. I would investigate the reactions of different communities of people to suggestions in Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (2011) and Bruce Perry's *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (1991) that Malcolm X engaged in same-sex relationships. I will begin by providing a general overview of the complexities of Black culture and sexuality, Black masculinity, and homophobia in Black communities. Then I will focus in on the public discussions about Malcolm's sexuality and what it would mean if he were queer. I would study the reactions of different people (in scholarly work, blogs, comment boards, and newspapers) to those suggestions of non-heterosexuality and use this study as a window into larger issues of the intersection of race and sexuality, homophobia in Black communities, and racism in White lesbian and gay communities. Some questions I expect to address with this project are: How does a non-normative sexuality affect a Black public figure's legacy, image, and embracement by Black communities? What makes the idea of a bisexual Malcolm X so threatening? Are Black masculinity and homosexuality mutually exclusive in the eyes of the public? Why are Black artists or leaders who are rumored to be gay not more embraced by White lesbian and gay communities? I would also use discussions of other Black public figures such as Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansbury, and Queer Latifah to supplement my discussion of Malcolm.

Hannah Ronson: Real Live Music and the Internet

In the 1980s, the makers and supporters of underground rock music in America created opportunities for independent bands to play shows all over the country. The idea was not for such bands to become famous or wealthy, but to present music "anyone could be playing" to people who often cared about the community aspect just as much as the music. Of course many of the bands that started out this way, like The Replacements or Sonic Youth, eventually did gain a lot of fame, and probably because of this, their storied histories have shaped how a large group of music fans today imagine how the current musical landscape in America should look and operate.

One of the main obstacles faced by communities of the past was finding ways to identify and connect with other people who shared similar ideals. I would like to explore how the Internet has transformed the way various people involved in organizing independent music concerts today decided to be active, discover current music and bands, connect with other people, as well as learn about the music and communities that shape their ideals. How did they initially become engaged with the music they care about? Are people more knowledgeable about independent music because of the Internet? Do they feel more of a part of a musical landscape or less involved, since connections largely happen over the Internet, not in person? What inspires people to organize shows if they know the music played by bands is easily accessible online? How important are values and moral codes today? I would like to explore these questions by interviewing people who make the effort to organize music events and be part of an evolving scene that also celebrates the past. I will compare their experiences with the well-documented experiences of people who came before them. I will be exploring how history and the new availability of resources on the Internet have shaped their desires to be active and make connections.

Callison Stratton: Here Lies King: A Controversy of History and Memory at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, TN

My senior seminar project will be an analysis of the ways in which museums color our perceptions of the past, specifically focusing on the controversy surrounding the representation of the 20th Century American Civil Rights Movement at the National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM) in Memphis, Tennessee. Located at the historic Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, this museum presents a very specific interpretation of Civil Rights history, one that is sympathetic to King and his ideals and perhaps less comprehensive in regards to other facets of the movement.

In my paper, I plan to explore the aspects of the museum's design and execution that make it so effective, and look at the ways in which its setting inhibits or enhances its ability to tell its story. One of the big questions would be: is it possible to tell an unbiased version of the Civil Rights movement? Going further, what kind of bias or perspective should be honored in creating these museums? What determines a museum's "effectiveness" or comprehensiveness? Does setting up shop in the death place of a beloved American icon provide the visitor with a more emotional reaction than it would at an arbitrary location? Is creating an emotional reaction the goal? Should it be?

Using these questions as a jumping off point, I would look at what sets the NCRM apart from other museums that focus on the same era (and which paradigms it sticks to). For example, the International Civil Rights Center & Museum in Greensboro, NC has taken over the local Woolworth building, where the student-led sit-in movement came to a head in 1960— what does the setting lend to the message that the visitor gets from

the experience? Does the setting perhaps reflect the proprietor/ organization's ideological leanings— are they a follower of Dr. King, or an acolyte of Stokely Carmichael? A Birmingham, Alabama museum follows the same design as the Memphis NCRM, and may be maintained by the same organization. What does the setting of Birmingham (another MLK significant place—"Letter from a Birmingham Jail") say about this organization's goal for shaping the way we see the Civil Rights movement, especially when paired with Memphis? I aim to look at how the collective American memory of the CRM could potentially be influenced by these types of museums, while looking for the line when memorializing becomes romanticizing (and whether the NCRM crosses this line or not).

Eric Strebel

Network news in America is more widespread than ever. The emergence of the 24-hour cable news cycle brought the latest domestic and international headlines to many of the spaces we occupy throughout the day. The Internet adds an entirely new dimension; we can get instant access from a variety of different mediums and sources in almost any situation. These conditions have influenced profoundly our understandings of race. In many instances, race is discussed in the news through stories defined as containing or illustrating interracial conflict. Recent examples in history include the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson trials, as the national news reported that these events exposed racial divisions and urged Americans to evaluate the extent and impact of racism, racial prejudice, and racial discrimination. I want to analyze the ways in which three major networks, CNN FOX and NBC, report and discuss recent stories of interracial conflict, exemplified by Professor Henry Louis Gates' arrest, Arizona immigration laws, and the debate over an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero. Ultimately, I want to question if these networks are utilizing news stories concerning interracial conflict to better or complicate race relations in America.

Jacob Wolf: Perceptions of Whiteness: The Transition from George Mikan to Brian Scalabrine

I intend to write my seminar paper on race and the NBA. My paper will focus predominantly on how Whiteness operates in the Association. Specifically, it will consider the transition from a White-dominated league to the emergence of racial stereotypes characterizing White Americans as more cerebral, nonathletic players when compared to their more naturally talented Black counterparts. In particular, I would seek to analyze how two-hundred year old stereotypes and subsequent internalized oppression have influenced White culture's promulgation of this racial mythology, and I would like to consider how stereotypes have influenced White fandom and the declining popularity of the NBA. My paper would begin by discussing the formation of racist notions such as African Americans as animalistic and White Americans as intelligent and civilized, and how these falsities have informed beliefs about American athletics. It

would also offer a history of race in the NBA, focusing largely on the Association's transition from a White-dominated league to a Black-dominated league. The paper would then analyze the perception of Whiteness in basketball as equating to nonathletic, intelligent, and hard-working players, asking such questions as: Were these stereotypes created by Whites? If so, were they created specifically about sports, or are they simply modern adaptations of two-hundred year old stereotypes about Blacks as inferior to and more primal than Whites? Have Whites internalized these stereotypes, and if so why? Have Black players internalized these stereotypes as well? How did the Association and its media deal with players who broke the stereotypical mold, such as Jason "White Chocolate" Williams? Why does the notion of the "Great White Hope" exist? Why are White European players distinguished from American White players? When and why did Whiteness become disassociated with basketball? Why do athletic White players frequently have their athleticism downplayed and other traits, such as three-point shooting, emphasized? How are biracial players discussed, and are they "claimed" by certain races depending on their skills? Does the dearth of star-caliber White players help explain the decline in the NBA's popularity? Does the Jack Johnson versus Joe Louis dichotomy still exist? I will incorporate a diverse array of sources in this paper, including: scholarly sources regarding race relations and internalized oppression (both generally and how they pertain to sports), secondary sources on the history of racism in the U.S., secondary sources on the history of the NBA, as well as popular media sources such as sports blogs, newspaper and magazine articles, and scouting reports. My paper will also include examples of players who embody and reject various stereotypes, and will analyze the media portrayal of them. I also would like to visit the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Steven Zapata

My seminar people will focus on American Advertisement and the "mythic" or imagined "queer" consumer. I am interested in how and which LGBTQ peoples become the subject or target of advertising. How does American advertising view these consumers? Is the LGBTQ community a consumer market? LGBTQ Americans constitute a growing number of diverse, college educated and middle and upper class individuals. How does one create advertising that appeals to these individuals? How does one advertise to such a large and diverse group? How do advertising companies portray gay peoples, what is missing in their portrayals? Do these portrayals seem authentic? How do these advertisements reinforce or create queer identities? Or do they "normalize" gay identity, by creating easily understandable images and cultural symbols? In this paper I will research contemporary methods of advertising to queer communities. I will analyze a variety of television commercials that are targeted or aimed at a gay community. I am interested in the intersections of sexuality, class and gender and how they are composed in advertisements, arguably, in a capitalistic way. I am also interested in the thematic construction of these commercials as well. Why do gay characters in advertising have to kiss? How does kissing highlight the characters sexuality? Moreover, how does hetero-normality inform us of the context of the

advertisement? Are advertisements that portray gay people helping with the visibility of gay culture? Are these images positive? Understanding the complex and often misconstrued portrayals of LGBT people in advertisements may show us how advertising companies frame and construct television ads to appeal to specific groups, and how they use cultural symbols and understandings to create messages which appeal to these groups. Finally, this will lead me to find out how contemporary advertisement is changing and give me insight into the direction of future LGBT marketing and advertising.