

AM Senior Seminar Topics Fall 2021

Simon Burns: “Soft Power and American Film”

In recent years a perception of America’s declining global status has become a topic of increasing concern to Americans across a wide range of backgrounds. I believe that some of this worry does not take into consideration the enormous capacity of American soft power to influence public opinion both domestically and internationally and reinforce U.S. hegemony. In this paper I look specifically at the soft power of American film. I analyze a selection of films which offer a convincing and sympathetic portrait of American culture and national identity. I believe this selection proves that film can fortify global perceptions of the United States as the dominant superpower.

Katie Egan: “Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Mental Health at Skidmore College”

There are serious differences between people of color and white individuals in regards to their mental health. Why do these differences continue to exist? Are these differences a result of socioeconomic status, inherent racism, or some other variable? This study aims to investigate the variable of socioeconomic status and its relationship to mental health. Based on surveys within the United States, people of color have overall worse mental health than white people. I hypothesized that students of color at Skidmore College have overall better mental health than the population of people of color at large, and worse overall mental health than white students at Skidmore College. The results of this study pointed in a slightly different direction. Both white and non-white students had almost identical levels of poor mental health, leading to the idea that socioeconomic status may be a leveling agent that balances out the differences in mental health between people of color and white individuals.

Maya Gmach: “Investigating the U.S. Veterans Affairs’ Initiatives in Limiting Racial Disparities: How Access to Mental Health Services for Veterans Has Changed Over the Past Twenty Years”

In my thesis, I explore how the treatment of U.S. veterans’ access to mental healthcare varies depending on race. I argue that the United States Department of Veterans Affairs has changed over the course of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars to provide more access to mental health care for racial and ethnic minority veterans of all wars. I explore how outside barriers, such as socioeconomic status, historical distrust of healthcare institutions, and the bureaucracy of the VA contribute to racial disparities that exist for minority veterans. Healthcare inequality has been at the forefront of American problems for decades, and I examine how racial/ethnic minority veterans experience mental health care based on their intersecting identity of race and veteran status. By looking at how the VA has changed its policies and worked to limit racial disparities in recent

years, I hope to start a conversation about how the VA may be used as a toolkit for other providers or healthcare institutions across the U.S.

Katie Kenna: “The Imagined Community in the Wilderness: An American Tragedy on Big Moose Lake”

This work aims to dissect the relationship between an event and the place in which it occurred. The 1906 murder of Grace Brown on Big Moose Lake continues to echo in the minds of Americans, as translations of the story continue to be adapted, ideologically warping to their corresponding years of production. Little progress has been made towards understanding how the murder has impacted Big Moose Lake or how Big Moose Lake, hidden in the wilderness, has impacted the dramatization of the murder. Further, little effort has been made towards the investigation of the role the murder played in establishing a cultural identity of the lake and its surrounding communities. My goal is to understand the social, political, economic, and historical complexities of Big Moose through the lens of the immensely culturally significant event of Grace Brown's death. I intend to weave together two narratives about the lake, studying a changing landscape over time, answering the question; who has ownership of this land? I argue the increase of American privatization of the “wild spaces” of Big Moose reflects changes in American ideals and the encroaching power of industry. This power continues to impact the lake, dooming history to repeat itself. The same ideologies of wealth and prosperity that displaced the Indigenous people of the region and that resulted in the murder of Grace Brown and her unborn child are forever altering the meaning of Big Moose Lake and complicating the question of who owns it.

Sam Knox: “The American Housing Crisis: An Analysis of Power and Exploitation”

The ever-changing American Housing System has not sufficiently served the entirety of the United States population. With the introduction of new legislation that affects housing prices, access to affordable housing, the process of eviction, and more, renters' and landlords' responsibilities are constantly changing. Renters in particular are victimized by the American Housing system, specifically renters of a low-income class status. Now more than ever, the flaws of the Housing System are becoming more obvious as the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the lack of safety measures in place. While many programs are emerging as a way to minimize the damages already done to American citizens, this begs the question as to whether or not these programs will sustain long-term assistance to low-income individuals in need of financial assistance for housing. By taking a look at the efficacy of an organization that is contracted with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Capital Access, this paper explores the power dynamic between renter and landlord, the efficacy of a disaster relief program

in response to COVID, and how our lack of preparation, and our response, displays American attitudes toward the lower-income class, as well as our American values.

Isaac Markman: “Don’t Be All, Like, Uncool: The Cause and Effect of The Real Housewives on Popular Culture”

The Real Housewives encapsulates many aspects of American culture. By doing a close reading of the television show and engaging in the online forums attempt to unpack problematic aspects of American culture, I provide a close reading of the show. Pairing academic texts with studies by popular culture critics, I demonstrate that while The Real Housewives commodifies women for financial gain and includes hetero-patriarchal messaging, the structure of the show and its ongoing discourse subverts many of the problematic ideological messages included. It gives the audience a chance to scrutinize harmful narratives present in our society through a camp representation of American values.

Sofia Newberg: “Dead Malls Walking: The Hauntology of the American Mall”

The array of Malls in America today shows a spread of new, renovated, re-purposed, tired-but-functional, and now “Dead “ Malls. “Dead” Malls are a phenomenon of the past positioned in a present that no longer finds any use for them. Hauntology, a term coined by Derrida in the 1990s, refers to the study of specific sociocultural elements which return from our cultural past to haunt us in the present as specters. This Capstone explores the “Hauntology” of the (Dead) Mall and the subculture of people who consume Dead Mall content. I argue that American Malls are hauntological because they embody a sense of a failed American Utopia. I ask such questions as: What does this say about our modern relationship to old icons of consumer culture? What happens to a monolith of culture once it dies? I answer these questions by analyzing the subculture of Dead Mall enthusiasts, modern-day “Ghost Hunters” who are creators and consumers of Dead Mall content online. I conclude that such enthusiasts are nostalgic for past glory days but also captivated by decline and the promises of prosperity that haunt our culture today.

Brynae Newman: “They Grow Up So Fast: The Disappearance of Childhood and the Emergence of Digital Culture”

Technology and culture often evolve in tandem. In our present moment, technology is accessible to people of all ages; with the invention and rapid advancement of the internet, it has become a primary source for learning, entertainment, and social interaction. This essay investigates the effect of technology on the perceived destruction and dismantling of the cultural concept of “childhood.” Using critical discourse analysis

and consulting oral histories, I analyze how technology has transformed children's lives since the '80s to discern the effects of the cellphone and social media on pre-teens and teens' common behaviors, hobbies, and values. I argue that, although technology is continuously altering perceptions of childhood throughout history, the introduction of the cell phone and social media has greatly altered definitions of and expedited childhood in a way that both benefits and harms society. I will prove this through an analysis of the generation gap in which I will investigate how perceptions of childhood have changed over the last forty years and in the face of COVID-19 to create an even more prominent generational divide

Lissa Silk: "Teaching Future Generations about Race: Positive Representations of African Americans in Picture Books from the 1960s to 2020s"

My Capstone project examines African American representation in American picture books for children. It focuses on how representation of African Americans has shifted positively from the 1960s to today and concludes with ideas on how to include these books into first and second-grade classrooms as a method for exposing all students to black culture and cultivating positive identity-formation in black students. I have chosen to focus on six picture books, organizing them by decade. The 1960s time period deals with the shift from black caricature towards a more progressive representation of blackness. The 1970s begins the black empowerment trajectory but focuses on African folklore, culture, and acceptance. The 1980s and 1990s feature African American culture, focusing in on black families, dialect, and a continued rejection of harmful myths and stereotypes from the 1960s. The 1990s and 2000s exemplify historical fiction and history books depicting important moments in black history. The 2010s and today feature books on black love and empowerment. Ultimately, this paper showcases how representations of African American characters in picture books have shifted from representational illustration in the 1960s to a more positive and complex representation of African Americans today.

Adriana Stoyanovich: "Liberty and Equality in the United States: The History of Fighting Race and Class Disparities in Higher Education and Covid-19"

The United States has a long history of race and class gaps in higher education. The United States Constitution allows all students to have equal right to receive an education, but race and class disparities in schools prevent equal educational opportunity. The disparities in college success and degree attainment between marginalized students and other students is representative of the hierarchical democratic society in the United States. Liberty and equality are two values celebrated in the United States that are at constant battle with one another. The Brown vs. The Board of Education case was intended to end segregation in schools and reduce racial inequalities in schools, but it has fallen short of fulfilling its ambitions. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed its inadequacies and brought more challenges and awareness

to the inequalities present in the education system. This is a result of larger systemic discrimination against marginalized people in the United States.