

Senior Seminar Topic Proposals

Fall 2017

Ari Bogom-Shanon: “Growing Jewish American Identity: The Recent Jewish Food Movement and its Possibility as a New Collective Identity”

My paper considers how collective identity is constructed and impacted by forces inside and outside the Jewish community with particular attention to recent Jewish farm and food initiatives in the United States. Similar to the most recent trend of food movements in American society, this Jewish subculture looks towards food justice, health, community, and environmental justice as its guiding values. Dissimilar to the larger (though still niche) American movement and dissimilar to the trend of prioritizing the American in the American Jewish identity, the Jewish food and environmental community is active in its reengagement of Jewish tradition and text. I argue that engaging with Judaism through food and the environment is poised to be the next collective glue for Jewish American identity. The momentum of food and environmental movements in American society coupled with the biblical importance of food and farming and the role of food in American Jewish identity place this movement in a unique position of actively connecting a religious and cultural past to a broad and encompassing American trend.

Alessandra Canario: “Fashion Repeats: Vintage Clothing as Subculture vs Mass Produced Nostalgia: Fashion’s Second Wave Nostalgia Boom: the Rise of the Vintage Clothing Industry and Mass Production of Retro”

Vintage and retro clothing are modes of dress that not coincidentally caught on in a period that has been defined as the “nostalgia boom,” the late 1960s/1970s. The popularity of vintage and retro fashion is inarguably at an all-time high. Originally in the 1960s dressing in clothing indicative of past fashion was a countercultural response rejecting modernity: displaying disapproval of the current political atmosphere and expansion of capitalism. Since clothing is an act of self-identification, dressing from the past assumes a disassociation with the present. Retro clothing eventually made its way to the mainstream using recognizable designs to sell clothes by means of evoking nostalgia. The marketability of clothing from the past is most successful in moments of dissatisfaction with the current geopolitical climate, although buying into corporate trends is paradoxical. This paper explores answers to the following questions: Where/how does nostalgia fit in with the modern fashion world? Does mass production have a control over cultural memory? What are the messages sent by consumers of vintage/retro clothing?

Nora Faber: Why We Make Every Night a Late-Night

For my senior thesis I explore how the late night show franchise addresses political matters and current events. I specifically analyze how these shows act as a bridge between the political and social boundaries in our country. Television hosts like Steven Colbert, Jimmy Kimmel, John Oliver, and more, have changed the ways that our country learns and creates opinions about our current politics. Specifically I look at what language, exaggerations, characters, and images are used in association with episodes that reference major political and social moments from the past two decades, including natural disasters, 9/11, and the election of Barack Obama. I strive to prove how late-night television shows and their hosts are impactful teachers of history and current events to audiences across the world. In order to accurately convey this, I employ three common American Studies methodologies including: Ethnographic Analysis, Reception Analysis, and Symptomatic Analysis. These methodologies reveal how the honest, animated, and satirical attitudes of late-night hosts produce and suggest how the honest, animated, and satirical attitudes of late-night hosts produce an unconventional yet significant practice of communicating with the public.

Miller Fina: “Bad Apples Win”: The Place of Anti-heroes in Trauma Culture

My seminar paper is about how, in the post-9/11 world, television serials such as 24, Homeland, and Hawaii Five-0 (the 2010 reboot), increasingly focus on main characters who, despite their heroics, are “bad apples.” Characters such as Steve McGarrett, Carrie Mathison, and Jack Bauer justify their anti-American actions in order to meet their goal of protecting the nation-state in the same way that guards guilty of torturing prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib justified their behaviors. These characters, and their series, are the spawn of a post-9/11 traumatized culture that encourages violent nationalism, fear of the racialized other, and glorification of the greater good. Thus, these television serials are products and promoters of trauma culture but most importantly they encourage the perpetuation of trauma culture by the viewer. By comparing these three characters and their actions I chart how these serials are informed by trauma culture, how they encourage viewers to perpetuate trauma culture, and whether they are meant to restore the viewers’ faith in the government.

Magden Gipe: “Art and Authorship in the Digital Age”

The debut of the world-wide web has changed the stakes on a number of issues, from identity politics to freedom of information. In my paper, I explore the ways in which our assumptions about intellectual property, originality, and authorship are challenged by new modes of art that have risen to popularity in the past several years. Whether musical, commentative, cinematic, or a mix of the three, they all have appropriative aspects to them, and flourish on a platform where media sharing is a straightforward and uncomplicated process. First, I will identify the ways in which these art forms tie in with larger historical conversations about artistic license, and how the discourse surrounding them compares with that of past debates concerning originality and intellectual property. Next, I illustrate how the platform of the internet affects our

attitudes towards these topics, and how being an “online phenomenon” distinguishes the content I focus on from other cultural products. Finally, I elaborate on the ways in which I believe our collective stance on authorship in art will evolve in the coming years, and the adjustments larger media companies may have to make in their practices to ensure continued success.

Brian Hall: The “Student-Athlete” as Misnomer: NCAA Division I Basketball and Football

My Senior Seminar paper deals with the world of college athletics in the United States—specifically with the role that educational authorities play in the lives of the student-athletes who attend institutions. Currently we operate under a system (at least as far as basketball and football are concerned), in which it is assumed that athletic competition must somehow be tied to education. In recent years there has been much debate on the treatment of these student-athletes, whether they should be compensated for their labors or if they are voluntary participants in the system. Whether one sees the system as exploitative or not, I ask whether it is necessary to mix the terms “student” and “athlete” at all. Why are kids whose goal it is to make it as professional athletes forced to attend college when they have no desire to do so? The system of sports in America leads kids to mix athletics and education in increasingly unworkable ways. A system similar to that of European club soccer or even minor league professional baseball may be more effective. I argue, therefore, that elite education and elite athletics should not be mixed, since doing so compromises both. .

Ian Iversen: Satire in the Age of Trump

My seminar paper studies political satire through the lens of comedic television programming. I argue that while political satire as a form has a long and rich history, it is changing rapidly in the Trump era. It is my assertion that Trump-era satire is both easier and harder to create than such comedy has been to produce in the past. Reacting to Trump era news and politics, satirists have created a new landscape in which unprecedented news is met with a stand-alone brand of satire. This brand of satire, both rhetorically and thematically original, is primarily concerned with lampooning news that is already classifiably absurd. Paradoxically, this has changed the way satiric comedy is received even as it reaffirms the traditional ways in which it has been produced over time.

Lisanny Manzueta: Generational Identity and Assimilation: Dominican Immigration to the United States

My seminar paper is an ethnography of Dominican and Dominican American immigrants. I have interviewed Dominicans of different ages who arrived to the United States at different times in their lives, I argue that people experience immigration into

the United States generationally, and that those generational differences make it difficult to establish immigration policies. Although entering a foreign land with a different language and culture is challenging regardless of age, those who arrive at an older age find it more difficult to assimilate into American culture because they already have a solidified language and culture of their own. Conversely, those who come to the United States as children, assimilate faster into American society as they grow up and consequently associate more with their American identity. I argue that immigration policies and practices should reflect these trends.

Laila Morgan: “Where Do You Think You’re Going, Girlie?”: Doulas as Witnesses and Advocates for Birth Justice in the Capital Region.”

The New York State Department of Health reports that for Albany County, the infant mortality rate for white babies is 4.7 deaths for every 1000 live births, while the infant mortality rate for Black infants is 23.2 deaths. To doulas and midwives in the Capital Region, these numbers are no surprise — they witness the reality of racial disparity in maternal healthcare constantly. Doulas, as non-medical support persons for individuals going through childbirth, provide emotional, physical, and educational support to pregnant and birthing people. They also act as advocates for the families they support, trying to ensure they and their vision for the birth of their child are treated with respect, a job that is difficult in hospitals often focused on efficiency, financial gain, and liability. For my seminar paper, I have interviewed doulas, midwives, and OB/GYNS in the Capital Region, exploring why people think the racial disparity exists and what they think can be done about it. Ultimately, I argue that doulas, because of the qualities inherent in their roles as support persons and advocates, play a vital role in achieving birth justice.

Lucas Pickering: ADHD Diagnoses and the Prescribing of Drugs as Therapy

I argue that the rapid increase of ADHD diagnoses and medications in children ages 4-17 over the past twenty years is the result of pressures to medicate American youths as a way of controlling behavior rather than seeking alternative therapy strategies. These pressures have social and cultural roots that go well beyond the biological justifications for such medication. While it is the case that some patients benefit from such prescriptions—indeed, some find them essential for functioning adequately in schools, for instance—it is my contention that for others this is simply a path of least resistance and a solution that does more harm than good. I make my case using an ethnographic approach, focusing on testimonials from students at Skidmore who have been treated using such drugs.

Zoe Resnick: Identity in The Digital World: How Building a Digital Identity Is Changing the Way We Are Perceived

In today's digital age, individuals are creating new identities online through social media and other online communities. Because one's digital identity is crucial to one's self-representation, social life and self-esteem, online platforms have affected the ways in which we perceive ourselves and present ourselves to the public. By understanding individual experiences of digital identity formation in Skidmore students and alumni, I explore the pre-formatted technicalities and social patterns within social media to gauge the effects of living within a digital culture. I also argue that America's youth has transformed into an ambitious, individualized and digitally obsessed generation, using social media in ways that increasingly affect the way our institutions are run, both good and bad.

Jack Spiegelman: Love & Haight in the 1960s

From the Shakers to the Mormons, counterculture communities have existed throughout American history and have struggled to escape or transform mainstream society. The turbulent decade of the 1960s saw a revolutionary civil rights movement, an increasingly unpopular war being fought in Southeast Asia, a feminist movement, and an emerging mass media, all converging to create an epoch period of cultural and political upheaval. With its mantras of peace and freedom, San Francisco's Haight Ashbury community in the 1960s effectively escaped political paranoia and social unrest. With examinations of emblematic artifacts such as photographs, music, and films, my paper attempts to prove that "the Haight" not only established a sustainable model for alternative living, it also helped transform a nation into a more tolerant society in ways that had a lasting effect on generations to come.