**Sex, Satan, and the Carceral State: Culture Wars in the MTV Era**

Hist191-01, Spring 2025

Harkness 210

**Instructor:** Elizabeth Sapere

**Office Hours:** Monday 12pm-1pm, location TBD and by appointment

**Course Description**

From neoliberalism and the age of fracture to post Fordism in a war for the soul of America, scholars have devised numerous frames to characterize the U.S. at the end of the twentieth century. “Sex, Satan and the Carceral State” will take a long-durée approach, beginning in the waning years of the 1970s and concluding in the first two years of the twenty-first century. Each week students will read primary and secondary sources about a different moment of “culture war.” These will include topics such as the sex wars, the AIDS crisis, stranger danger, satanic panics, Waco, and 9/11 among many others. This course will not only be concerned with what makes a “culture war,” but also what political phenomena contribute to moral panics, who participates, who is at the center of these debates and why it matters. Students will grapple with the centrality of race, gender and class to each week’s topics, as well as interrogate the ways in which culture, politics, economics and even popular media intersected in both old and new ways to help create, justify, and reify a specific form of carceralism.

**Assignments**

**Class Participation:**

This is a seminar-style course, which means it is reading and discussion based. Students should come to class having done the reading, watching and listening assigned each week and be prepared to contribute to class discussions. Participation will be a significant portion of students’ grades.

**Final Project**

Students will write a 10-12 page research project on a culture war of their choosing. “Culture war” here is defined broadly, and I encourage students to think outside of the box. However, this must be an historical essay based on some sort of primary source research. The project should have an argument that is both grounded in and supported by both primary and secondary sources. **Final Projects are due May 6th.**

**Project Proposal**

Submit to me a 1 to 2 page proposal of your research project. The proposal should include a brief description of the culture war and time period, why you consider it a culture war, and the primary source or sources you plan to use for the project. You do not need to have an argument in the proposal (though the final product should be argument-based), but the more detail you give me, the more I can help.

**Rough Draft**

Every project starts with a “shitty first draft.” This does not need to be a complete draft of the project, but the more you give me the more I can comment on and help with. This draft should at least have the general structure: an intro with your argument, some of the body of the essay that shows how you are mobilizing your evidence to support your argument, and at least some tentative gestures or suggestions for a conclusion. This is not meant to be (nor will it be) perfect. This is meant to be a step in us working together to refine your argument and writing, as well as a tool to help keep you on track throughout the semester.

**Bibliography**

You will submit to me a bibliography with at least eight sources, two of which need to be full monographs (books). The bibliography should be divided into “primary” and “secondary” sources using Chicago style citation format. This is meant to give me an idea of what sources you are using to build your essay, as well as keep you on track with your research throughout the semester. If you are having trouble finding sources or figuring out what types of sources would be best for your project, please do not hesitate to reach out to me or come to office hours. I am here to help.

**Meme Assignment**

Each student will create a meme, TikTok or reel related to a class reading, theme, or concept. Toward the end of the semester we will dedicate part of a class session to a “meme fest” (and I will submit one as well). Please have fun with this one, it is meant to be a fun way to get some points.

**Film Response**

Students will watch four films throughout the semester and write a two to three page response for each one. Students should explore how the themes in the film relate to that week or previous weeks readings and discussions. While these are short responses, these little essays should have an argument, a body with supporting evidence from the film and class readings/discussions, and a conclusion. Please use proper Chicago-style footnotes and bibliography when citing both movies and readings. All movies will be available to stream on Blackboard. The four movies are:

The Breakfast Club

Nightmare on Elm Street

Boys n the Hood

Fight Club

**Grade Breakdown**

**Class Participation-20%**

**Final Project-30%**

**Project Proposal-5%**

**Rough Draft-15%**

**Bibliography-5%**

**Meme Assignment-5%**

**Film Responses-20% (5% each)**

**Course Policies:**

This course will meet in person. Because it is discussion-based, it is important that students come to class and be prepared having done the reading. However, I also understand that we all have lives outside of the classroom and that we live in a world that is increasingly challenging in many ways. You are allowed one “fuck it” day per semester. That is, you are allowed one absence with no questions asked. Any further absences will require documentation and a conversation with me.

I am always willing to work with you and figure out ways of navigating course work with other life stuff. But I can only do that if you communicate with me. Please do not hesitate to reach out with anything and I will do my best to help and work with you. With that being said, continued absence from a discussion-based course will make it difficult to keep up with the course and will effect your overall grade.

**Week 1**

**The End of Fordism, Encroaching Neoliberalism, “Crisis” of the Family**

**Session 1 (January 22)**

Introductions/syllabus overview/questions

**Session 2 (January 24)**

Robert O. Self, *All in the Family:The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s*, Preface

Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, Introduction

Listen:

Don Henley, “Boys of Summer”

Ramones, “We’re a Happy Family”

Dead Kennedys, “Kill the Poor”

Dead Kennedys, “Dear Abby”

**Week 2**

**Feminist Sex Wars**

**Session 1 (January 27)**

Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986*, Introduction

**Session 2 (January 29)**

Nancy Whittier, *Frenemies: Feminists, Conservatives, and Sexual Violence*, chapter 1

Lorna Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era*, Introduction

**Week 3**

**Broader Sex Wars**

**Session 1 (February 3)**

Charlie Jeffries, *Teenage Dreams: Girlhood Sexualities in the U.S. Culture Wars*, introduction and ch. 2

Listen:

Eurythmics, “Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves”

Pat Benatar, “Sex As A Weapon”

Salt-n-Peppa, “Let’s Talk About Sex”

Salt-n-Peppa, “None Of Your Business”

**Session 2 (February 5)**

Asynchronous, work on project proposal

Project proposal due

**Week 4**

**Stranger Danger**

**Session 1 (February 10)**

Paul Refro, *Stranger Danger: Family Values, Childhood, and the American Carceral State*, Introduction

**Session 2 (February 12)**

Paul Renfro, *Stranger Danger: Family Values, Childhood, and the American Carceral State*, chapters 1 and 2

Watch music video for “Runaway Train” by Soul Asylum

First film response due

Meet with me this week to discuss final project

**Week 5**

**HIV/AIDS Crisis**

**Session 1 (February 17)**

Watch documentary How to Survive a Plague

Meet in special collections (?)

**Session 2 (February 19)**

Jennifer Brier, *Infectios Ideas*: *U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis*, chapter 1

Dan Royles, *To Make the Wounded Whole: The African American Struggle Against HIV/AIDS*, Introduction

Listen:

Lou Reed, “Halloween Party”

Ani DiFranco, “On Every Corner”

Elton John, “The Last Song”

Wu-Tang Clan, “America”

Salt-N-Pepa, “I’ve Got AIDS”

**Week 6**

**Crack**

**Session 1 (February 24)**

David Farber, *Crack: Rock Cocaine, Street Capitalism, and the Decade of Greed*, Introduction and chapter 3

**Session 2 (February 26)**

Felicia Angeja Viator, *To Live and Defy in LA: How Gangsta Rap Changed America*, chapter 1

Listen:

Toddy Tee, “Batterram”

NWA, “Fuck Tha Police”

Ice-T, “6 ‘N The Mornin’”

Bibliography Due

**Week 7**

**Satanic Panic**

**Session 1 (March 3)**

Kyle Riismandel, “’Say You Love Satan’: Teens and Popular Occulture in 1980s America,” in *Growing Up America: Youth and Politics Since 1945*, edited by Susan Eckelmann Berghel, Sara Fieldstone, and Paul Renfro

Listen:

Dead Kennedys, “Triumph of the Swill”

Ozzy Osbourne, “Suicide Solution”

Twisted Sister, “We’re Not Gonna Take It”

**Session 2 (March 5)**

Watch Paradise Lost documentary

Second film response due

**Week 8**

**Ritual Sexual Abuse**

**Session 1 (March 17)**

Richard Beck, *We Believe the Children: A Moral Panic in the 1980s*, Introduction

Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic: Changing Conceptions of the Child Molester in Modern America*, chapter 8

**Session 2 (March 19)**

Richard Beck, *We Believe the Children: A Moral Panic in the 1980s*, chapter 6

**Week 9**

**Rodney King, Latasha Harlins, and the LA Riots**

**Session 1 (March 24)**

Max Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles: Race, Resistance, and the Rise of the LAPD*, chapter 9

**Session 2 (March 26)**

Brenda Stevenson, *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots* , Preface and chapter 7

Listen:

Sublime, “April 29th, 1992”

2Pac, “Hellrazer”

Dr. Dre, “The Day the N\*ggaz Took Over”

Rage Against the Machine, “Killing in the Name”

Third film response due

**Week 10**

**Ruby Ridge, Waco, and Oklahoma City**

**Session 1 (March 31)**

Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home*, chapter 8

**Session 2 (April 2)**

Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home*, chapter 9

**Week 11**

**Right-To-Life Movement**

**Session 1 (April 7)**

Jennifer Holland, *Tiny You: A Western History of the Anti-Abortion Movement*, Introduction and chapter 5

Ben Folds Five, “Brick”

The Verve Pipe, “The Freshmen”

Goo Goo Dolls, “Slide”

**Session 2 (April 9)**

Asynchronous, work on your rough draft

**Week 12**

**Ryan White and HIV/AIDS Revisisted**

**Session 1 (April 14)**

Paul Renfro, *The Life and Death of Ryan White: AIDS and Inequality in America*, Introduction

**Session 2 (April 16)**

Paul Renfro, *The Life and Death of Ryan White: AIDS and Inequality in America*, chapters 6 and 7

Meme Assignment Due

**Week 13**

**Columbine**

**Session 1 (April 21)**

Dave Cullen, *Columbine*, chapters 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 49, 50, 52 (69 pages total)

**Session 2 (April 23)**

Marilyn Manson, “Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?” *Rolling Stone* <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/columbine-whose-fault-is-it-232759/> ;

Dave Cullen, Preface to 25th anniversary edition of *Columbine*

Watch Michael Moore’s Bowling for Columbine

Listen:

Marilyn Manson, “Lunchbox”

Marilyn Manson, “Fight Song”

Eminem, “The Way I Am”

Rough Draft Due

**Week 14**

**9/11 and the War on Terror**

**Session 1 (April 28)**

Richard Beck, *Homeland: The War on Terror in American Life*, Introduction

Andrew C. McKevitt, “’Watching War Made Us Immune’: The Popular Culture of the Wars,” in *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, edited by Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman

Listen:

Anti-Flag, “911 For Peace”

Ani DiFranco, “Self Evident”

Toby Keith, “Courtesty of the Red, White and Blue”

**Session 2 (April 30)**

Wrap up module and meme fest

Fourth Film Response Due