

English 457: Topics in American Literature and Culture since 1900

## America in the 1990s

Professor Ramzi Fawaz

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Class Meetings: M 2:30-5 PM, 4208 Helen C. White Hall

Office Hours: M 12-2 PM, and by appointment, on Zoom.

**Course Description:** This advanced reading seminar will explore the culture and politics of the United States in the 1990s. We will use film and media, social movement history, and cultural theory to reconstruct the national conflicts and debates that defined the last years of the twentieth century.

From the perspective of our current political nightmare, it might be difficult to imagine that the decade before you were born is considered by many U.S.-Americans to be a golden age in national economic, political, and social progress. The 1990s began with the political collapse of the Soviet Union, which signaled the end of the Cold War and the triumph of the United States in its global war against Communism; it saw the election of Bill Clinton, the first Democratic president in over a decade, whose administration successfully balanced the federal budget for the first time in U.S.-American history; the rise of the internet and a booming Silicon Valley tech industry brought international wealth to U.S. shores and expanded national access to information technology; and the advent of globalization saw the unprecedented circulation of U.S.-American popular culture, consumerism, and technology around the world. Yet in many ways, the United States' victory over global Communism masked a deep-rooted crisis at the core of its democracy. While claiming to fight for international democratic freedom abroad, U.S. society remained exceptionally unequal domestically: neoliberal business policies had redistributed wealth and privilege upward to the most elite sectors of the corporate economy, depressing U.S. wages and blighting the working class; the government's divestment of resources from inner cities and its over-investment in policing and incarceration led to the Los Angeles race riots of 1992, which revealed white supremacy to be alive and well in the modern U.S.; rampant homophobia resulted in the government neglect of people with HIV/AIDS and the institution of an unconstitutional "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy in the U.S. military; and as international genocides raged in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, the United States, now the world's leading global democratic power, watched from the sidelines as millions were killed.

Far from a golden age then, the 1990s might be better understood as a shadow history of the present, describing a moment of possibility and danger that provides a blueprint for the Trump era. With the suspension of a four decade long Cold War in 1989, the United States was faced with two choices: to pursue an authentically egalitarian, global democracy and make amends for its own domestic injustices, or doggedly pursue global economic domination by exporting U.S.-American style capitalism to the world. In this course, we will explore why the United States chose global capitalism above democracy, and how Americans of many stripes have fought a range of cultural and political battles to refuse this outcome.

We will begin by studying the “Culture Wars” of the early 1990s, a name given to a series of struggles over conflicting views about U.S.-American cultural identity, including race and class hierarchy and gender and sexual freedom, that provides the basis for our contemporary revolution against white supremacy. We will then explore national debates over the potential uses (and abuses) of new technologies at the turn of the century, including cyborg culture, the internet, immunology, and genetic testing. Finally, we will conclude by looking at the ways that U.S. global military conflict in the first Gulf War (1990-1991) laid the foundation for what would later become the global war on terror. Throughout, we will look at how film and popular culture played a key role in narrating, shaping, and informing national ideas about the struggle for “the soul of America.”

### **What are we reading?**

This course is an advanced readings seminar in English. Each week we will engage 2-3 readings related to a particular topic alongside a primary film text. Readings will include scholarship in literary and cultural studies, political theory, and cultural history, alongside primary source texts such as manifestos, political poster art, and magazine articles. Our course films will be streamed online for your convenience and must be viewed prior to our Monday meetings. You will receive links to each of the course films by email. Alongside two writing assignments your grade will rest largely on your participation in class. Through your participation you should demonstrate that you have actively and consciously engaged our course readings. All readings will be available on Canvas unless otherwise indicated on the syllabus. You must bring copies of readings to class with you either in print or on electronic tablets. I encourage you to print out and take hand-written notes on course readings whenever possible.

### **What are we writing?**

This course has three writing assignments: a weekly on-line post, a personal journal, and a final essay.

**Weekly on-line post:** Each week, 3-4 members of the class will be responsible for developing a substantive response to a pre-circulated question or task related to that week’s reading. These are mini essays between 500-700 words that should be well written and organized in thought and execution; you should have an original argument or stake a distinct position and incorporate at least 1-2 direct citations from the week’s reading in making your claims. These posts must be online by 8 PM on Sunday evenings before our class meetings the following afternoon. The rest of the class is required to post short replies that take up and complicate particular ideas, questions, or concepts brought up in the primary posts. These responses are due no later than 10 AM on Monday mornings. Each member of the class will cycle through posting a primary response two times across the semester.

**Personal journal:** Throughout the class, you will maintain an informal journal where you will respond briefly to three questions related to each week’s readings. These questions will be circulated in advance of each week’s meeting and may be revised, rethought, or expanded upon after you complete the assigned reading. This should be an actual physical journal or notebook

that you handwrite in, unless you require other accommodations. If you do, inform me as soon as possible and we will make the appropriate accommodations.

**Final essay:** Rather than a traditional analytical essay, the final will require you to produce an original work of cultural criticism, or what is commonly known as an “op-ed” or opinion piece; you will research and make a sustained statement about a contemporary topic of political concern. The essay will go through substantial revision and you will have the option of submitting it to a major news outlet like *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*.

Though completing and submitting all of the assignments is a prerequisite for passing this course, it does not guarantee a passing grade. Consistent class participation is a key element to the successful completion of the course and makes up a sizeable 50% of your final grade. If you have special circumstances that require extended time on papers, please inform me as soon as possible so we can set up appropriate deadlines.

**Attendance: Attendance and participation at every class session is mandatory.** That means not only showing up, but being awake, attentive, and actively engaged in our meetings. Most importantly, this includes coming to class having completed that day’s reading (and viewing) assignments, taken careful notes on all these items, and prepared to engage in dialogue about them. **I will grant each student one excused absence for any reason; all other unexcused absences will incur the 5% participation grade deduction listed above.** I am acutely aware that the conditions of the covid pandemic might create obstacles to a consistent attendance record: please inform me of all unforeseeable absences, such as those caused by severe illness or a personal emergency, as soon as possible. I will do everything in my power to accommodate unexpected changes in anyone’s personal circumstances.

### **Grade Distribution:**

Online posts, 20%

Final paper, 30% (Draft 15%, Final 15%)

Participation (including course journal), 50%

### **Required Texts:**

Sturken, Marita. 2008. *Thelma & Louise* (BFI Modern Classics). London: British Film Institute.

**Discussion Good Practices:** This is a course about politics, culture, and identity. Across the semester, we will talk about a wide range of topics including social difference and hierarchy, radical political activism, sexual freedom, community formation, violence and abuse, disease, stigma, and global war. These are all complicated and emotionally charged subjects that most of us have strong opinions about. Moreover, we are currently living through a revolutionary moment in American culture, when many of our most sacredly held ideas about political freedom, collective good, and democratic life are under threat, or at least, in flux. In this class, I want you to develop the ability to take a strong position on the issues that matter to you most, to defend what you believe in with substantial evidence, and to question one another about those beliefs with both kindness and conviction. Perhaps most importantly, I want you to learn how to listen carefully to what others are saying and *be willing to change your mind* when the ideas, questions, or arguments you hear are convincing. None of us have all the answers, which is why

we must actively draw upon the opinions and perspectives of others to get a broader view of the world we share in common.

Our conversations should be lively and intense, but under no circumstance should anyone ever be personally attacked; at the same time, I want to encourage you to take risks and get involved, even when it might feel easier to bow out of a controversial conversation. I guarantee the rewards of participating will be extraordinary.

**Below are best practices for class discussion:**

1. All students must speak at least once in every class session.
2. Regardless of what we discuss, we will treat one another with respect, knowing that we may not always agree on other peoples' conclusions, interpretations, or claims.
3. Anything you bring up in class is up for discussion and others are free to agree, disagree, or respond to what you have said in a respectful way.
4. You must always begin by responding to what other students have said before you or inform the class that you intend to move the dialogue in a new direction.
5. Practice making arguments, not stating opinions. This requires you to always have your reading materials with you in class and to be able to point to specific moments or features of a text to support your ideas.

Finally, all student should be aware that we will view and read about a range of human experiences that will activate every emotion imaginable: at different times you will feel joy and devastation, wonder and horror, boredom and confusion, disgust and thrill. Life is complicated and messy, and it includes *all the feels*. So it's no surprise that representing the collective experience of U.S.-Americans—in movies and popular culture, in political speeches, and in historical accounts—will be just as complicated. It is impossible to address the full range of U.S.-American cultural and political life without dealing with all its messy expressions, the good, the bad, the ugly, and the surprisingly electrifying. With this in mind, it is up to you as informed adults, to decide how you wish to view and engage with this material.

**Course Goals and Learning Outcomes:** By the end of this course students will have gained the following skills:

1. The ability to develop and support scholarly arguments about cultural texts – in both written and verbal form – using both primary and secondary source materials.
2. The ability to articulate, distinguish between, and debate the merits of different intellectual positions within a field of knowledge while also identifying the links between those positions.
3. The ability to engage in sustained intellectual discussion of primary and secondary source material using the sources at hand to support one's claims.
4. The acquisition of a wider knowledge of American popular culture and the relationship between popular culture and political life.

**Disability Support Services:** At all times, this seminar will be open and accessible to students with disabilities. If you are a student enrolled with the McBurney Disability Resource Center or have a disability but have not used the MDRC, I encourage you to speak with me regarding your rights to accommodation. Please come see me about any questions you have regarding additional support for your success in this class. For more information, contact MDRC, 702 W. Johnson Street, at 608-263-2741. Or refer to <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>.

**Academic Integrity:** To learn strategies for researching, compiling, and presenting your arguments, you must complete all stages of the work yourself: taking the words of others, or presenting the ideas of others as your own not only prohibits you from learning the skills of academic research, it is also a violation of the University's Code of Academic Integrity.

**Frankly, it's also just plain dishonest and destroys your ability to be creative, try out new ideas, and actually learn something.** I encourage you to familiarize yourself with the Code of Academic Integrity posted on the University's website (<http://www.students.wisc.edu/doso/academic-integrity/>) in order to better understand the stance taken on academic dishonesty here at the University. Additionally, I am happy to discuss the appropriate ways to cite references in office hours. If you have any questions on these matters at any time, please see me.

Course Pre-Reading:

Jenny O'Dell, "Introduction: Surviving Usefulness" and "Chapter 1: The Case for Nothing," from *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019)

"How to Read and View: A Worksheet."

***Introduction:  
From Cold War to Culture Wars***

Week 1: From Cold War to Culture Wars

Monday, September 7

Mini-lecture: "1992—Life Magazine: The Year in Pictures"

In-class reading: Barbara Ehrenreich, "Cauldron of Anger," *Life Magazine: 1991, The Year in Pictures* (January 1992).

***Part I:  
Cultural Politics***

Week 2: Identity Crisis: On "Angry White Men"

Film Screening: **Falling Down** (Schumacher, 1993)

Monday, September 14

James Davison Hunter, "Prologue: Stories from the Front," and pgs. 31-35 & 42-51 of "Cultural Conflict in America," from *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics in America* (1991).

Pat Buchanan, speech presented at the 1992 Republican National Convention.

Lauren Berlant, "Introduction: The Intimate Public Sphere," from *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex & Citizenship* (1997).

Week 3: Decomposing America: Rethinking Citizenship in a Multicultural Age

Film Screening: **Forrest Gump** (Zemeckis, 1994)

Monday, September 21

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Forward" and "The Decomposition of America," from *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1991).

Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," from *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1991).

Selections from, *Time Magazine Special Issue: The New Face of America*, November 18, 1993:

David Van Bierna, “And Still They Come”;

James Walsh, “The Perils of Success”;

Jill Smolow, Greg Aunapu et. al, “Intermarried...with Children”;

and Pico Iyer, “The Global Village Finally Arrives.”

Week 4: Savage Inequalities: Race Matters

Film Screening: **LA92** (Martin and Lindsay, 2017)

Monday, September 28

Toni Morrison, “Racism and Fascism,” and “Home,” from *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches and Meditations* (2019).

Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “The Los Angeles ‘Race Riot’ and Contemporary U.S. Politics,” in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (1993).

Michelle Alexander, “Introduction” and “The New Jim Crow,” from *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010).

Week 5: Women and the Law, or Women With/Outlaws (Part I): Feminism’s Third Wave

Film Screening: **Thelma & Louise** (Scott, 1991)

Monday, October 5

Susan Faludi, “Introduction: Blame it on Feminism” and “The Trends of Antifeminism: The Media and the Backlash,” from *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1991).

Marita Sturken, *Thelma & Louise* (2000). Read all.

Week 6: Queering the Nation: The New Sexual Politics

Film Screening: **Shortbus** (Mitchell, 2006)

Monday, October 12

Michael Warner, “Preface,” “The Ethics of Sexual Shame,” from *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (1999).

“Queers Read This: I Hate Straights” (*The Queer Nation Manifesto*, 1990).

This document can be accessed at the following website:

<http://www.digenia.se/andras%20texter/THE%20QUEER%20NATION%20MANIFESTO.html>

Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3.4 (1997).

Week 7: Women and the Law, or Women With/Outlaws (Part II): Black Feminism Reimagined  
Film Screening: **Set it Off** (Gray, 1996)

Monday, October 19

Ann DuCille, "Toy Theory: Black Barbie and the Deep Play of Difference," from *Skin Trade* (1998).

Patricia Williams, "On Being the Object of Property," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14.1 (1988).

Nellie Y. McKay, "Remembering Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas: What Really Happened When One Black Woman Spoke Out," in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. Toni Morrison (1992).

## ***Part II: Technologies of Difference***

Week 8: "Act Up, Fight AIDS": The HIV Epidemic and the Politics of Survival  
Film Screening: **United in Anger: A History of ACT UP** (Hubbard, 2012)

Monday, October 26

Paula Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," from *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (1999).

Deborah Gould, "Activism as Worldmaking," from *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (2009).

Jih-Fei Cheng, "How to Survive: AIDS and Its Afterlives in Popular Media," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44.1/2 (2016).

In-class case study: Gran Fury's visual art for ACT UP.

Week 9: The Body Multiple: Remaking Flesh in American Technoculture  
Film Screening: **Terminator 2: Judgment Day** (Cameron, 1991)

Monday, November 2

Donna J. Haraway, “A Manifesto For Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” from *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991).

**Special assignment:** RE-READ “A Manifest for Cyborgs” and answer questions in journal.

Week 10: Plugging In: The World Wide Web Goes Online  
Film Screening: **The Net** (Winkler, 1995)

Monday, November 9

Stephanie Ricker Schulte, “From Computers to Cyberspace,” from *Cached: Decoding the Internet in Global Popular Culture* (2013).

Jia Tolentino, “The I in the Internet,” from *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (2019).

Lisa Nakamura, “Cyberberrace,” *PMLA* 123.5 (2008).

Week 11: Always Optimizing: Biocitizenship in the Genomic Age  
Film Screening: **Gattaca** (Niccol, 1997)

Monday, November 16

Alondra Nelson, “Acts of Reparation” and “Racial Politics After the Genome,” from *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliations after the Genome* (2016).

Jia Tolentino, “Always be Optimizing,” from *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (2019).

Jackie Stacey, “Imitation of Life: The Politics of the New Genetics in Cinema,” in *Signs of Life: Cinema and Medicine*, ed. Graeme Harper, Andrew Moor (2005).

**Part III:**  
***Environments of Insecurity***

Week 12: Risk Management: The Discourse of Harm and its Discontents  
Film Screening: **Safe** (Haynes, 1995)

Monday, November 23

Malcolm Harris, “Danny Dunn and Homework Machine,” from *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials* (2017)

Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “Introduction: Death in the Afternoon,” “The Lives and Deaths of the More and Less Educated,” and “How American Healthcare is Undermining Lives,” from *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (2020)

Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, “Microaggressions and Moral Cultures” from *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars* (2018)

Week 13: American Imperialism: The Gulf War Then & Now  
Film Screening: **Three Kings** (Russell, 1999)

Monday, November 30

Melani McAlister, “Military Multiculturalism in the Gulf War and After, 1990-1999,” from *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (2005).\*

Jasbir Puar, “Abu Ghraib and U.S. Sexual Exceptionalism,” from *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007).\*

Week 14: Whither Democracy?: Neoliberalism and the War on Terror  
Film Screening: **Syriana** (Gaghan, 2005)

Monday, December 7

Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization” (2006)

Talal Asad, “Introduction,” and “Horror at Suicide Terrorism,” from *On Suicide Bombing* (2007).

Barack Obama, “A More Perfect Union” (2008).