

Natalie Hopkinson, Ph.D.
Cultural Criticism, Summer, 2008
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Cultural Criticism

Americans consume mass quantities of culture, high and low, and have just as many opinions about it. It has never been easier to be a critic; in fact there are millions of people with wordpress accounts doing just that. But what elevates cultural criticism beyond the garden variety? How can a writer's voice be heard above the din? How do writers analyze culture in ways that are truly original? This course explores those the questions through a workshop in creative writing about cultural phenomena such as visual art, music, fashion, film, media, and literature. This course will introduce students to the basics of "semiotics," or the study of sign systems that allow writers to transform a conversation about sometimes fleeting cultural phenomena into a window into the times we are living in. Students will be introduced to the habits, practices and process of professional cultural reporting and criticism by critiquing the critics and through writing assignments and peer review.

Grading: 50 % participation, 50% written assignments. Participation includes oral presentations of current critical reviews 15 points, attendance/class discussion 20 points, and in-class writing workshops 15 points. Written assignments: 10 points, 1st paper; 15 points, 2nd paper; 25 points, final paper.
1st two papers are from 800-1200; Final paper is 1,500 words.

Extra credit is available for publishing criticism during the term; Publications must be pre-approved by the instructor and be dated before the last day of class.

BOOK LIST:

The following books are all available as paperbacks.

W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
Hendrik Hertzberg, "On Politics"
Roland Barthes, "Mythologies"

Dick Hebdige, "Subcultures: The Meaning of Style."
Susan Sontag: "Against Interpretation and Other Essays"
Valerie Steele. "Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power"
Strunk & White, "Elements of Style"
Edward Said "Orientalism"
Robert Warshaw "The Immediate Experience"
Veronica Chambers, "Kickboxing Geishas."

Week ONE: Wednesday, June 4

INTRODUCTIONS

In-class writing assignment: My Lens
Lecture: The Critic as Anthropologist
Go-go culture.
Show go-go video(?)
Assign dates for oral presentations on criticism.
Reading assignment: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*; Strunk & White

Week 2: Wednesday, June 11

Student Oral report
Discuss Roland Barthes, "Mythologies"; Strunk & White
LECTURE: Semiotics
In CLASS READ *Washington Post* Fashion Editor Robin Givhan's Pulitzer catalogue.

In-class assignment 1: Painting description.
Reading Assignment: Valerie Steele. "Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power"
Introduce 5-point outline (handout) for essays.

Week 3: Wednesday, June 18

Student Oral report
Discuss: Valerie Steele. "Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power"
Reading assignment: Susan Sontag: "Notes on Camp."; 'So bad, it's good.'

Week 4: Wednesday, June 25

Student Oral report
Discuss: Susan Sontag: "Against Interpretation and Other Essays"
"Notes on Camp"
Rough draft of 1st essay due; peer review

Reading assignment: W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*; Dick Hebdige, "Subcultures: The Meaning of Style."

Week 5: Wed., July 2

Student oral report

Lecture: Postcolonial studies

Reading assignment: Edward Said, "Orientalism"

Final draft of 1st essay due.

Week 6: Wednesday, July 9

Student oral report

Reading Assignment: Robert Warshaw, "The Immediate Experience";

Sign up for meeting times with instructor July 16 to discuss final essay topics

Rough draft, 2nd essay due; peer review

Week 7: Wednesday, July 16

Student oral report

Reading assignment: Hendrik Hertzberg, "On Politics"; Veronica Chambers, "Kickboxing Geishas."

Final draft, 2nd essay due

Discuss final essay with instructor

Week 8: Wednesday, July 23

Student Oral report

Discuss Hendrik Hertzberg; Veronica Chambers.

Pitches for final essay due.

Week 9 Wednesday, July 30

Student oral report

Outline due of final essay.

Week 10: August 6.

Closing remarks.

Peer review final papers.

An essay about a cultural trend. Final due date TBA