

Religion, Art, and Politics in America

Saint Louis University
THEO 3930.4

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Spring 2017
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Course Description

“Hand in hand,” wrote the abolitionist, statesman, and ex-slave Frederick Douglass in the early 1860s, “picture-making power accompanies religion, supplying man with his God, peopling the silent continents of eternity . . . and giving form and body to all that the soul can hope and fear in life and death.” Art and religion are entwined, Douglass observed, in the concerns of the world no less than in the lofty matters of the soul. This course starts with Douglass’s insights more than a century and a half ago and expands out to consider a broader framework of religion, art, and politics in the United States over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From visual media to hip hop, art museums to quilts to tattoos, we will explore the definitional projects of religion and art, the constitutional frameworks of religious freedom and establishment as a visual project, and the politics of representation various artists and beholders have signaled in their work, commentary, and critique.

Required Texts

bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (1995)

Su’ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (2016)

Kimberly Pinder, *Painting the Gospel* (2016)

All other readings are on Blackboard and are **required**.

Course Requirements

1) Attendance and Participation (20 points)

This course is graded out of a semester total of 100 points. Unless otherwise noted, all written assignments are due to the designated Blackboard assignment folder by 9:30am on the date they are due. Late work is not accepted and will receive zero credit.

- Active, prepared, and respectful attendance is critical to your successful completion of this course. 2-3 unexcused absences will result in a loss of 2 points; 4-5 unexcused absences will result in a loss of 4 points; more than 5 unexcused absences will result in the loss of 10 attendance and participation points.

That said, I know life happens outside of the classroom. Please make every effort to contact me if you will be absent at least two hours advance of class and I will review each instance on a case-by-case basis. Make up work is not allowed for unexcused absences. I reserve the right to revise my policy as needed.

- Completion of assigned material, including readings, prior to the start of class is expected. Read actively and come to class ready to discuss and analyze texts, artworks, images, and other assigned material and the issues they raise.
- Laptops and cell phones are not allowed in class unless otherwise noted. You should bring books, paper, and writing instruments to each class.
- Discussion leader (10 points). Once this semester you will be in charge of leading discussion of the day's assigned readings. Prepare a list of at least 5 generative, substantive questions about the day's topic and readings. Bring at least one copy of your questions to class to submit for credit and be mindful of your presentation (including dress, clarity, and time).

2) Five "Quote, Note, and Question" Responses (50 points)

Each of these short response papers should include these three components:

- Quote:** select a quotation from one of the readings up to this point (and since the last paper, if this applies). The length is not important—it could be a whole paragraph or even just a single word. But you should select a quotation that helps illuminate or clarify for you something about the reading. You might fully understand the quotation or you might not! Be sure to include page numbers.
- Note:** the note is a comment about the quotation you selected—it can be an observation or an extended reflection about the text. It should draw upon what we sometimes call "close reading"—this method of analysis pays attention to the details of a text, perhaps by looking for patterns or asking what is included or excluded from the text and why. You might take special note of the language the author uses, the style in which a text was written, the intended audience, or the kind of world created within the text (and how it compares the world in which the text was produced or the world we live in today). Your note may try to explain something complicated, reveal a hidden or underemphasized argument in the text, or draw attention to some of the text's limitations. With this kind of analysis, your goal is not to be "right" but rather to demonstrate a thoughtful and perhaps even creative reading of a text. You should aim for quality, not quantity. That being said, each note should run in the ballpark of 400-500 words (roughly 1-2 pages).
- Question:** offer a question about the quotation or text you have just addressed. Your question should be a textual one. That is, it should not be a question that requires outside research in order to begin to form a response. Instead, it should be a question about what something in the text means or how it works or what it does. This should not be a simple "yes or no" question but instead one that calls for further interpretation or reflection.

Responses will be marked on a 10-point scale (with 10 being the highest score) and evaluated based upon the thoughtfulness and creativity of your work. Responses should also be proofread and written in formal prose (see the note on writing below). Remember to keep your audience in mind—do not assume your reader comes from the same cultural or religious background as you do and write in a way that respects this difference. Submit your

response in Blackboard as an attachment (.doc or .pdf). They are due by 9:30am on the dates marked on the syllabus.¹

3) Semester Unessay (30 points)

Your major project for this semester is an unessay. As the name implies, an unessay turns the traditional academic assignment—the essay—on its head and asks you, the student, to choose your own topic and present it in any way you choose—a song, a poem, a speech, a policy paper, a podcast, a film, a painting, a court brief, a dance, a photograph or photoessay, a short story. Any way you choose. Instead of being evaluated by the standards of the academic essay, your unessay is evaluated on the basis of how compelling it is.

Ground Rules:

Your unessay must pick up on some theme, idea, image, space, word, or person introduced in this class.

You may use any source in the course of creating your unessay, and you must include or attach a list of sources in your final project (formats will vary based on the form of your unessay).

Every unessay must have the equivalent of an artist's statement or liner notes that situates your project in the context of religion, art, and politics in America. This requirement is not an essay. Instead, your statement may be in the form of a documentary voice over, album liner notes, or gallery tags, to name a few possible suggestions. For some projects, this material will be embedded in the project itself. For others, you'll have to think about how to best convey this information in a way that is organic to your project.

You may spin your unessay off of any other work in this class. However, your unessay must not be a resubmission of any prior work. In other words, don't cheat.

Deadlines

Proposal: 2/9 by 5pm (5 points)

Your 1-2 page proposal should identify a general topic and format. This is not a contract. You may, and likely will, change either your topic, scope, or format over the next several weeks. But take this step seriously. Describe what you want to focus on, why it is important, and how you plan to approach it. Your proposal must also include a brief list of sources you have consulted and/or plan to consult.

Check-in 1: Schedule a meeting with Dr. Lindsey between 2/28 and 3/9 to discuss your initial plans for your unessay and strategies for success.

¹ This assignment, including much of the wording, comes from Joshua Dubler, "Quotes, Notes, Questions,"

- Bring your proposal, your working list of sources, and any material you have produced to date. (5 points)
- Check-in 2: Schedule a meeting with Dr. Lindsey between 3/28 and 4/12 to discuss your progress to date, address any concerns you have, and brainstorm best strategies to complete your unessay. (5 points)
- Exhibition: Thursday, May 11, 2-3:50pm. Our final exam period is an opportunity to share your unessay with the class. Your unessay is due no later than the scheduled exam period. (15 points)

Course Policies

Technology:

As a general rule, no laptops, cell phones, or other electronic devices are permitted in class. Make sure your ringer and notifications are silenced or on vibrate and stored out of sight. If you must answer a call during class, please respect your classmates and the learning environment by stepping out of the classroom. All students should be prepared to take hand-written notes while in class and to engage in the collective learning process.

Technology makes many aspects of academic work more efficient, but it can also break down, become interrupted, or otherwise fail. Short of wide scale technological Armageddon, technological disruptions are not acceptable excuses for late work. Back up your work often and leave yourself enough time to respond to any hiccups.

Email

I do my best to respond to emails within 24 hours of receipt. Emails received after 8pm will likely not be read until the following day. If an emergency arises and you need to reach me immediately, you may call the Theology Department office at 977-2881.

When corresponding with professors, supervisors, officials, or other professionals on campus and in your career, please make it your habit to address the recipient formally according to their title (Dr., Professor, Ms., Mr., Esq., etc.) and to follow standard rules of grammar, syntax, and structure. A good rule of thumb is to use the title on the syllabus.

Assignment Submissions:

I do not accept late work. Unless otherwise noted, all written assignments must be loaded through the designated assignment folder on Blackboard.

Every assignment should include your name, the date, the assignment name or your title, and page numbers. As a rule of thumb, use 12-point font and 1-inch margins on all academic work. *I will not grade papers or assignments that do not have these basic elements.* Double-check your work for spelling and grammatical errors before submitting.

You may email assignments if you encounter errors on Blackboard. Emailed assignments must include your name, the assignment, and your section number in the subject line. For example:

Rachel Lindsey // Reflection Paper 1 // THEO 1000-59.

I will make an effort to verify receipt, but it is ultimately your responsibility to make sure that your work has been received on time.

Academic Honesty:

Only submit your own original work. This is a fun class and you will have ample opportunity to be creative—don't channel your creativity into nefarious actions. I am your advocate as well as a resource. If you are struggling with the class, starting to feel overwhelmed, something comes up or happens, or you are just burnt out, come see me first.

For the official SLU policy on academic integrity follow this link:

<http://www.slu.edu/college-of-arts-and-sciences-home/undergraduate-education/academic-honesty>.

The Student Success Center is also a great campus resource for all stages of learning:

<http://www.slu.edu/student-success-center>.

Civility:

We are going to be discussing some hefty topics in this course. Please remember to respect your classmates and their point of view. Vigorous debate may occur, and at times will be encouraged—we learn, after all, through exposure to new ideas and experiences. You don't have to agree with everyone—authors, each other, me—all the time but please work to critique ideas and statements rather than malign or impugn the people raising them.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Please note, all readings should be completed before arriving in class. Please come prepared to discuss the readings and raise informed questions.

UNIT 1: ORIENTATIONS

Defining the Sacred: What is Religion? What is Art?

T 1/17: Introductions

Read in Class: "Truth or Insult? Artwork Hung in Capitol Spawns a Dispute," *New York Times*, January 11, 2017

Th 1/19: S. Brent Plate, *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture*, 1-18

T 1/24: Nell Irvin Painter, "Ut Pictura Poesis, or the Sisterhood of the Verbal and the Visual Arts," 103-131

Politics of Representation: Artists, Subjects, Beholders

Th 1/26: bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, xi-21, 35-48

T 1/31: hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 108-118, 125-151

Th 2/2: hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 163-170, 202-220

"Quote, Note, and Question" #1 Due by 9:30am

UNIT 2: BOUNDARIES

Public/Private

- T 2/7: Sally Promey, "The Public Display of Religion," *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, 27-48
- David Morgan, "The Art of John McNaughton, the Tea Party's Painter," *Religion & Politics*, July 25, 2012
- Th 2/9: Promey, "Material Establishment and Public Display," *Material and Visual Cultures of Religion*
- O'Connor v. Washburn University*

Unessay Proposal Due

Blasphemy

- T 2/14: Plate, *Blasphemy*, 32-61
- Th 2/16: Plate, *Blasphemy*, 64-126

Iconographies

- T 2/21: Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists*, 73-170
- Th 2/23: Jolyon Baracka Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition*, 1-56
- "Quote, Note, and Question" #2 Due by 9:30am**

UNIT 3: MUSEUMS

Spaces

- T 2/28: Gretchen Bugeln, Crispin Paine, S. Brent Plate, "Religion in Museums, Museums as Religion," *Religion in Museums* (2017), 1-7
- Karla Cavarra Britton, "Toward a Theology of the Art Museum," in *Religion in Museums* (2017), 21-27
- Carol Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship," *Exhibiting Cultures* (1991), 88-103
- Th 3/2: Visit to SLAM

Objects

- T 3/7: Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums*, 1-44
- Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, from "Objects of Ethnography," in *Destination Culture* (1998), 17-30
- Lauren F. Turek, "Religious History Objects in Museums," *Religion in Museums*, 57-62
- Th 3/9: Visit to SLUMA

SPRING BREAK 3/13-3/17

Stories

- T 3/21: "State of the Art: A Q&A With the Smithsonian's New Religion Curator," *Religion News Service*, October 17, 2016
- Judith Weisenfeld, "Religion on Display at the National Museum of African American History," *Sacred Matters*, January 3, 2017
- Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums*, 101-111
- Listen to "How a Candy Magnate Helped Bring a Holy Collection Home," *Wyoming Public Radio*, August 8, 2015,
<http://www.npr.org/2015/08/08/430083449/how-a-candy-magnate-helped-bring-a-holy-collection-home>
- "Quote, Note, and Question" #3 Due by 9:30am**
- Th 3/23: Visit to MOCRA

UNIT 4: BODIES

Skin

- T 3/28: "Tattooing," *Religion and American Cultures: An Encyclopedia...*, vol. 2, 357-358
- "Tattoos and Numbers: The System of Identifying Prisoners at Auschwitz," *United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum*
- Stefanie Truesdale, "Jews and Tattoos: Rooted in Conflict," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*
- Andy Abrams, "Kosher Ink: The Emerging World of Tattooed Jews"
- Anna Nussbaum Keating, "Marked for Christ: The Sacred Symbolism of Religious Tattoos," *America*, November 11, 2013
- "Mr. Cartoon, Tattooing the Virgin," *Day to Day, NPR*, December 10, 2004 (audio and transcript)

Memory

- Th 3/30: Anthony Petro, *After the Wrath of God* (2015), 137-185
- "AIDS Quilt," *Religion and American Cultures: An Encyclopedia...*, vol. 2, 373-375
- ["Blessing the AIDS Quilt,"](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2012/07/25/bleasing-the-aids-quilt/12032/) *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, [01:28], July 25, 2012, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2012/07/25/bleasing-the-aids-quilt/12032/>

Voice

- T 4/4: Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (2016), 1-76

- Th 4/6: Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 77-138
 T 4/11: Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 139-232
“Quote, Note, and Question” #4 Due by 9:30am
 Th 4/13: NO CLASS (EASTER HOLIDAY)

UNIT 5: STREETS

Public Art

- T 4/18: Kimberly Pinder, *Painting the Gospel*, Intro, Chaps 1-2
 Th 4/20: Pinder, *Painting the Gospel*, Chaps 3-4
 T 4/25: Pinder, *Painting the Gospel*, Chap 5, Conclusion and Appendix
 Th 4/27: Erika Doss, “Statue Mania to Memorial Mania,” *Memorial Mania* (2010), 17-60
 “Confederate Memorial,” *Forest Park Statues and Monuments*,
<http://www.forestparkstatues.org/confederate-memorial/>
 “Confederate Monument Report” (December 10, 2015)
 “History” and “About Us,” *Incarnate Word Foundation*,
<http://www.iwfdn.org/about/history/>

Roadside Religion

- T 5/2: Patrick Arthur Polk, *Botánica Los Angeles*, 14-55
 Th 5/4: Timothy Beale, “Folk Art Church,” *Roadside Religion*, 194-210
 “[Howard Finster](#)” Artworks, *Smithsonian American Art Museum*
 Mark Moran and Mark Scuerman, “Lanning Garden Lawn Museum,” *Weird Missouri*, 124-125
 + Semester Debrief
“Quote, Note, and Question” #5 Due by 9:30am

Final Exam Period

Thursday, May 11, 2-3:50pm: Unessay Exhibition