

## **Syllabus for Humanities 131--Cultural Connections      Summer 2022**

Instructor: Mort Cohn

Course Text: Handbook for the Humanities (2013) ISBN: 13: 978-0205161621

### **Course Description**

From the college catalog: "HUM 131 CULTURAL CONNECTIONS (3 CR) This interdisciplinary course examines contemporary issues, their human and technological components, and their historical precedents through art, music, literature and philosophy." Admittedly, this course description sounds pretty vague. That might be a good thing for our purposes, however. Part of the power of this course is drawing from sources that are familiar to us-- and learning to find their connections to a larger and more diverse culture on our own.

### **Workload and Grading**

There will be three or four short quizzes or informal writings that respond to selected readings or class discussions. In total, they will constitute 10 percent of the class grade. Class participation will account for 20 percent of your semester grade. The formal paper will receive a letter grade and constitute three to five pages of academic writing--and 20 percent of your semester grade. The formal paper will need to include complete academic notation where appropriate. (We will discuss this.) There will be in-class midterm and final exams, each worth 20 percent. In addition, you will be required to keep an informal academic journal during the time you take the course. The journal can be typed or hand-written and should comment on your academic work, your life, or the world at-large, whatever you are interested in, as long as it represents your best prose. This will provide an additional resource during the composing process. At the end of the semester it should comprise at least 20 pages of prose (approx. 250 words per page--single spaced if written, double spaced if typed with one-inch margins all around) and will be worth ten percent.

Another important part of the class will be the colloquium. Each student will choose a specific time to present materials and lead discussion--and essentially take an active role in teaching an aspect of the texts or on a relevant topic of your own choice. After we get under way, one or two students will present colloquia at the end of each session. While your performance here cannot hurt your participation grade, an excellent performance will certainly help. The colloquium is important because it fosters a sense of responsibility that a simple discussion cannot. We are better readers and writers when given the additional task of presenting material or leading discussion.

## **Grade Weighting**

Academic journal 10%

Formal paper 20%

Participation 20%

Midterm exam 20%

Final exam 20%

Quizzes 10%

## **Schedule of Major Assignments** (See also detailed schedule in course pack.)

Midterm Exam—(July 1)

Term Paper—(Aug. 5)

Final Exam—(Aug. 12)

## **Course Objectives**

By the end of the semester, students should achieve the following outcomes:

ADO 1—Writing Clearly, Concisely, and Intelligibly at the Developing Level

ADO 6—Understanding and appreciating aesthetic experience and artistic creativity.

Beyond the college's desired outcomes, I have some of my own, which we will discuss at some length in the days ahead.

## **Student Responsibilities**

\*As I've pointed out, you will be responsible for submitting all assignments on deadline.

\* Your attendance in the class is mandatory. With three weeks' worth of class absences (or their equivalent), your semester grade will be reduced by one full letter grade. Upon reaching four weeks' worth of absences, you will receive a failing mark.

\*Students are required to submit only their own original prose written during this semester.

\*Academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated in the class. Plagiarism or cheating will result in either a failing grade or outright expulsion from the program. We'll discuss it.

\*If any problems arise during the semester, please get in touch with me as soon as possible.

## Course Pack for HUM 131

### Schedule of Assignments: (Weeks One through Ten will correspond to the assignments.)

**\*Assignment One (Cultural Self Assessment and Reading):** This class is not an inventory. That is, you will not be evaluated on how well you memorize a lot of facts. The text is laden with facts. You are going to read most of the text and, of course, you will learn—and perhaps later recollect—many facts. But that is not what the class is essentially about. We are here to gain cultural fluency. We are here to gain confidence and competence in writing and talking about culture. That is sort of a big deal. The world has become a very small place because of technology and the global marketplace. We encounter other cultures all of the time and it is important that we have the ability to understand each other.

As a first step, I always ask students to write about their own culture. I mean, how do you identify yourself culturally? What are some of the things that distinguish your culture from others? Is it just customs and food—or does it go deeper? Does it affect the way you perceive the world? And do you identify with multiple cultures? (You would probably be unusual these days if you only saw yourself in one culture. Generations, locales, religions, language communities, and even hobbies can group us together and distinguish us from each other. Admittedly, there is a lot of overlap these days.) For instance, I see myself as a domiciliary of Ohio but more importantly a native of Michigan. I was once a kibbutznik, a farm laborer, and a land surveyor. Do you think those experiences shaped me culturally? Damn right they did. I was a student of history, an aspiring intellectual, and an athlete. I once owned an Alfa Romeo. Believe it or not, there is a whole culture that binds together owners of that car. They call themselves Alfisti. Why do they band together? Is it the famously poor mechanical record of that automobile and the necessary sharing of parts and know-how? Or is something more intangible? When I would pass another Spider on the road, we would exchange little honks on the horn to show our membership in this sad little community. We would nod our heads at each other as we flew by, a knowing nod, a nod of approval or acceptance—or maybe it was just self-pity. (Now that Fiat owns Chrysler, its subsidiary Alfa now imports here regularly. Alfas are not so rare anymore, and I doubt if Alfa owners even consider themselves special in any way. Plus, I think the car is probably better made these days. I hear the Italians are finally using galvanized steel.)

They talk about the culture of a winning football team. Is that really a thing? I mean, is it appropriate to compare the things that distinguish the life and thoughts of football players to the cultural artifacts of the ancient Maya or the Parthians? Well, if the players take them seriously, then maybe we should. The Mayans believed in their cosmology so thoroughly that they would sacrifice their lives after winning a basketball game (not losing like the Aztecs). That is belief. Well, someone tell me why Ohio State is so dominant year after year. Could it be that those players share something so special and powerful that it permits them to pass on the genius of winning to other players? Does it rise to the level of a cosmology, a religion, even if it does not require human sacrifice? I have seen those scarlet and gray monsters get off the bus in Ann

Arbor. I have seen the gleam of collective insanity in their eyes. If they are not practitioners of some kind of modern religion and true believers, then I do not know who is.

Culture is in our clothes. It is in our music. Whether we prefer Coke to Pepsi is cultural. Same for Miracle Whip over Mayo. Pineapple on pizza? Depends on your culture. Do you belong to a Ford family or a Chevy family—or Dodge? (I was raised orthodox Oldsmobile but later converted to reformed Chevy.) Do you think women should be thin or have curves? Do you prefer dark hair to blonde hair? Where do you go for news, Fox or CNN? What passes for entertainment in your home? These are all cultural questions.

The way we live informs our culture, creates perspective, and alters our aesthetics. Hunting made us see the world a certain way. Farming dramatically changed that perspective. Living in towns and cities changed it further still. Some say that the internet is changing the way people see reality. How could it not, based on what we already know about human nature? What you do makes you who you are, what you are, and how you think. A race of people walking around looking at a two-inch screen all day will not be long for this world, I fear.

So, I want you to start thinking about all of the things that have shaped you culturally. Write about your experiences, especially the ones that helped you to see the world as you do now. Try to be as complete as you can. Omit nothing. And most importantly, try to assess the value of each of these experiences. I mean, I was only in Israel for one summer, but I was a boy of 15 and very impressionable. In some ways, that summer fashioned the man I would become more than the previous 14 summers. Writing about it has been tremendously useful for me. I invite you to try it yourself. When you are finished, just drop it in the mailbox or hand it to me in class, whatever is easiest and fastest.

Also, please read Parts I and II in the course text (through p. 124) and keep notes. There will be a short quiz or essay assignment in the days that follow.

Please also refer to Assignment Nine below (the journal). You should begin writing this when the course commences. At the end of term, it will need to be 30 pages or more.

**\*Assignment Two (Read and Evaluate Two Epic Poems):** Please read *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the course pack. Again, keep notes. Bear in mind that these are pretty ancient texts. The people who wrote them had a different perspective on beauty, heroism, and even storytelling itself. See yourself as a scientist here. These poems were not meant to entertain you. The intended audiences lived and died centuries ago. You are here to assess their cultural value. What specifically were they doing for their own people? What were the two unnamed poets attempting to accomplish? Also, compare the pieces carefully. According to you, what changed in the Anglo Saxon culture between 700 and 1200, based on your reading of these two epic poems? How did the hero change? I mean, what did it take to be a hero in the time of Beowulf? What did it take—more or less—to be a hero in the time of King Arthur?

Write a brief essay in response and pop it in the drop box, please.

**\*Assignment Three (Colloquium One):** Please read Part III in the course text. Again, keep meticulous notes. If you find something of particular interest—or you are interested in a cultural issue of the same time period—let me know through the JPAY that you are interested in presenting a colloquium to the rest of the class. These can be short discussions (and I prefer interactive discussions to lectures) where you engage the rest of the class, teach us something, and in the process, reinforce your own knowledge and practice public speaking. We can probably accommodate three or four of these in a live session. If you don't go this week, there will be two more opportunities to do a colloquium later in the term. So, if you are presenting, your assignment is to engage the class. If you are not presenting, then your assignment is to read the relevant chapters in the course text and come to class prepared to discuss them. Again, there will be a short quiz or essay as a follow up.

**\*Assignment Four (Midterm):** I will send a series of questions, either in the slow mail or through JPAY. Select two of the prompts and write a short essay in response to each.

**\*Assignment Five (Colloquium Two):** Please read Parts IV and V in the course text. Give special attention to the chapters on the 20th and 21st Centuries. The same directions apply here as in the previous colloquium assignment. Again, we will have space for three or four students to present ideas in class. There will be a quiz or short essay assignment as a follow-up.

**\*Assignment Six (Term Paper):** The major assignment for the semester is the term paper, literally the paper that defines your term or semester. We are going to discuss the paper criteria, brainstorm ideas (preferably avoiding any duplication in topics), and reviewing research methods, citations, etc. I am a writing teacher when not teaching HUM 131, so I might be able to impart some wisdom here. The paper will be due, not surprisingly, at the end of term. I will be happy to look at rough drafts before it is due.

**\*Assignment Seven (Colloquium Three):** This session will feature students who have cultural interests not contained in the course text or course pack. You can discuss sub-cultures, more modern trends of differentiating ourselves, or cultural expressions typically ignored by the West. (You will notice that the text treats non-Western cultural expressions as sidebars and organizes most of the chapters like a Western Civilization class. It was still some kind of effort on the editors' part to be more inclusive, but that is one of the major flaws in our education system: it favors the favored. Powerful and successful cultures (ones that prevail in war and colonization) get to write the histories. It is up to us to sift through the detritus of the ages and discuss alternate histories. It is up to us to remember those cultures that did not end up on top of the heap. This should prove to be the liveliest and most interactive of the three colloquium sessions. Bring your best game.

**\*Assignment Eight (Final Exam):** Similar to the midterm, the final exam will be a timed essay writing experience. I will provide a list of questions. You will select one this time and write a short essay in response. This will happen in a live class, or it will happen over JPAY, as needed.

**\*Assignment Nine (Journal):** This is strictly a formality. You are to keep a journal for the duration of the course. I would recommend writing in it two or three times a week. Make sure to date your entries. You can write about current events or your class work, what you are reading, etc. It should document your academic life during this interesting period. You can share it with me—or not. It is entirely up to you. I merely keep track of who keeps a journal and who does not. I will not be invading your privacy by reading them, unless you direct me to do so.

**\*Assignment Ten (Final Self Assessment):** After our last meeting, I will ask you all to write a brief follow-up to the self-assessment you wrote at the beginning of term. What, if any, changes do you see in your own cultural identity, based on the experience of this college course? How might you see other cultures today differently? Do you notice any overlap or intersection between cultures that you previously did not recognize—and how might this be significant? Again, there are no right or wrong answers here. It calls for an opinion. When you are done, either hand it to me or drop it in the mailbox.