R.S. 3811 Contemporary Alternative Spirituality

Instructor: Dr. Jennifer Porter
Classroom: SN1019
Slot 17 (Tues/Thurs 9:00 – 10:15)
Office Hours: Tues-Thurs 10:30-12:00; 2:00-3:30
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Course Description: This course provides an in-depth examination of one or more forms of contemporary alternative spirituality as practiced in North America. In order to gain understanding of these alternative spiritual movements, we will draw upon social scientific studies of these groups, as well as explore images of these groups and their religious practices in both history and popular culture. This year, we will be focusing on the religion of Spiritualism, with a focus on the theme of "Spirits, Spirit Possession, and Spirit Communication." Spirit possession and talking to the spirits of the dead represent age-old religious themes that are undergoing revitalization in the modern world, with what appears to be a mainstreaming of Spiritualist beliefs within popular culture. This course will explore both the historical roots of Spiritualism, and the modern prevalence of Spiritualist themes in television shows such as Ghost Whisperer, Medium, and Ghost Hunters.

Texts: No textbook: required readings have been placed on reserve in the library.

Requirements:

| Assignment and Discussion #1 | 15% |
| Assignment and Discussion #2 | 15% |
| Assignment and Discussion #3 | 15% |
| Final take-home exam | 55% |

Assignments and Discussion: This class is going to follow a mixed lecture/discussion format. Although I will be giving lectures to cover the topics we will be studying in the class, these lectures will be interactive: you are encouraged and expected to come prepared by having read the assigned readings, and to have comments and questions relevant to the topic ready to contribute in class. Please make sure you come prepared to class: it will make the class more enjoyable for everyone! We are also going to make room for three full discussion classes. On these dates, you must have carefully read the assigned readings, and hand in an assignment worth 15% of your final grade (for a total of 45% of your grade over the course of the semester.) These assignments should engage critically with the material in the readings, and address issues and themes that have been covered in class as they relate to the articles in question. What is the key point or points the author is trying to make? How do these points relate to what we have covered in class and in previously assigned articles in this section of our course? Do you think the author successfully makes their argument, if so, what do you find most compelling about the argument? If not, what weaknesses do you see in the argument? Can you think of any examples from pop culture or your own experience that relate to the theme(s) in question? Assignments should be approximately 4-5 pages, typed, double-spaced. They are NOT to be purely descriptive retellings of the assigned articles, they must reveal your own analysis and conclusions regarding
the topic under discussion. You must also come to class prepared to discuss the readings and your reaction to the points raised. **Late assignments NOT accepted without Dr.’s note.**

**Take-home Exam:** This course will have a final take-home exam. It is worth **55%** of your final grade. This exam will be essay-style, with multiple questions, and with some choice of questions. The exam is designed to encourage you to show your understanding of the details and implications of the material we have been studying. You may draw upon outside sources to answer the questions on the exam; however, you are not required to do so. This exam will be handed out on the last day of class, and will be due on whatever date and time is assigned to us by the Registrar’s office for our final exam.

**Section One: Theories of Spirits, Spirit Possession and Altered States of Consciousness**

**Thursday Jan. 5th  Introduction to the Course - course outlines, requirements, etc.**

**Jan. 10-12  Introduction to Theories of Spirit Communication and Spirit Possession**


**Tuesday Jan. 17th  Taking Ghosts, Spirits and Spirit Possession Seriously - Discussion Class. Assignment #1 Due!**


**Section Two: Spiritualism**

**Jan. 19-24  Introduction to Spiritualism in History**

Jan. 26-31 Spiritualism and Science


Feb. 2-7 Spiritualism and Women
Read:


Video: Telegrams from the Dead.

Feb. 9-14 Spiritualism and Healing
Read:


Video: Spiritism: Bridging Spirituality and Health

Thursday Feb. 16th – Discussion Class #2 – The Science and Spirituality of Alternative Healing


Feb. 28-March 1 Mediumship in Spiritualism

Videos: 6th Sense with Colin Fry/Crossing Over with John Edward

**March 6-13 Spirit Guides and the Afterlife in Spiritualism**


VIDEO: What Dreams May Come

**SECTION THREE: GHOSTS, MEDIUMSHIP AND POPULAR CULTURE**

**March 16-20 Ghosts in Spiritualism and Popular Culture**

Video: Episodes of Medium and/or Ghost Whisperer

**March 22-27 Ghosts and ghost-hunting in Folklore and Popular Culture**

Video: Episodes of Most Haunted.

**March 29th: Discussion Class #3 – Popular Culture and Spiritualist/paranormal religious belief**


**April 3-5**

Ghosts, Spirits, and Mediumship – Ouija Board Séance (split class)

No Readings.