

J. M. DeLeon

Cultural History of the US: Protest and Performance

This course considers the relation of politics and aesthetics in 20th and 21st century social movements, from Bluestockings to Black Lives Matter. We will explore the ways performance and spectacle have been used to affect social change through protests and demonstrations, and the strategic work of representation and respectability in appealing to popular opinion and public sentiment. The contributions of women, queers, people of color, and gender-nonconforming people have been repeatedly—and, sometimes, strategically—written out of histories of social movements throughout the 20th century: we will foreground the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality in these movements, and the always-present labor of minoritized bodies and identities.

We will look at spectacular public protests—such as demonstrations during the Civil Rights movement, the work of artists and activists in ACT UP, Occupy Wall Street, and contemporary Black Lives Matter protests, as well as pro-life protests and the Westboro Baptist Church—as well as the legislative and structural effects of such events, in order to ask: what can performance do, both as a rallying point and alienating force? How are protest strategies taken up and changed over time? What can we learn from these past strategies, and how are they being used in contemporary activism? In addition to novels, plays, documentaries, and primary sources, we will consider contemporary narratives that reflect the circulation of these histories in popular imagination. We will also read texts on performance theory and spectatorship, in order to ground our interdisciplinary approach between history and performance studies methodologies.