The Idea of “America”: What Does it Mean?

This class will examine “America” as a complex, historically-rooted, and malleable idea, which writers, social scientists, politicians, and the state have shaped, changed, and critiqued to fit their own contexts and purposes. We will explore the historical roots and shifting conceptions of the idea of America through analysis of political treatises, poetry, essays, and official government documents from the pre-colonial period to the present. Approaching “America” as both a nation-state and an empire, and considering how it has been imagined by those within as well as outside its borders, we will analyze the idea of America not only in the context of life in the United States, but also in the context of global development, environmental crises, and American foreign policy. Students will write informal response papers as preparation for drafting and revising 3 essays over the course of the semester, including a literary critical essay. Texts will include works by John Locke, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Zora Neale Hurston, Walt Whitman, Jose Martí, Henry Luce, Eugene Burdick, and Naomi Klein, as well as official documents of U.S. foreign policy.

Reading and Writing
This class is designed to hone your skills and practice as a writer. Our premise is that reading and writing are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. We write in order to extract and convey a particular reading and significance of a book, article, movie, public event, political debate, or episode in our own lives.

Assignments and Grading:
Over the course of the semester, you will write **3 formal essays** in which you explore a specific question about the idea of America through an analysis of one or more texts on the syllabus. You will write a rough draft for each of these essays. We will workshop rough drafts in class. On the day of the workshop, you will be responsible for bringing in hard copies for the class or your group. Final papers must be formatted appropriately. Please use 12-pt font, double-space, and paginate. Essays will be graded for the form as well as content of their analysis.

You will also write **6 informal responses** of approximately 250 words. Your responses are designed to function as preparation for class discussion as well as brainstorming for your essays. They will not be formally graded, although they do constitute an important part of your participation grade. The prompts for these responses are posted to the Discussion section of Blackboard. Please copy and paste your responses there.

This course is a seminar. Your involvement in our discussions is key to its success. In addition to making regular contributions to class discussion, **you will serve as “point person” at least once in the semester.** On this day, you will be expected to help guide the conversation with critical and analytical questions you have prepared in advance.

The best way to do well in this class is to really engage with the readings and our discussions. Be ready to challenge yourself and have fun doing it.
Writing Seminar I: The Idea of America: What Does it Mean?

Essay 1: 4-6 pages (20%)
Essay 2: 4-6 pages (30%)
Essay 3: 6-8 pages (30%)
Participation: Response Papers and Class Discussion: (20%)

Late Policy: It is important to complete your drafts and final essays on time. Unless you have made other arrangements with me, late papers will be penalized.

Attendance Policy: You are allowed 3 unexcused absences, no questions asked. Except for extenuating circumstances, additional absences will be penalized.

On Plagiarism and Academic Integrity: A description of Gallatin’s academic integrity policy, including plagiarism and its consequences, can be found at the following link: http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html

Laptop and Technology Policy: You are permitted, though not encouraged, to bring a laptop or other computer device to class in order to take notes on class discussion. You are not permitted to surf the web during class. Please turn your cell phones to vibrate and do not text during class.

Books and Readings:
Please purchase the following books by any means you prefer (Amazon, Strand Bookstore, Book Culture, etc.). All other readings can be found on the Course Documents section of Blackboard.

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Penguin Classics)
- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Dover)
- Hacker, *Pocket Manual of Style*

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Introduction:

Sept. 7  
- Obama, “Yes We Can” (Jan. 27, 2008); West Point Speech (Dec. 1, 2009)
- Glenn Beck, “American Revival” (Feb. 8, 2010)

The Roots of “America”: Master Narratives of Early America

Sept. 12:  
- John Locke, “Two Treatises on Government” (excerpts)
- Jan Sadeker, “America” (map)

Sept. 14:  
- Mary Rowlandson, “A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson”
- Prep for First Response Paper: Close Reading: What is it? How do I do it? What can Jon Stewart teach me about it?

Sept. 19:  
**Response Paper 1 Due**  
Michael Rogin, “Liberal Society and the Indian Question”
Writing Seminar I: The Idea of America: What Does it Mean?

Sept. 21: Emerson, “Self-Reliance”

Sept. 26: Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Author’s intro; Part 2, Ch. 5; Part 2, Ch. 10; Part 3, Ch. 7) in Penguin Classics edition: (pgs. 11-26, 228-231, 616-648, 675-677)

Sept. 28: **Response Paper 2 Due**
Ehrenreich, “Nickel and Dimed”
[Assign Essay 1]
- Analytical Arguments
- MLA Citation

Oct. 3: **Essay 1 Drafts Due**
Workshop 2 Drafts [in groups of 4]

Oct. 5: Workshop 2 Drafts [in groups of 4]

**Counter-Narratives?: African-American, Latin-American, and “Other” Perspectives**

Oct. 10: **Columbus Day: No Class**

Oct. 12: **Essay 1 Final Due**
Phillis Wheatley (selected poems)
Writing Tips: Getting Rid of Extra Words

Oct. 17: **Response Paper 3 Due**
Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”
Hurston, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me”


Oct. 26: **Response Paper 4 Due**
Jose Martí, “Our America”; Greg Grandin, “Your Americanism and Mine,”
[Assign Essay 2]

Oct. 31: **Essay 2 Drafts Due**
Workshop 2 Drafts [in groups of 4]

Nov. 2: Workshop 2 Drafts [in groups of 4]

**“America” in the World: The American Century and Beyond**

Nov. 7: Henry Luce, “The American Century”
Writing Seminar I: The Idea of America: What Does it Mean?

Nov. 9: Essay 2 Final Due
Andy Rotter, “Chronicle of a War Foretold”
The Ugly American (pages 1-42)

Nov. 14: The Ugly American (pages 43-190)
Michael Latham, “Redirecting the Revolution?: The USA and the Failure of Nation Building in South Vietnam”

Nov. 16: Response Paper 5 Due
The Ugly American (pages 191-285)

Nov. 21: Trip Gabriel, “Plagiarism Lines Blur for Students in the Digital Age”
Stanley Fish, “Plagiarism is not a Big Moral Deal”
Ryan Brown, “The Plagiarism Generation”
Writing Tips: Plagiarism and Originality
[Assign Essay 3]

Nov. 23: Thanksgiving: No Class

Nov. 28: Noon: Brown-Bag Lunch with Sinan Antoon
Response Paper 6 Due
State Department, The Future of Iraq Project (excerpt)
Naomi Klein, “Baghdad Year Zero: Pillaging Iraq in Search of a Neocon Utopia”
Antoon, “Monumental Disrespect”

Nov 30: What’s your prompt? [Class Workshop]

Dec 5: -Rebecca Johns, “Bridging the Gap between Class and Space: U.S. Worker Solidarity with Guatemala”
-Michael Zweig, “Iraqi Unions and Their American Labor Allies”

Dec 7: Essay 3 Draft Due
Workshop Drafts [in groups of 4]

Dec. 12: Workshop Drafts [in groups of 4]

Dec. 14: Essay 3 Final Due
Student Readings