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. Texts will include works by John Locke, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, 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 2 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 submit a rough draft for each of these essays. 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.

In addition, you will write 5 response papers (1 for each unit) of 250-500 words, which you will post to Blackboard’s Discussion Forum. These responses are designed to function as preparation for class discussion as well as brainstorming for your essays. While you are welcome to include personal reflections in your responses, you must organize your comments around a pointed analysis of the assigned text, which should include quotes from and references to specific passages in the text.

This course is a seminar. Your regular participation in our discussions is key. You are expected to come to class prepared with questions and comments on the day’s reading.

Response Papers: (25%)
Essay 1: 4-6 pages (25%)
Essay 2: 8-10 pages (35%)
Participation: (15%)
Writing Seminar I: The Idea of America: What Does it Mean?

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 off and do not text during class.

Books and Readings:
Please purchase the following books. Shakespeare & Co. (716 Broadway) has several copies on hand. I have also placed copies on reserve at NYU Bobst Library. All other readings can be found on the Course Documents section of Blackboard.

Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (Penguin Classics)
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (Penguin Classics)
Jill Lepore, The Whites of Their Eyes
Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass (Dover)
Hacker, Pocket Manual of Style (or a style manual of your choice with MLA and Chicago guidelines)

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Introduction:

Sept. 5 - Paul Ryan, VP Acceptance Speech, Wisconsin, Aug. 11, 2012

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

Sept. 10 - John Locke, “Two Treatises on Government” (excerpts)
-Jan Sadeler, “America” (map)

Sept. 12 Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (focus on ch. 6, esp. pgs. 43-80; ch. 11; ch. 14, esp. 144-155)

Sept. 17 No class: Michael Rogin, “Liberal Society and The Indian Question”

Sept. 19 Emerson, “Self-Reliance”
Writing Seminar I: The Idea of America: What Does it Mean?

Sept. 24  Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Author’s intro; Vol. 1, Part 2, Ch. 5; Vol. 1, Part 2, Chs. 10-20; Vol. 2, Part 3, Ch. 7) in Penguin Classics edition: (pgs. 11-26, 228-231, 616-648, 675-677)
[Assign Essay 1]
- Analytical Arguments
- MLA Citation

Early American Thought in Contemporary Politics

Sept. 26  No class

Sept. 28  Rescheduled Class: 2:30-3:45 (1 Washington Place, Rm. 601)
Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes* (up to page 125)

Oct. 1  Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes* (page 126 to end)

Oct. 3  **Essay 1: Drafts Due**
Workshop 3 drafts as a class

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

Oct. 8  Phillis Wheatley (selected poems)

Oct. 10  **Essay 1 Final Due**
Writing Tips: Getting Rid of Extra Words

Oct. 15  **No Class: Fall Break**

Oct. 17  Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (pages 323-403)

Oct. 22  Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (pages 403-436)

Oct. 24  Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

Oct. 29  Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

Oct. 31  Jose Martí, “Our America”

Nov 5  Greg Grandin, “Your Americanism and Mine,”
Assign Essay 2

“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. 12  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. 19  *The Ugly American* (pages 191-285)

Nov. 21  **Thanksgiving: No Class**

US Nation-Building in Contemporary International Politics

Nov. 26  Jeremi Suri, *Liberty’s Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building From the Founders to Obama* (excerpts)

Dec 28  **Essay 2 Drafts Due**  
Workshop 3 essays as a class

Dec 3  Individual Student Meetings

Dec 5  State Department, *The Future of Iraq Project* (excerpt)  
Naomi Klein, “Baghdad Year Zero: Pillaging Iraq in Search of a Neocon Utopia

Dec. 10  **Essay 2 Final Due**  
Student Readings

Dec. 12  TBA