

Ams200 / His264 / Eng242
Professor Joan Rubin
Spring, 2018

THE IDEA OF AMERICA

WHAT IS AMERICA? A country? A continent? A political ideal? A culture? This course traces the development of ideas about America, from its historical beginnings to our own time, from European fantasies about the New World and its possibilities to the experiences of settlers and citizens facing its realities. We will explore the competing and even contending narratives of America in a wide variety of cultural documents, from orations, sermons and political tracts to novels, photographs, and films. The course is open to all interested students and required for all American Studies majors.

REQUIREMENTS:

1. **Class participation** (accounts for 25% of your final grade for the semester). A. **Attendance** at every class meeting is absolutely required. Attendance will be recorded, and more than one unexplained absence will adversely affect your final course grade. If you must miss class for any reason, please let the instructor know (via email or in person) as far in advance as possible. B. **Close and careful reading** of all assigned texts is expected and required, to be completed before the day it appears on the syllabus. You will come to each class prepared to be a careful listener and regular contributor.
2. **Three brief (1-2 pp.) "close reading" writing assignments** over the course of the semester (each worth 15% of final grade, so, all together 45%). In each of these short assignments, you will perform a close textual reading of a single passage from the week's reading. They may be submitted on the days of your choice, but you must submit them in each calendar month.
3. **Final essay (12-15 pages) due May 3** (30% of final grade). Instructions for this project will be provided later, but students can expect to identify a topic in consultation with the instructor before spring break.

Schedule of Readings

Week 1: Course Introduction (1/18)

Week 2: What is America? (1/25)

J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from An American Farmer* (1781)
(excerpts)

Barack Obama, Democratic National Convention Keynote Address (2004)

Donald J. Trump, Inaugural Address (2017)

Week 3: The Invention of America (2/1)

Christopher Columbus, from "Letter to Luis de Santangel Regarding the First Voyage" (1493)

John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" (1629)

Week 4: Colonial British America and Its Aftermath (2/8)

Mary Rowlandson, "A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson" (1682)

William Apess, "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man" (1833)

William Apess, "Eulogy on King Philip" (1836)

Week 5: American Independence, American Virtue (2/15)

Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, Part One (1771) and Part Two (1784)
only

"Amelia: or The Faithless Briton; An Original American Novel, Founded Upon Recent Facts" (1787)

Week 6: America Ascendant/America Transcendent (2/22)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" (1837)

Walt Whitman, preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

Week 7: Frontiers (3/1)

Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1899)

John Filson, "The Adventures of Colonel Daniel Boone[e]" (1784)

Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900) (excerpts)

Week 8: From Americanism to Multiculturalism (3/8)

Theodore Roosevelt, "True Americanism" (1894)

Randolph Bourne, "Trans-national America" (1916)

Week 9: Idealisms and Realisms (3/22)

William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890)

Week 10: Citizenship and Selfhood in the American Century (3/29)

W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (excerpts)

Edward Bok, *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (1920) (excerpts)

Week 11: Documenting America Between the Wars (4/5)

R. and H. Lynd, *Middletown* (1929) (excerpts)

WPA murals and documentary photographs of the 1930s

Week 12: Gender and Postwar Consumer Culture (4/12)

John Cheever, selected short stories (TBA)

Week 13: Social Criticism in the 1960s and 1970s (4/19)

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) (excerpts)

"The Port Huron Statement" (1962) (excerpts)

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963)

Week 14: Writing Race (and Thinking About America) in the 21st Century (4/26)

Ta-Nehesi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015)