

**Honors 201 A: Seminar in American  
Institutions and Values to 1900  
Fall, 2001  
T and Th, 8:30-9:45 AM  
Langsdorf 315 A**

**Professor Michael Steiner  
Office hours: T and Th, 10-11  
AM; Th, 7-8 PM; and by  
appointment in EC-608.  
Phone: 278-3640 or 2441  
E-mail: [msteiner@fullerton.edu](mailto:msteiner@fullerton.edu)**

You cannot spill a drop of American blood without spilling the blood of the whole world....We are not a narrow tribe...not so much a nation as a world.

Herman Melville

What traits of character do we hold in common? Why is it that I can meet a black man in the street or a Hispanic woman on a train and imagine that he and I, or she and I, share an allied hope and purpose? This question is as American as it is rhetorical, and a Belgian would think it the work of a dreaming imbecile....Among all nations of the earth, America is the one that has come most triumphantly to terms with the mixtures of blood and caste.

Lewis Lapham

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality chose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic dis-equilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.

Adrienne Rich

O, let America be America be America again...  
O yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
American will be!

Langston Hughes

Herman Melville, Lewis Lapham, Adrienne Rich, and Langston Hughes evoke questions that lie the heart of this seminar. What has it meant to be an American? What historical forces and distinctive institutions and values have shaped our personal and collective identities as “members” of an ever-evolving national culture? How have early ideals and struggles to achieve (or defeat) them influenced contemporary American society and the rest of the world? Has the American experience— from 17<sup>th</sup> century collisions between Europeans, Africans, and native Americans to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century emergence of a complex, urban-industrial society—has this three century nation-building process welcomed diversity or demanded uniformity? Have Americans ultimately

succeeded in embracing “the blood of the whole world” as Melville and Lapham boast? Or have we largely excluded “the dark-skinned, old, disabled, female,” and other outsiders from the promise of America as Rich and Hughes stress?

These and a myriad of other questions will crop up throughout the semester as we critically examine the development of American institutions and values from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. A number of themes are woven throughout the seminar. In addition to stressing the role of American political culture and the constitutional system in forging national identity, the seminar will focus upon cultural diversity that has been the ever-present essence of our national experience. From the beginning, North American culture has been richly various and ever changing: racial, ethnic, gender, religious, regional, class, political, and age based differences among Americans have represented our greatest promise and exposed our greatest flaws.

Democratic institutions and civic rights embodied in our constitutional system are the foundation of a healthy inclusive society. Yet these formal instruments, important as they are, are not enough to ensure that we will live up to our pluralistic promise. We also need less tangible, more subjective, and transcendent sources of hope and identity found in collective stories and narratives that dramatize our existence and bring us together for a higher purpose. As discussed in greater detail at the beginning of the semester, our national identity is rooted in compelling origin stories—overarching creation myths—as well as in formal democratic institutions. Two narratives in particular—the story of the frontier and of the African diaspora—are especially powerful in our culture, and one of the basic purposes of this seminar will be to trace the impact of these competing, perhaps complimentary, myths in forging American identity.

### **Readings:**

Collected Readings (a packet of short readings; several copies are placed on closed reserve in the CSUF Library).

Ronald Takaki, A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America (partial)

John Demos, The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story From Early America

Henry Louis Gates, editor, The Classic Slave Narratives (partial)

Ole E. Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth

Albert L. Hurtado, Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California

Lisa See, On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family (partial)

(All of the books are available at the Little Professor Bookstore, 725 N. Placentia Avenue, Fullerton.)

In addition to these readings, I will offer a variety of visual materials and other artifacts—slides, music, films—that are integral parts of the seminar.

### **General Format, Requirements, and Assessment:**

Although I will give brief background lectures from time to time, this course will be taught as seminar, stressing informed discussion of the seminar material. It is essential, then, that you complete all of the required readings as they come up for discussion, and I will provide series of questions for you to consider as you're preparing for each meeting. Your critical responses to the texts are an important part of the seminar, and I look forward to the spirited and informed discussions that will be the heart of our seminar. Seminar attendance and participation are required and will be factors in your final grade. With this in mind, there are four basic elements to the seminar:

- 1) Readings, discussion, small group exercises:** Perhaps the most valuable part of the course involves the give and take of ideas. Especially in a class of this size, I look forward to the free, sometimes heated, exchange of ideas generated by our community of interest in the development of American institutions and values from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although I am eager to hear your informed opinions and encourage you to voice them, I certainly respect students who are thoughtfully quieter than others. It is essential that you attend all of the meetings ready to engage in critical discussion and informed debate. Periodically, I may break the seminar into small discussion groups to focus and then report on particular issues.
- 2) Analytical response papers:** You will be required to write two 5-6 page papers during the semester. These papers should be carefully written and will help you to capture some of the fugitive thoughts sparked by our readings and discussions. I will provide detailed problems and questions to investigate for each paper, and they may require additional library and internet-based research. You will have at least two weeks in which to write each response paper, and I may provide time in the seminar for you to critique each other's papers and rewrite them. I will give you the opportunity to write as many as three response papers, and you can throw out the paper with the lowest grade if you write all three of them. I may also give you a few shorter writing assignments during the semester.
- 3) Oral reports:** I will ask each of you to present at least two 5-15 minute oral reports during the semester. These reports—a 5 minute individual and a 15 minute group report—will be based on articles or chapters or issues not assigned to the seminar as a whole. By the second week of the semester, I will begin to offer opportunities for these reports. Some of the suggested articles and chapters will come from our Collected Readings or from Takaki's and Gates's books; whenever possible, I will also give students copies of other outside articles or essays related to our seminar discussion.
- 4) Final exam:** The final in-class essay exam provides the opportunity to bring together many of the issues you've explored in the shorter papers. This will be a two hour, open book, open note exam, and I will provide you with a variety of sample essay questions as it approaches.

In addition to enhancing your skills in discussion, writing, and critical analysis, this honors seminar also provides an opportunity for you to self-consciously expand your research abilities--to be aware of the range of artifacts and diversity of cultures that lie all around us--in everyday life as well as in libraries. A central purpose of this seminar, then, is to encourage you to "read" the artifactous world and swirl of cultures around you, capturing your observations in properly documented essays. To further your these abilities, Professor Wayne Hobson, director of the Honors

Program, has generously agreed to give us some background to the vast world of electronic sources and data bases for interdisciplinary historical scholarship.

**Grading, Participation, Attendance:**

Your final grade will be based upon your written work, your oral reports, the quality of your seminar discussion, and the consistency of your attendance. Your two papers and final exam will constitute 80% of your final grade; your oral report, quality of discussion, and attendance will constitute the remaining 20%. Once again, it is important that you attend every meeting, and missing a significant number of meetings during the semester—unless there are severe and unavoidable problems that you discuss with me beforehand—will hurt your grade. I will accept late papers, but they will be lowered one grade if they are not turned in by the due date.

**Papers:** 60% (two 5-6 page papers, plus possible shorter exercises)  
**Final:** 20 % (two hour, in-class, open-book, open note)  
**Oral reports:** 10 % (5 minute individual; 15 minute small group)  
**Discussion/Attendance:** 10 %

**Seminar Outline:**

**I. PRELIMINARIES: AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS AND VALUES, ORIGIN STORIES AND CREATION MYTHS. ISSUES OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND NATIONAL UNITY. (Two weeks)**

**T, August 21:** Introduction to the seminar

**Th, August 23:** What does it mean to be an American? What values, beliefs, ideals, and Institutions might we hold in common? What forces might separate us?

**Read** for a close and critical discussion: Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, “What is an America?” (1780), Langston Hughes’s poem, “Let America be America Again,” and Russell Bank’s “Who Will Tell the People?” (Collected Readings.)

**T, August 28:** Themes of inclusion and exclusion in American history:

**Read:** Ronald Takaki's introduction his A Different Mirror, pp. 1-17, and Lewis Lapham's

**Th, August 30:** Conclude our discussion of Crevecoeur, Hughes, Banks, Takaki, and Lapham;  
**See and discuss a film,** "Talk to Me: Americans in Conversation."

## **II. RACE AND GENDER IN COLONIAL AMERICA**

### **A. Europeans and Native Americans (Three weeks)**

**T, September 4:**