

**Honors 201 B: Seminar in American
Institutions and Values Since 1900
Spring, 2005
T and Th, 11:30-1:45 PM
University Hall 239**

**Professor Michael Steiner
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“In the beginning all was America.”

John Locke

“America, why are your libraries full of tears?”

Allen Ginsberg

“Embedded in all that I like and all that loathe in America is something which fascinates me: the tremendous opportunities America offers, the gigantic risks it actually runs today—things in which we all share. All human problems are posed here on a tremendous scale....the future of man is at stake here...Here is a battle field, and one can only be stirred by the struggle she carries on within herself, a struggle whose stakes are beyond measure.”

Simone de Beauvoir

“There are as many ways to love America as there are Americans, and our country needs us all. The rights and liberties described in the Constitution are guaranteed not just to those citizens who have the most money and power, but also to those who have the least, and it has taken hard struggle through every year in our history to hold our nation to that promise.”

Barbara Kingsolver

“Let us remember, at the dawn of this new century, that history is not over. We live in a continually incomplete history. The lessons of our unfinished humanity is that when we exclude we are made poorer, and when we include we are made richer....None of us will ever be able to find the humanity within us unless we are able to find it first in others.”

Carlos Fuentes

Locke, Ginsberg, Beauvoir, Kingsolver, and Fuentes--all evoke questions that lie the heart of this seminar. Perhaps more than any other nation, the United States has embodied high ideals and seemingly impossible expectations. Locke's utopian image of America as a fresh start and new beginning has been echoed and expanded by countless enthusiasts. Yet for every exalted notion of our nation as a city upon a hill, a fresh green breast of a new world, a geography of hope, a refuge for the oppressed, a land of freedom and equality—and the list could go on—for every great hope there are cries of disappointment and despair. For every Hector St. John de Crevecoeur who trumpeted America as “the most perfect society now existing in the world” there are critics like Allen Ginsberg asking why our “libraries are so full of tears?” And why have we failed to live up to our ideals?

With such questions in mind and building upon historical foundations developed in Honors 201A, this seminar will trace the evolution of American institutions and values in the twentieth century. Particular attention will be paid to the tension between professed ideals and historical realities. We will carefully examine the relationship between politics and culture and explore how particular individuals and groups have responded to injustice and inequality and worked to achieve the full promise of American life. We will discuss a myriad of issues and questions. What, for example, is the relationship between nationalism, patriotism,

cosmopolitanism, and personal identity? What is the American Dream, and who has achieved it? What has it meant to be an American—especially during the century that the United States became the world’s dominant power? Has 20th century and early 21st America usually welcomed diversity or demanded uniformity? How have our ideals and struggles to achieve (or defeat) them affected the rest of the world? From the vantage point of 2005 and echoing Simone de Beauvoir, is the future of the world still at stake in America? Are we forging just solutions for everyone in our society and offering a compelling example for people throughout the world?

Although these cosmic questions will crop up throughout the semester, our readings and discussions will focus primarily upon issues of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender and the variety of responses to injustice and inequality in twentieth century America. We are also extremely fortunate in mid April to have acclaimed author, **Barbara Ehrenreich, as a guest lecturer for honors students**—especially for students in Honors 201 B. To take full advantage of Ehrenreich’s visit, we will take a week or longer break from our chronological survey to read and discuss Nickel and Dimed, meet her, attend her lecture, and, if possible, see the CSUF production of the play based on her book.

Required Readings:

Collected Readings (a packet of 23 short readings; several copies are on closed reserve in the CSUF Library; personal copies are available at Copyco, 2438 Chapman, Fullerton).

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

Michael Gold, Jews Without Money

John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle

Barbara Ehrenreich, Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America

T. Coreghessan Boyle, The Tortilla Curtain

These books are available at the Titan Bookstore. 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 a 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 since 1900. 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 provide detailed written response to each of your papers and suggestions for improvement, if necessary. 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 three 5-15 minute oral reports during the semester. Each report—a 5 minute individual and/or 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 A Different Mirror; 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 artifactual world and swirl of cultures around you, capturing your observations in properly documented essays.

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 75% of your final grade; your oral reports, quality of discussion, and attendance will constitute the remaining 25%. Once again, it is important that you attend every meeting, and missing more than three or four 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 on time.

Papers:	50 % (two 5-6 page papers, plus possible shorter exercises)
Final:	25 % (two hour, in-class, open-book, open note)
Oral reports:	15 % (three 5 minute individual, or three 15 minute small group reports)
Discussion/Attendance:	10 %

****I will use the new +/- grading option for the seminar; we will discuss its mechanics and implications in class, probably during our first meeting.**

Seminar Outline: (next page)

I. AS OTHERS SEE US: AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS AND VALUES IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT AND THROUGH OTHER PEOPLE'S EYES (Two and a half weeks)

T, February 1: Introduction to the seminar and a quick self-survey

Th, February 3: Promise and Paradox of American Culture: What does it mean to be an American? What values, beliefs, ideals, and Institutions might we hold in common? What forces might separate us? What does the United States mean to the rest of the world?

Read for close and critical discussion: **Read:** Langston Hughes's poem, "Let America be America Again" and Ted Halstead, "The American Paradox" (2003) in Collected Readings. We will also see (or begin to see) a film, "Talk to Me: Americans in Conversation."

T, February 8: Seeing Ourselves As Others Have Seen Us

Finish seeing and then discuss the film, "Talk to Me"; begin to discuss outside observers.

Read: Carl Jung, "Complications of American Psychology" (1930); Fie Xiaotong, "The Daring of a Young Culture" & "A World Without Ghosts" (1943-44); and Octavio Paz, "The Pachuco and Other Extremes" (1947) in Collected Readings.

Th, February 10: Seeing Ourselves as Others Have Seen Us, continued:

Read: Simone de Beauvoir, "Adieu to America" (1953); and Ariel Dorfman, "Letter to America" (1973) in Collected Readings. We will search for possible patterns—for a common core of values and institutions mentioned by our six outside observers.

T, February 15: Some Views From Within: Conservative, Liberal, Radical Responses to Our Times:

Read: David Brooks, "On the Playing Fields of Suburbia"(2002); George McGovern, "The Case for Liberalism" (2002); Barbara Kingsolver, "And Our Flag Was Still There" (2002); Michael Moore, "A Patriot's Act" (2004); and Mark Slouka, "A Year Later: Notes on America's Intimations of Mortality" (2002) in Collected Readings

Possible reports: Benjamin Barber, "Jihad vs. McWorld" (provided to interested students) and/or one of our common readings)

II. FROM AGRARIAN TO INDUSTRIAL FRONTIERS AND THE RISE OF EMPIRE AT THE DAWN OF THE CENTURY (Two weeks)

Th, February 17: The Fate of the Western Frontier: Wounded Knee and White Imperialists

Read: Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." (1893).

T, February 22 : **Fate of the Western Frontier and Native Americans**, continued
Read: Mike Davis, “White People Are Just a Bad Dream” (1997) in Collected Readings; and Ronald Takaki, “The ‘Indian Question’,” in A Different Mirror, pp, 228-245.

Possible reports: Richard White, “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill” and/or Patricia Limerick, “The American Frontier in the Twentieth Century.”

Th, February 24: **Progress, Technology, and Empire: Teddy Roosevelt, Daniel Burnham, and Walt Disney:**

Read: Howard Zinn, “The Empire and the People” (1995) and Michael Steiner, “Parables of Stone and Steel” (2001) in Collected Readings

Possible reports: “Richard Slotkin, “Buffalo Bill’s ‘Wild West’ and the Mythologization of the American Empire” and/or Amy Kaplan, “Black and Blue on San Juan Hill” (1993).

T, March 1: **Popular responses to the Urban-Industrial Frontier: Fred Taylor, Charles Lindbergh, and John Henry.**

Read: Frederick W. Taylor, “Scientific Management” (1911) and John William Ward, “The Meaning of Lindbergh’s Flight” (1958) in Collected Readings and listen to and carefully analyze the ballad of John Henry to compare two folk heroes and their responses to the machine.

Possible report: Lawrence Levine: “Progress and Nostalgia: The Self Image of the 1920s.”

III. *A RADICAL RESPONSE TO INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM: MICHAEL GOLD’S JEWES WITHOUT MONEY (1930) (Two weeks)*

Th, March 3: **Eastern European Jews on the Lower East Side:** Begin Gold’s Jews Without Money.

T, March 8: Continue reading and discussing Jews Without Money; **also read:** Ronald Takaki, “Between ‘Two “Endless Days’: The Continuous Journey to the Promised Land” in A Different Mirror, pp. 277-310; and James Loewen, “The Land of Opportunity,” in Collected Readings. In addition to these readings, we will see at least one film—“The Inheritance”—and listen to a variety of Jewish folk music and see a selection of slides.

Th, March 10: Continue to discuss Jews Without Money and Gold's radical/utopian proposals
Possible reports: essays on poverty, labor history, the American Dream, Jewish ethnicity, Michael Gold, and other critics on the left—to be announced

T, March 15: **First response paper is due;** final words on Gold's novel.

IV. CONFLICTING REACTIONS TO THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND TO JOHN STEINBECK'S IN DUBIOUS BATTLE (Two weeks)

Th, March 17: Begin In Dubious Battle: open discussion and background to the 1930, the Dust Bowl, the agrarian dream, factories in the fields, and migration to California as the last frontier.

T, March 22: Continue to discuss In Dubious Battle. Possible film snippets from "The Grapes of Wrath," "Sullivan's Travels," and "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?"

Th, March 24: Continue discussing Steinbeck and possible reports on Steinbeck and the 1930s be announced. To gain a women's perspective on the 1930s & 40s, we may see a film, "Union Maids," and we will read and discuss Sara Evans's "Rosie the Riveter: Women and War Work During WWII" in our Collected Readings.

Possible reports: Three essays by Lawrence Levine: "American Culture and the Great Depression," "Hollywood's Washington: Film Images of National Politics During the Great Depression," and "The Historian and the Icon" as well as Michael Steiner's "Regionalism in the Great Depression."

SPRING BREAK

T, April 5: Final words regarding In Dubious Battle.

Second response paper is due; final words on Steinbeck.

V. ON (NOT) GETTING BY IN THE LATE 1990S: BARBARA EHRENREICH'S NICKEL AND DIMED (One and a half very full weeks)

Th, April 7: Begin reading and discussing Nickel and Dimed.

T, April 12: *Read most, if not all, of Nickel and Dimed; continue discussing the book in our seminar meeting; attend Barbara Ehrenreich's lecture from 2-3 PM, place to be announced. I encourage you to see the CSUF dramatic production of this book as well, running from March 12-April 10th.*

Th, April 14: Reactions to Ehrenreich's lecture and to Nickel and Dimed.

VI. THE WORKING POOR IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: RACE, ETHNICITY, CLASS, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM IN OUR REGION: A PANOPLY OF ESSAYS, FILMS, AND BOYLE'S THE TORTILLA CURTAIN (Four weeks)

T, April 19: **Race and class relations in our region and beyond:** cooperation & conflict; hybridization and separation: from Zoot Riots to Rodney King to today

Read: Octavio Paz on the pachuco (1947), Jack Miles “Blacks vs, Browns,” Gregory Rodriguez, “Mongrel America” (2003), Richard Rodriguez, “Brown” (2002) (Collected Readings) See the film, “Boyle Heights: The Power of Place.”

Th, April 21: Race and class relations in our region, continued

Possible reports: chapters from Dale Maharidge, The Coming White Minority and/or Mike Davis, The Ecology of Fear; essays by George Lipsitz, “Cruising Around the Historical Bloc” and/or “Land of a Thousand Dances”; Henry Wu, “How Tiger Woods Lost His Stripes,” George Sanchez, “What’s Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews” (available to interested students).

T, April 26: Begin The Tortilla Curtain and compare its opening themes and images to Nickel and Dimed. Also read Takaki, “El Norte: The Borderland of Chicano America,” in A Different Mirror, pp. 311-339,

Th, April 28: Continue to discuss Takaki’s chapter and The Tortilla Curtain.

T, May 3: Continue to discuss Boyle’s novel ; begin John Caldwell’s powerful documentary, “Ranch California (Por Favor).”

Th, May 8: Conclude our discussion of The Tortilla Curtain and “Rancho California.”

T, May 17: **Three film versions of cultural conflict and creativity: Pointing toward the future:** Portions of “The Blade Runner” the brooding, “Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992,” and the joyously optimistic, “What’s Cooking?”

Th, May 19: **Third (optional) response papers is due**

Th, May 26: **Final exam—open book, open note essay exam covering the semester—and a well-earned Summer vacation.**

Some important dates:

T, March 15: **First response paper is due**

T, April 5: **Second paper is due**

T, April 12, 2 PM: **Lecture by Barbara Ehrenreich, author of Nickel & Dimed**

Th, May 19: **Third (optional) paper is due**

Th, May 26: **Final, two hour, essay exam.**

