

First-Year Seminar
Barnard College
Fall 2001

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Office: 401 Lehman
Hours: Tues. 1-2 PM; Wed. 9:30-10:30 AM

BC1257 URBAN MYTHS AND THE AMERICAN CITY

Course Overview

The social theorist Max Weber believed that our concept of the city was a unique product of Western civilization that reflected a culturally determined psychology. With this in mind, students will be introduced to founding American myths or stories whose repeated tellings have shaped our ideas about the city. These stories are not always explicitly about the city. Rather they are narratives that retain their power to explain some basic truth, and whose structures are reproduced as the narratives are repeated over time. Myths retain power through repetition but they also gain new power as the stories are retold in new ways. Through repetition and reconstruction urban myths lodge themselves in our cultural memory, ever present, ever available for deployment as we try to understand the world.

The first several weeks of the course will be spent laying the foundation for our analysis of myths and the American city. We will ground our notion of myth in the relevant theories developed by Claude Levi-Strauss. We will then read selections from what might be termed 'foundational American myths,' including Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*; Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis; Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" from *Leaves of Grass*; and Jane Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull House*.

From there, we will interrogate different theories and forms of writing about the American city and competing literary and analytical perspectives on urban life. Our readings will be drawn from different disciplines and time periods; students will read fiction, memoirs and journalistic accounts, as well as social science approaches to the problems of the city. Students will also have the opportunity to view films and evaluate myths conveyed through the work of selected visual artists. To bring a cohesiveness to the course, most of the readings on the American city will draw on the rich social, cultural, and political history of New York, America's emblematic city. This is done to allow the student the opportunity, if she chooses, to be immersed in the mythic milieu of the material examined in the readings.

Course Requirements and Grading

The purpose of the First-Year seminar is to develop students' critical reading and thinking skills, and to provide an opportunity for students to improve their oral presentation and writing abilities. It is imperative that students come to class prepared to discuss the week's readings and that students complete writing assignments on time. Grades will be awarded based on an evaluation of your attendance, participation in class discussion, and writing assignments.

Writing Assignments

There will be two types of writing assignments, short weekly discussion papers and two essays (serving as the mid-term and final exams). To facilitate discussion and give you as much opportunity as possible to practice writing, you will write a 1-2 page paper approximately each week. These papers will not receive a letter grade but will count collectively toward your final participation grade. Your failure to miss more than one weekly writing assignment will result in the lowering of your final grade by .3 or .4 points (i.e., from an A to an A-, or an A- to a B+). The weekly papers will address questions raised by the readings and will be used by students to lead class discussion. Students will be paired and required to lead class discussion on the days discussion papers are due.

In addition to weekly discussion papers, you will write two 5-7 page essays. For each essay you will submit a draft and a revised version. Drafting and revising are important elements of the writing process and your work at each stage will be evaluated accordingly, though only the final version of your essay will be given a

grade. Drafts are required and due dates will be strictly enforced. All writing assignments will be based on the readings and on themes and questions we will explore in our class discussions.

The field trip to the Lower East Side Tenement House Museum and selected film screenings are required and will be used in weekly writing assignments. Films will be screened on Friday afternoons in the new Media Center screening room on the third floor of the library. You will be required to post a short response or review of each film addressing the 'urban myth' structuring or underlying the film's narrative.

Grading

Class participation (contribution to class discussion, weekly discussion papers, film reviews):	40%
Mid-term essay (draft and final version):	30%
Final essay (draft and final version):	30%

Reading Schedule

Note: All reading assignments are required. The following books have been ordered at Labyrinth Books, 536 West 112th Street:

Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*
Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*
Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow and Its Planning*
Jane Jacobs, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*
Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*
Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*
Herman Melville, *Bartleby and Benito Cereno*
Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*
Terry Williams, *Cocaine Kids*
Anzia Yezierska, *The Bread Givers*
Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*
Ann Petry, *The Street*
Dawn Powell, *The Wicked Pavillion*
David Bradford, *Drive-by Shootings*

All other readings are on reserve at the Barnard College library. Reading assignments should be completed by the dates indicated below.

September 4 INTRODUCTION

September 6 METHODS: Myths, Theories and Stories
Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*

Discussion paper #1 due

SCREENING: "The Wizard of Oz"

SOME AMERICAN MYTHS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CITY

September 11 ANTI-URBANISM VS. THE LURE OF THE CITY
Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (selections)

Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," from *Leaves of Grass*

September 13 TRANSGRESSING BOUNDARIES
Frederick Jackson Turner, "On the Significance of the Frontier in American History"

September 18 THE RE-FORM IMPULSE
Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*

Discussion paper #2 due

THE CITY THEORIZED

September 20 THE CITY AS AN ECOLOGICAL COMMUNITY
Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *The City* (selections)

September 25 THE CITY AS A CULTURAL FORM
Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," and "The Ghetto"

Discussion paper #3 due

September 27 THE CITY AS UTOPIA I
Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow*

October 2 THE CITY AS UTOPIA II
Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (selections)
Lewis Mumford, *The Urban Prospect* (chapter 2)

Discussion paper #4 due

October 4 AGAINST PLANNING
Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (selections)
Lewis Mumford's review of Jacobs in *The New Yorker*

October 9 THE LEGIBLE CITY
Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*

First draft of mid-term essay due

THE NOIR CITY: ALIENATION, CORRUPTION AND CRIME

October 11 Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Discussion paper #5 due

SCREENING: "Sweet Smell of Success" (1957)

October 16 Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*

Discussion paper #6 due

October 18 Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City* (chapters 1, 5, 7)

SCREENING: "Double Indemnity" (1946)

October 23 Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

Discussion paper #7 due

SCREENING: "Fort Apache, the Bronx" (1981)

October 25 Terry Williams, *Cocaine Kids*

Mid-term essay due

October 30 Ernesto Quinonez, *Bodega Dreams*

THE URBAN FRONTIER (CONFRONTING 'THE OTHER'/CONFRONTING THE CITY/CONFRONTING THE SELF)

November 1 Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (chapters 1-6, 9-17, 23-25)

FIELD TRIP: Lower East Side Tenement House Museum

SCREENING: "America, America" (1963)

November 8 Anzia Yezierska, *The Bread Givers*

Discussion paper #8 due

November 13 Slide presentation, Jacob Lawrence, "The Migration of the Negro"
Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series* (on
Barnard Reserve)

November 15 Ann Petry, *The Street* (chapters 1-12)

November 20 Ann Petry, *The Street* (chapters 13-18)

Discussion paper #9 due

November 27 Dawn Powell, *The Wicked Pavillion*

THE CONSUMPTION CITY: FROM FLANEUR TO VOYEUR?

November 29 Charles Baudelaire, *The Parisian Prowler*
Vivian Gornick, *Approaching Eye Level* (chapter 1)

SCREENING: "Night on Earth" (1991)

December 4 David Bradford, *Drive-By Shootings; Photographs by A New York Taxi Driver*

December 6 Wrap-up

First draft of final essay due

December 18 **Final essay due**

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