Course Description

“A city on a hill.” “A more perfect union.” “Law on her brow and empire in her eyes.” “America after all it is you and I who are perfect not the next world.” The discourse of utopia has pervaded the United States of America since its founding. Even before it became a sovereign nation, the USA’s politicians, philosophers, authors, and citizens expressed a sense of its utopian potential. This course aims to chart the trajectories of utopian thought in America from its European precursors to its present-day reimaginings, faced with the realities of war, late capitalism, and environmental changes on a global scale. Along the way, we will read a number of the most foundational treatises, manifestos, and tributes to American utopianism—as well as many of the most incisive critiques of America’s imperialist ambitions and exceptionalist self-regard. The syllabus skews towards poetry but features works from many genres, “literary” and critical, political and journalistic. Over the course of the semester, we will explore how successive generations of writers have reimagined America as a place capacious and diverse enough to support their livelihoods, and we’ll discuss the political, social, ethical, and aesthetic implications of the Americas they create.

Course Requirements
- weekly attendance and active participation in tutorial sessions
- oral presentation (15 min) on theoretical, critical, or historical readings
- short (5-6pp) midterm paper on a topic from the first four weeks of readings
- prospectus (2pp) and bibliography (2pp) in preparation for Junior Paper
- library consultation with Odile Harter, English Dept. Research Librarian
- Junior Paper (20-25pp)

Schedule of Readings
Week 1: Contexts I
- Ovid, “The Four Ages,” in Metamorphoses, I.89-150.
- Thomas More, Utopia (1516)

Week 2: Contexts II
- Thomas Paine, Common Sense (1776)
- Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence of the United States of America (1776)
* chapters in parentheses are recommended

Week 3: Early American Utopias
- Philip Freneau, selected poems (1768-1794)
- Phyllis Wheatley, “On Being Brought From Africa to America” (1773)
- Joseph Brackett, “Simple Gifts” (1848)

Week 4: Transcendentalism: A Guide to Utopian Philosophy
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature (1836); The American Scholar (1837); The Poet (1844)
- Henry David Thoreau, selections from Walden (1854)
** SHORT PAPER DUE (5-6 pages) **

Week 5: Reimagining Utopia in the Nineteenth Century
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, selections from The Blithedale Romance (1852)
- Edward Bellamy, selections from Looking Backward: 2000-1887 (1888)
- J. H. Noyes, selections from History of American Socialisms (1870)

Week 6: Whitman and the Self as Utopian Space
- Walt Whitman, Song of Myself; other poems TBA (1855-1892)
- Brewster M. Higley, “Home on the Range“ (early 1870s)
- Katharine Lee Bates, “America the Beautiful” (1895)

Week 7: Vying for America: Modernism’s Conflicting Utopias
- Hart Crane, selections from The Bridge (1930)
- Allen Tate, selections from I’ll Take My Stand (1930)
- Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (1975), ch. 1-5 (Tom Yingling, “Homosexuality and Utopian Discourse in American Poetry.” In Breaking Bounds, pp. 135-146.)
** PROSPECTUS AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE (2 pages each) **

Week 8: Modernism and After: African-American Utopias
- Alain Locke, The New Negro: An Interpretation (1925), Introduction; “Negro Youth Speaks”
- Langston Hughes; Countee Cullen; Jean Toomer, selected poems (1920s)
- Duke Ellington; Bessie Smith; Billie Holiday, selected jazz and blues performances (1920s-40s)
- Martin Luther King, J r., “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963)

Week 9: Socialist Utopias in American Poetry
- Karl Marx and Friederich Engels, The Communist Manifesto (1848), section III
- Friederich Engels, “Socialism Utopian and Scientific” (1880)
- George Oppen, selections from Of Being Numerous (1968)
- Louis Zukofsky, selections from A (1978)
  (Frederic Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other
  Science Fictions (Verso, 2005) Introduction, ch. 1, 10.)

Week 10: Postwar Utopias: Modeling Utopian Space
- B. F. Skinner, Walden Two (1948)
- Woody Guthrie, “This Land Is Your Land” (1940)
- Peter Monacell, “In the American Grid: American Poetry and the Suburbs.” Journal of

Week 11: Countercultural Utopias, 1950s-1970s
- Allen Ginsberg, selected poems 1955-1966 (TBA)
- Paul Kagan, New World Utopias: A Photographic History of the Search for Community
  (1975)
- Bob Kaufman, selections from The Ancient Rain (1981)
- John Lennon, “Imagine” (1971)
  (Norman Finklestein, The Utopian Moment in Contemporary American Poetry (1993),
  chapter 5)

Week 12: Queer Utopias
- Frank O’Hara, selections from Lunch Poems (1964)
- Adrienne Rich, selections from Twenty-One Love Poems (1976)
- D. A. Powell, selections from Cocktails (2004) and Chronic (2009)
- José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (2009),
  Introduction, ch. 1, (5), (8)
  (Sam See, “Making Modernism New: Queer Mythology in The Young and Evil.” ELH no. 4
  (2009): 1073-1105.)
**DRAFT OF FINAL PAPER DUE: 3 WEEKS BEFORE DEPARTMENTAL DEADLINE**

Week 13: Questioning Utopia in Contemporary Poetry
- Rae Armantrout, selections from Versed (2009)
- Timothy Donnelly, “Hymn to Life” (2014)
- Jorie Graham, selections from Sea Change (2008) and Place (2012)
- Claudia Rankine, Citizen (2015)
  (Leszek Kolakowski, “The Death of Utopia Reconsidered” (1982))

Week 14: Make Your Own Utopia
An open week for anything we haven’t covered yet!

**FINAL PAPER (20-25 pages) DUE BY 5PM WEDNESDAY OF FINALS WEEK**