

TRANSNATIONAL ECONOMIES OF U.S. LITERATURE: COTTON, WHEAT, GOLD, AND FUR IN THE MAKING OF AMERICAN CULTURE

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Proposed Course for Upper-level Undergraduates

“From the peasant toiling in Russia, the lady lolling in London, the chieftan burning in Africa, and the Esquimaux freezing in Alaska; from long lines of hungry men, from patient sad-eyed women, from old folk and creeping children went up the cry, ‘Clothes, clothes!’...the dense black land sensed the cry and heard the bound of answering life within the vast dark breast. All that dark earth heaved in mighty travail with the bursting bolls of the cotton while black attendant earth spirits swarmed above, sweating and crooning to its birth pains” (25). – W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Between 1865 and 1898, U.S. exports nearly quadrupled. Exponential economic growth following the Civil War facilitated efforts to expand the U.S. commercial power across the globe—efforts also made possible by the United States’ advantageous natural resources. How did writers register these dramatic economic changes in their fiction? This interdisciplinary course will examine the ways that late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American novels represent some of the United States’ most important commodities: cotton, wheat, gold, and fur. Beginning with cotton, a U.S. export with a notorious and troubled history, we will use these commodities as entry points into larger questions about capitalism, imperialism, and expansionism. Drawing connections between disparate texts through their common interest in these goods, we will consider the strategies writers employ to grapple with the consequences of commercial expansion and globalization. In doing so, we will practice methodologies for thinking about U.S. fiction in a global context, including transatlantic, transnational, postcolonial, inter-imperial, and hemispheric approaches. We will aim to identify the range of attitudes nineteenth-century writers expressed toward U.S. economic imperialism, and investigate their varied formal strategies for representing the material world. By the end of this course, you should have a fuller knowledge of nineteenth-century economic history in U.S. fiction, practiced methods for expanding the geographic frame of literary analysis, and gained curiosity about the histories of objects you encounter in your daily life.

REQUIRED TEXTS

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911)

Constance Fenimore Woolson, *Anne* (1882)

María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, *Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872)

Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (1872)

Frank Norris, *The Pit* (1903)

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918)

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADES

Course project (60% total)

Your major grade for this course will be a semester-long project in which you investigate a text of your choice in terms of its engagement with the economy, material culture, empire, and/or global contexts. You may either choose a text from the assigned readings, or you may choose another American text from approximately 1865–1900. Smaller pieces of your essay will be due along the way so that you have opportunities to brainstorm, draft, receive feedback, and revise. These will include a project proposal (10%), an initial close reading of 1-2 passages from your chosen text (10%), a summary of the historical context and/or global methods you will be using to interpret your text (10%), and a final paper (35%).

Presentation (15%)

You will be responsible for one ten-minute presentation that explains relevant historical or cultural context for the day's reading, describes a global methodology, or summarizes a piece of literary criticism. I encourage you to choose a topic that relates to your interests, and that might inform your work for your final project.

Participation (10%)

Active, regular participation is a basic expectation of this course, and includes completing the assigned reading, bringing a copy of the reading with you to class, and contributing actively in class discussions. Learning to express yourself extemporaneously is an important skill in English classes (and in life!), so I encourage you to share your ideas freely, even if they are less developed than they might be if they were written. I also realize that personality types differ, so work in small groups will provide alternative opportunities to participate for those who are shy about talking to the class as a whole.

Online reading responses (10%)

Every week you will be expected to post a short, informal response to the week's readings online. These should be short, 1-paragraph responses to the assigned reading that demonstrate your thoughtful consideration of the text. They may ask questions about a reading, explore a specific passage in depth, or find connections between that week's reading and previous texts. These responses will provide material for our discussions and generate topics to consider for your course project.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Cotton, Race, and Global Capitalism (3 weeks)

Required readings:

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911)

Optional supplementary readings (may use for presentations):

Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*. New York: Knopf, 2014. Print.

Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.



Edgar Degas, "A Cotton Office in New Orleans," 1873

The Fur Trade and Inter-Imperial Conflict (3 weeks)

Required readings:

Excerpts from Washington Irving, *Astoria* (1836)
Constance Fenimore Woolson, *Anne* (1880)

Optional supplementary readings (may use for presentations):

Eric Jay Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*. New York: Norton, 2010.
Laura Doyle, "Inter-imperiality and Literary Studies in the Longer *Durée*." *PMLA* 130.2 (2015): 336-47.



John Trumbull, "Portrait of Benjamin Franklin," 1776

The Gold Rush and Hemispheric Crossings (4 weeks)

Required readings:

María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, *Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872)
Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (1872)

Optional supplementary readings (may use for presentations):

Janet Floyd, *Claims and Speculations: Mining and Writing in the Gilded Age*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2012.
Caroline Levander and Robert Levine, *Hemispheric American Studies*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2007.



William McIlvaine, "Panning for Gold, California," 1849

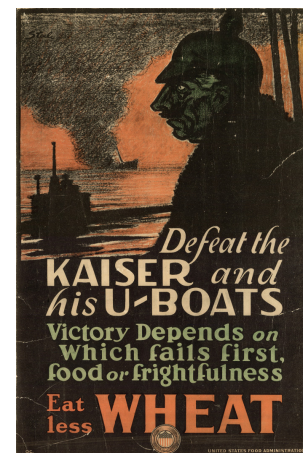
Wheat, Westward Expansion, Speculation, and Globalization (4 weeks)

Required readings:

Frank Norris, *The Pit* (1903)
Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918)

Optional supplementary readings (may use for presentations):

Hunter, Brooke. "Wheat, War, and the American Economy during the Age of Revolution." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62.3 (2005): 505-26.
Perren, Richard. "Structural Change and Market Growth in the Food Industry: Flour Milling in Britain, Europe, and America, 1850-1914." *The Economic History Review* 43.3 (1990): 420-37.
Castronovo, Russ. *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007.



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