Course Description:

“One percent of the nation owns a third of the wealth. The rest of the wealth is distributed in such a way as to turn those in the 99% against one another: small property owners against the propertyless, black against white, native born against foreign born, intellectuals and professionals against uneducated and unskilled. These groups have resented one another and warred against one another with such vehemence and violence as to obscure their common position as sharers of leftovers in a very wealthy country”
Howard Zinn

The topics for this course are wealth, poverty, and expendability. We will explore American literature as a platform upon which dynamic communities have debated issues of economic stratification, which is inextricably linked to American identity. We will start with the concept of chattel slavery as a means to think through the idea of people as commodities. Famed American Studies scholar Houston Baker called for teachers, students, and researchers to consider slavery in economic terms rather than the conventional focus on race in order to illuminate the fact that economic and racial disparity are interdependent in the U.S. Slave narratives shed light on how American capitalism reduces people to expendable commodities on the balance sheet of the nation. We will then move into the twentieth century and look at the rise of the popular western, not as one of the most durable of American literary genres (it is), but as a form of economic treatise. Diverse authors have used the western as a means to rethink American capitalism. We will study one of the great social protest novels - and, in many ways, socialist novels of the 20th century - John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath and, as well, delve into the caustic, satirical poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks in order to consider the ways in which economic ideologies have influenced concepts of the U.S. This will be an eye-opening course that will change the way you read, think, and write about stories and nation.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the course a successful student will have:

1. gained critical and abstract thinking skills
2. learned key concepts that continue to inform the construction of the United States
3. obtained advanced research skills
4. produced a scholarly edition, thereby gaining skills in editing practices
5. learned how to use digital tools as a means to express and share ideas
6. a greater ability to read analytically, think creatively, and express the aforementioned skills with precision, coherence, and clarity

**Required Texts:**

Gwendolyn Brooks “The Lovers of the Poor” and “Kitchenette Building” (Blackboard)
Marge Piercy “For The Young Who Want To” (Blackboard)
Walt Whitman “Democratic Vistas” (Blackboard)
Sara Humphreys “‘Truer ’n Hell’: Lies, Capitalism, and Cultural Imperialism in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, B. M. Bower’s *The Happy Family*, and Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea*” (Blackboard)
William Carlos Williams “To Elsie” (Blackboard)
Countee Cullen “Saturday’s Child” (Blackboard)
Adrienne Rich “What Kind of Times Are These” (Blackboard)
Kenneth Burke “The Economics of Life” (Blackboard)
Houston Baker “Figurations for a New Literary History” (Blackboard)
Mourning Dove *Cogewea* (bookstore)
Owen Wister *The Virginian* (bookstore)
Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (ed. Kwame Appiah) (bookstore)
Edward Bellamy *Looking Backward* (bookstore)
Frank Miller *The Dark Knight Returns* (bookstore)
John Steinbeck *The Grapes of Wrath* (bookstore)
Rebecca Skloot *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (bookstore)

**Week-by-week schedule:**

**Lecture 1 September 10**

Readings: Syllabus

Topics: Course overview, expectations explained and so forth.

**UNIT ONE: Brands of Identity**

**Lecture 2 September 17**

Readings: Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (be sure to read Lydia Marie Child’s Introduction); Houston Baker “Figuration for a New Literary History”

Topics: slavery as economic system; the print culture of slave narratives or the “business” of abolition; “ghettoizing” literatures; explanation of assignments

**Lecture 3 September 24**

Readings: Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
Topics: biopolitics as economic indicator; the cult of true womanhood or sentimental materialism

Lecture 4 October 1

Readings: Edward Bellamy Looking Backward; Walt Whitman “Democratic Vistas”; Owen Wister’s The Virginian (intro and first few chapters)

Topics: American socialism and democracy; the Frontier Club, the Cheyenne Club, Bellamy Clubs; national collectivity and gentlemen’s clubs

Workshop: Scholarly editing project; using wikis; assignment expectations; discussion of manuscript

Lecture 5 October 8 – cancelled for Thanksgiving!

UNIT TWO: Economic Frontiers

Lecture 6 October 15

Readings: Owen Wister’s The Virginian and Mourning Dove’s Cogewea

Topics: The nations within the nation; print culture, textual production and race

Workshop: Editing meeting

October 24th – Reading Week!

Lecture 7 October 29

Readings: Owen Wister’s The Virginian and Mourning Dove’s Cogewea; Sara Humphreys Truer ”n Hell”: Lies, Capitalism, and Cultural Imperialism in Owen Wister’s The Virginian, B. M. Bower’s The Happy Family, and Mourning Dove’s Cogewea

Topics: Indigenizing capitalism; ideologies of whiteness and national belonging; management and workers

Workshop: Editing meetings

Lecture 8 November 5
Readings: John Steinbeck *The Grapes of Wrath*; William Carlos Williams “To Elsie”

Topics: the Jeffersonian ideology of farms and farming; Okie’s and American regionalism

Workshop: Editing meetings

UNIT THREE: Hard Times, Resistance, and The Status Quo

**Lecture 9 November 12**

Readings: John Steinbeck *The Grapes of Wrath*; Kenneth Burke “The Economics of Life”; Countee Cullen “Saturday’s Child”

Topics: Free market capitalism, “silver spoons” and “racoons;” man-on-the-make vs. civic duty: the rhetoric of America

Workshop: Final editing meeting – printed copies of edited manuscripts brought to class

**Lecture 10 November 19**

Readings: Rebecca Skloot *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*; Gwendolyn Brooks “The Lovers of the Poor” and “Kitchenette Building”

Topics: Language and ideology; science and faith; sentimental capitalism

**Lecture 11 November 26**

Readings: Rebecca Skloot *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (first half of class); Frank Miller *The Dark Knight Returns*; Marge Piercy “For The Young Who Want To”

Topics: neoliberalism and Reaganomics; hope and privilege

**Lecture 12 December 3**

Readings: Frank Miller *The Dark Knight Returns*; Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* films Adrienne Rich “What Kind of Times Are These”

Topics: Unfettered capitalism; neoliberal legacies; 21st century robber barons and rebels

Workshop: course review and take home exam provided