COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar focuses on the United States before 1865. Poised halfway between our current moment and the seemingly archaic, superstitious fervor of the Salem Witch Trials, America in the antebellum era was in the process of fitfully, at times reluctantly, becoming modern. We will focus on strange objects—daguerreotypes of dead children, the spectacles created by P. T. Barnum, the seedy newspapers of antebellum New York—and texts that figure the disorienting changes to media, transportation, personhood, and nation that unfolded as the United States settled uneasily into nationhood. Considering literary and subliterary texts, religious beliefs, visual culture, and political practices with an eye to race, gender, sexuality, and class, students will learn about a period that is in many respects deeply alien to contemporary Americans but offers surprising moments of coincidence with the present.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Three Short Assignments, 3-4 pages each
You will complete 3 short assignments that ask you to follow up on our shared readings—to close-read a text from class or read something extra, to answer a provided research question, or to follow a footnote of your choosing. As you follow a lead outward from our readings, you will engage in analysis and argumentation to make a point about how your additional research and reading extends or reframes our original readings. Assignments should be 3 pages in length—and absolutely no more than 4 pages. Although their object is interpretation and analysis, they do not require central arguments and should not include lengthy introductions. No more than a short paragraph should postpone turning to the actual work of the response.

All students will complete Short Assignment #1, a close-reading of The Coquette due on Sept. 20 at noon. Two additional short assignments are due in October and November, and students are welcome to choose which prompts best suit them.

- Short Assignment #2, due Oct. 25 at noon—Feejee Mermaid OR Kingdom of Matthias OR Follow the Footnote
- Short Assignment #3, due Nov. 15 at noon— Henry Box Brown OR Fanny Fern OR Follow the Footnote
Short Essay, 5 pages, due Oct. 11 at noon
This assignment asks you to practice skills essential to academic writing. In this paper, you will focus on a single primary text that we have considered together. You will subject this text to close scrutiny, being attentive to language, form, imagery, point-of-view, and other relevant concerns, and then build an original argument from your observations. Your essay also must engage directly and substantively with a work of scholarship that we have read together. Your essay will therefore enter into a critical conversation about the primary text and the concerns of the secondary piece. Broad prompts will be provided well in advance of the due date, and students will also have the opportunity to propose their own topics.

Final Essay, 8 pages, due Dec. 9 at midnight
Students have multiple options for the final essay. As with the short essay, you may choose to focus on a primary text or texts we have read together in class, while also incorporating scholarship we have considered together. You may expand a short assignment you completed earlier in the semester, or you may choose from a list of novels that are related to the course but didn’t quite make it onto the syllabus. All students will complete a short proposal that names their topic.
- Nov. 25 at midnight: Proposal with working bibliography
- Dec. 9 at midnight: Final essay

Final project options:
- Focus on course readings from Week 6 forward
- Expand a short assignment
- Read an extra novel

Grading Percentages:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>20%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Short writing assignments (3)</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short Essay</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Essay</td>
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COURSE POLICIES

Attendance and Participation: I expect you to attend class every week. Students are allowed a single absence, no questions asked. Use this absence strategically, if at all, because each additional absence will reduce your participation grade and therefore your final grade by half a percentage point (i.e., from 19.5 points to 19 points, or from a 92 to a 91.5). Emergencies are the only exception to this rule; interviews, extracurricular engagements, etc., are not. This course is a seminar, and I therefore expect you to engage substantively in class discussion every week. Strong participation often depends on good preparation. You should do your reading well: mark up your book, article, etc.; take notes for yourself; underline important passages; think over what most interests you or puzzles you about what you’ve read. Please come to each class with all materials, including assigned texts and materials from our course website. If you
do not have copies of the week’s readings in seminar, your participation grade will be lowered. If you have questions or concerns about your class participation at any time, please feel free to meet with me.

**Subject material:** Our subject matter can be divisive and offensive and is certainly worthy of scrutiny and critique. However, I encourage you to approach the material as an important (if often difficult) part of history and culture, meant to spark lively discussion about its past and its present significance. You are welcome to come speak with me if you have any concerns.

**Pronouns:** Preferred gender pronouns will be respected by everyone in our class. I will default to the pronouns you have selected on my.harvard; if you have other preferences, please let me know. Address your fellow students directly by name or “you” when responding to a point made by your classmates, with whom you are in conversation during our discussions.

**Written Work:** Students may build on their work throughout the semester if they so choose. In returning to previous work, however, students must substantively revise, revisit, and otherwise reconsider their initial ideas and prose. Work that does not attempt and accomplish this serious work of revision will be penalized.

**Extensions and Late Assignments:** Everyone will start with three extension days to be used at your discretion and on any assignment except the final essay. Each day extends your deadline by 24 hours with no grade penalty. You do not need to ask permission to use an extension day, but I would appreciate your letting me know that you’re using them on a given assignment. Your three days may be used in any combination (e.g., one day for the short essay, two days for Writing Assignment #2), but once you have used all three extension days, no more extensions will be allowed except in extreme circumstances. Late assignments will be marked down one level for each 24-hour period they are late (e.g., an A- becomes a B+, a C+ becomes a C, etc.).

**Screen Use:** It is to your advantage as a reader to fully annotate and mark up readings, so try to print out and read hard copies of our course readings and limit screen use in the classroom. If you are reading in class from a screen, do not use the Internet. It is not appropriate to use phones during discussion. Since most of our class time will be spent in talking with each other, I encourage you to think of class as a space to generate questions and discussion, rather than exhaustive notes.

**Accommodations:** If you need academic adjustments or accommodations in this course, please speak with me and present your letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO), which is a resource for students with disabilities and temporary health conditions who may require accommodations to fully participate in all aspects of Harvard student life. If you wish to notify me, please do so by the end of the second week of the term so that I may respond in a timely manner, since accommodations are not retroactive. The AEO consults with any student who experiences barriers related to physical or mental health, or learning disabilities, and works collaboratively with students and their faculty. Students are not required to share their diagnoses or clinical documentation with anyone outside of the AEO, but you may wish to
notify me if there are potentially inaccessible elements of this course. All discussions will remain as confidential as possible within the parameters of FERPA; I may consult AEO to discuss appropriate implementation. Please be in touch with the AEO directly if you are not yet registered.

**The Harvard College Honor Code, Academic Integrity, and Collaboration:**

Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.

Plagiarism is presenting someone else’s ideas or language as your own, whether intentionally or not. It is in most cases a serious violation of ethics and policy, punishable by grading penalties and referral to the Honor Council for disciplinary action.

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are welcome to discuss our readings and your ideas about them with your peers. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. If you find yourself using the idea or words of another scholar—whether that scholar sits across the table from you in seminar or published a book that you are reading—you must cite that idea and/or those words. In all written work you submit, you must adhere to standard citation practices, including citing any books, articles, websites, etc., that have helped you. Please use either MLA or Chicago citation methods. Finally, I expect you to be familiar with the Harvard Guide to Using Sources, which is available at [http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu](http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu).
RESOURCES OF INTEREST

General:
History & Literature: A Guide to Research Resources,
https://guides.library.harvard.edu/History_and_Literature

Electronic Databases of Primary Sources, available through HOLLIS at
https://databases.hollis.harvard.edu/:
Accessible Archives (including African American Newspapers: The 19th Century)
American Broadsides and Ephemera
America’s Historical Newspapers
ProQuest Historical Newspapers
American Periodicals
Early American Imprints, Series I (1639-1800) and Series II (1801-1819)
Everyday Life and Women in America, c.1800-1920

Online Databases:
Chronicling America, Library of Congress: https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/

Human:
Steve Kuehler, Research Librarian for History & Literature, kuehler@fas.harvard.edu

REQUIRED TEXTS

Henry Box Brown, Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself (University of North Carolina Press, 2008)
Fanny Fern, Ruth Hall (Penguin, 1997)
George Foster, New York By Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches (Univ. of California Press, 1990)
Hannah Foster, The Coquette (Oxford University Press, 1987)

*** Please do your best to read and bring to class the editions specified. Texts are available for rental or purchase at the Harvard Coop and on reserve at Lamont Library. You can use this link to rent or purchase your books from the Harvard Coop: https://tinyurl.com/300-F19-HSLT-90DO-1. PDFs of other readings are available on the course Canvas site. If you encounter any problems (financial or otherwise) accessing course material, please get in touch with me.
SCHEDULE OF READING & WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Week 1, Sept. 5: Course Introduction

Week 2, Sept. 12: The Novel
Hannah Foster, The Coquette (1797)

Week 3, Sept. 19: The Dead
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience” (1844)

DUE on Fri., Sept. 20, at noon: Short Assignment #1—Close-reading The Coquette

Week 4, Sept. 26: The Humbug
Richard Adams Locke, The Moon Hoax; or, A Discovery that the Moon Has a Vast Population of Human Beings (1859)

Week 5, Oct. 3: The Prophet

***Optional visit to the Peabody Museum to view the Feejee Mermaid after class
Week 6, Oct. 10: The City
George Foster, *New York By Gas-Light* (1850)
David Henkin, Chapter 3: “Commercial Impudence and the Dictatorship of the Perpendicular: Signs of the City” in *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (1998), pp. 69-100

DUE on Fri., Oct. 11, at noon: Short Essay

Week 7, Oct. 17: The Body
Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself* (1836), Books I-IV

Week 8, Oct. 24: The Body, cont.
Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, Books V-VIII

DUE on Fri., Oct. 25, at noon: Short Assignment #2

Week 9, Oct. 31: The Vanishing Indian
William Apess, *Eulogy on King Philip* (1836)

Week 10, Nov. 7: The Escape Artist
Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (1851)

Week 11, Nov. 14: The Pseudonym
Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall* (1854)
Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860” (1966)

DUE on Fri., Nov. 15, at noon: Short Assignment #3
Week 12, Nov. 21: The Archive

DUE on Mon., Nov. 25, at midnight: Final essay proposal

DUE on Mon., Dec. 9, at midnight: Final essay