Module on National Mythologies

American Exceptionalism

1. Goals
While every nation says it is unique in its own way, the United States is one of the few (like France) to believe themselves to be exceptional. Over the years, exceptionalism has grown into the American national memory, inserting influence on American politics, foreign policies, economic development and cultural life, and more profoundly the American way of life and thinking. For outsiders and even social critics in America, the obsession with exceptionalism proves offensive and illusionary sometimes, causing troubles at all fronts, within and without. This module aims to introduce the core tenets and development of Exceptionalism, encourage students to explore the relevant debates and eventually enable them to identify and evaluate various demonstrations of Exceptionalism in the United States. A proper understanding of the history, different facets, underlying logic and implementation of the theory of exceptionalism will shed new light on the United States.

2. Desired student outcomes
The key objectives for students include but not limited to:
A. Content/knowledge:
   a) to develop a historical narrative of exceptionalism;
   b) to understand the different aspects of exceptionalism;
   c) to familiarize themselves with some key documents of national importance to America

B. Skills and abilities
   a) to cultivate the ability to identify traces of exceptionalism;
   b) to analyze the impact of exceptionalism on various aspects of American life;
   c) to approach the myth critically from an interdisciplinary perspective;

3. Advice to Teachers
Depending on the students’ level and time available, the teacher may choose from either of the following two approaches.

A. Foundation course
   This approach may suit students who have limited English competence and/or who do not have a general understanding of the American history. The main teaching goal, therefore, is to present the basic facts first and then encourage

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1 Note: This syllabus was prepared by Chen Juebin, Zhai Zheng, and Song Ying from Beijing Foreign Studies University on the topic of National Mythologies. Three separate but related mythologies—American exceptionalism, the frontier myth, and the success myth—are discussed. The syllabus contains the following key components for each sub-topic: goals, advice to teachers, readings, other materials to be used in class, as well as suggested class activities.
the students to think critically.

--Pre-class: The teacher assigns “Basic Readings”;
--First hour: The teacher presents a historical overview of the period in question; and explains such key concepts. As for students, with the help of teacher (for example, showing pictures, paintings, advertisements, movie clips, music video or primary historical records), they brainstorm popular myths associated with the American exceptionalism.
--Second hour: Teacher leads the discussion on how American exceptionalism has manifestations/ramifications on different aspects of the US, such as politics, economics, mentality, national character, and so on; then, based on the reading materials, teacher encourages students to make a comparison between “myths” and “realities”.

B. Advanced
Advanced-level students may be required to read both “Basic Readings” and “Advanced Readings”, with research questions assigned by teachers so as to prepared students for a seminar-style class discussion. Students may be asked to give presentations in an effort to answer some of the research questions.

4. Readings
In this module, all the readings fall into three categories: 1) Basic Readings: suitable for undergraduate students; 2) Advanced Readings: for students with necessary levels of command of English and knowledge of the U.S., for example graduate students; 3) Reference Readings for Teachers: for teachers’ reference to enhance their class performance. For Basic Readings and Advanced Readings, there will be both Required Readings (mostly second-hand research works) and Additional Readings (both research works and first-hand documents, graphs, music, movies and etc.).
These readings aim to help students and teachers to engage in meaningful discussions in classroom on the essence, origin, impact and paradox of American exceptionalism and prepare them to identify, analyze and research on relevant issues associated with American exceptionalism.

4.1. Basic Readings
Required
• James Q. Wilson, “American Exceptionalism”. (James Wilson explains the basic political interpretations of American exceptionalism from the perspectives of the Constitution, federalism, religion, freedom and democracy.)
• “What is ‘American Exceptionalism’”. (Source to be confirmed. This short book chapter highlights the key elements of American exceptionalism and the logic behind it.)
• Byron E. Shafer, “What is the American Way? Four Themes in Search of Their Next Incarnation”, (Source to be confirmed).
Additional

- John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity”. (It is also known as "City upon a Hill" and denotes the notion of American exceptionalism. John Winthrop states the reasons why God made people have different positions from one another.)

- Alexis de Tocqueville, “Chapter IX”, Democracy in America. (In this chapter, Tocqueville explains in what ways North America is “exceptional” and what the implications are.)

- George Washington, “Farewell Address to the People of the United States”. (This document is typical of the belief of American exceptionalism among American politicians. Students may be encouraged to search other signs of exceptionalism in American political rhetorics.)

- Philip Freneau, “On Mr. Paine’s Rights of Man”. (A poem on American exceptionalism. Students need to read to engage in class discussion.)


4.2 Advanced Readings

Required


- “American Exceptionalism and the Forces that Maintain It”, (A book chapter whose source is to be confirmed.)


Additional

- Aaron Wildavsky, “Political-Cultural Roots of Exceptionalism”, (Source to be confirmed).


4.3 Reference Readings for Teachers

Journal Articles and Book Chapters


- Mila Versteeg and Emily Zackin, “American Constitutional Exceptionalism


**Books**

The Frontier Myth

1. Goals
The West, as one of the most mythologized regions of the United States, has given rise to myriad and varied myths associated with people, places and events. For many students, mention of the “Frontier” or “The West” conjures up popular stereotypes: macho cowboy heroes, Indians in war paint, gunfights in saloons, or wagon trains filled with pioneer families. These images, powerful and simplistic, come from advertisements, movies, television, and adventure books. However, contemporary scholarship has given us a much more complex, realistic—and more interesting—history of the American west.

The key goals for this section of the module, therefore, are as follows:

- to gain a historical perspective of the Westward Expansion;
- to identify some typical myths associated with the frontier experience;
- to dispel some widely held misconceptions of the West; and
- to approach a subject with multiple angels.

The essays and materials listed here provide a starting point for discussions and projects in the classroom that help students develop a richer and more complex understanding of the West and the frontier myth in the United States. Studying the West allows us to stress multicultural perspectives, popular culture, politics, history, geography, economic growth, as well as gender and race.

2. Advice to Teachers
Depending on the students’ level and time available, the teacher may choose from either of the following two approaches.

a. Basic
This approach may suit students who have limited English competence and/or who do not have a general understanding of the American history. The main teaching goal, therefore, is to present the basic facts first and then encourage the students to think critically.

--Pre-class: Teacher assigns required reading.
--First hour: Teacher presents a historical overview of the period in question; teacher explains such key concepts as Westward expansion, manifest destiny, frontier, and Frontier Thesis; with the help of teacher (for example, showing pictures, paintings, advertisements, movie clips, music video or primary historical records), students brainstorm popular myths associated with the frontier experience (such as freedom, change, progress, democracy, equality, violence, cowboy justice, individualism, and success).
Second hour: Teacher leads the discussion on how these frontier-related myths have manifestations/ramifications on different aspects of the US, such as politics, economics, mentality, national character, and so on; then, based on the reading materials, teacher encourages students to make a comparison between some typical frontier-related “myths” and “realities”.

b. Advanced
If you teach advanced-level students, you may consider engaging the students more. For example, you may ask students to collect cultural artifacts that embody the frontier myth. Have them present these in class and discuss the cultural and historical implications of the frontier experience. Then, guide the students to challenge the commonly held assumptions about the West. Encourage them to discover and identify as many “West’s” as possible. The teacher may also ask the students to do a research project on the frontier myth following the example of Susan K. Opt (“American Frontier Myth and the Flight of Apollo 13: From News Event to Feature Film”).

3. Required Readings
- Bureau of International Information Programs, US Department of State. “Chapter 5 - Westward Expansion and Regional Differences.” Outline of U.S. History. 2011: 110-128. (This is a “skeleton” historical account of the period in question.)
- Reinhardt, Akim D. “Native America” in Hausladen, Gary J. ed., Western places, American Myths: how we think about the West. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2003: 184-203. (This is a good summary of the native American experience—myths and realities; past and present—and could serve as background reading for students.)
- DiLorenzo, Thomas J. “The Culture of Violence in the American West: Myth versus Reality.” The Independent Review 15.2 (Fall 2010): 227-239. (This essay, with rich historical details, debunks the myth of a “violent” West. By reading this essay, students may learn how to challenge a widely-held assumption, and more importantly, how to do it in a scholarly fashion.)

4. Suggested Readings
- White, Richard. “Born Modern: An Overview of the West.” History Now 9 (2006, Fall). Retrieved from https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/development-west/essays/born-modern-overview-west. (Richard White describes the area west of the Missouri River from a new perspective: as a laboratory for many of the modern developments we often assume to have roots in the older states. Among these are the extension of the authority and bureaucracies of the federal government
and the dominance of large and powerful corporations in the local economy. He also explodes the central myth of the West: that it was shaped by rugged and lonely men engaged in heroic struggle with the environment (and not-so-heroic with the native people)).

- Faragher, John Mack. “The Myth of the Frontier: Progress or Lost Freedom.” *History Now* 9 (2006, Fall). Retrieved from https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/art-music-and-film/essays/myth-frontier-progress-or-lost-freedom. (Faragher takes us through the competing, and evolving, frontier myths as reflected in folklore, literature and film over the last 120 years, from Daniel Boone to the Man With No Name. The disillusionment of the 1960s and 70s, Faragher writes, was reflected in the “utterly cynical” spaghetti Westerns of the period and the precipitous decline of the Western as a genre quickly thereafter.)

- Scharff, Virginia. “Women of the West.” *History Now* 9 (2006, Fall). Retrieved from https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/development-west/essays/women-west. (Sharff introduces us to the critical roles women have played, from the earliest Indian societies to the era of the homesteaders to modern times. The west, she notes, offered American women the same opportunity as it offered men: the chance to reinvent themselves.)

- Website: PBS New Perspectives on the West. http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/. (This website is a multimedia guided tour based on the eight-part documentary series produced by PBS, offering loads of materials, archival images and commentary, as well as links to background information and other resources. Recommended for students and teachers alike.)

5. **Reference Readings for Teachers**

- Hausladen, Gary J. “Introduction” in Hausladen, Gary J. ed., *Western places, American Myths: how we think about the West*. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 2003: 1-7. (This essay presents three typical views on how the West is perceived by Americans. The first is the West as a separate, exceptional region as opposed to the West as an inherent part of a national culture. The second juxtaposes the historical (or “real”) West against the mythic West. The third is the West as region versus the West as a process. It may be suitable for teachers as it gives a good summary of some representative scholarship on the field. Teachers may explain to the students that the West is such a complex concept that there is no one single approach to the study of it. You may even encourage the students to come up with their own angle(s) of study.)

- Deverell, William. “Fighting Words: The Significance of the American West in the
History of the United States” in Milner, Clyde A. II ed., A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996: 29-55. (The essay explains, from a historical perspective, how different people perceive the West differently. Teachers may choose some of the traditional icons of the West, say, those listed on page 32, and discuss with the students whether these images are true and fair. In particular, how do such images help shape the frontier mythology?)

- Lavender, Catherine J. “Picturing the American West.” Retrieved from http://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/item.php?item_id=216. (This essay provides a brief chronological overview of the visual evidence available for teaching about the American West. Lavender discusses some of the first representations of the region by the different populations that claimed it as their own, depictions of the West as a site of nineteenth-century U.S. expansionism, and visual materials that illustrate the complicated ways the region’s distinctiveness has been represented into the twentieth century.)

- Opt, Susan K. “American Frontier Myth and the Flight of Apollo 13: From News Event to Feature Film.” Film & History (1996) 26. 1-4: 40-51. (This essay is a good sample for a student research project as described above. Teachers or students themselves may select a subject and follow the example of Opt.)

The following are books on American mythologies, the West, and/or the frontier.


- Maynard, Richard A. The American West on Film: Myth and Reality. Rochelle
6. Class Discussion Materials
The following are materials that could be used in class for brainstorming or discussion. No prior preparation on the part of the students is necessary.

- Horace Greeley. “Go West.” 1871. (Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, wrote this letter in 1871 to R. L. Sanderson, a young correspondent who had requested career advice. Greeley, a great supporter of westward expansion, shared the national conviction that it was the manifest destiny of America to conquer and civilize the land between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans.)

  Questions for Discussion:
  1. What did Horace Greeley mean when he wrote that in the West “employment is not bestowed as alms”?
  2. According to Greeley what type of person and what skills were necessary for success in the West?
  3. What key messages do you read from this letter?
  4. If you had received Greeley’s letter in 1871, how would you have reacted? Explain your answer.

- Lynyrd Skynyrd. “Free Bird.” Lyrics and MTV. (Free Bird is a power ballad by the American rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd. The MTV contains many typical Western images and may be good to invoke discussion on the subject. The lyrics itself conveys a strong message of “seeking freedom”, a myth typically associated with the frontier experience.)

- Gast, John. American Progress, painting, 1872. (The painting, which was widely disseminated as a commercial color print, conveys a range of ideas about the frontier in 19th century America. Teacher may wish to remind the students that the painting appeared decades before Turner’s thesis. The ideas embodied in
this painting not only suggest the broad sources for Turner’s essay about the importance of the frontier in American life, they suggest that his essay reached an audience for whom these ideas were already familiar. The Gast painting allows one to demonstrate the ways in which painters, too, could engage large historical questions, cultural stereotypes and political ideas, by using a visual vocabulary that viewers found both familiar and persuasive.)

- Palmer, F. (Fanny). *Across the continent: Westward the course of empire takes its way*, painting, 1868. (In this painting, elements of development that happened in chronological succession are presented together, collapsing space and time into a single message of inevitable development. A railroad stretches diagonally across an open plain toward a distant mountain range. It is paralleled by a wagon trail, its chronological forerunner. In the lower left corner we see a rough frontier village with log cabins, a school, and a church. On the lower right, an Indian on horseback is partially obscured by the smoke from a locomotive. Images like these suggest that frontier development was inevitable, and that Indians simply disappeared in a puff of smoke. They depict the past, but suggest the obvious (and unavoidable) path of current and future development. The wagon trail set the stage for the railroad, and the railroad will transform the empty space at the heart of the image. What’s more, the continent is a blank space, ready to welcome communities developing under the political power of the United States.)

- Advertisements
  - Car Advertising: “Vintage Ad Browser”. [http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/cars-ads](http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/cars-ads). This website collects car advertising from the 1870s to 2000s. Many of the ads have Western/frontier themes.

- Films
  - Stagecoach (1939): A group of people traveling on a stagecoach find their journey complicated by the threat of Geronimo and learn something about each other in the process.
  - Blazing Saddles (1974): To ruin a western town, a corrupt political boss appoints a black sheriff, who promptly becomes his most formidable adversary.
The Success Myth

The success myth is an essential part of the American dream. From the rags-to-riches motif in Horatio Alger’s novels to the flashy, empty, and disillusionary success in the Gilded Age, the myth of the American success runs through the entire American history, and accounts for a crucial position in the American national narrative.

Goal of this course
The goal of this course is to help students better understand the essential strand of success myth in the American narrative, by introducing, analyzing and critiquing different aspects of this concept, including the reverse side of it, the American failure.

Therefore, this course mainly consists of three sections: the American success (phase I), the American success (phase II), and the American failure.

American success
The concept of American success undergoes changes, and can be divided into two phases.

Phase I: Self-made man, from rags to riches
In this prewar agrarian society, such virtues as diligence, integrity, temperance, and frugality are highly valued.

Required readings:
Benjamin Franklin, *the Way to Wealth; and the Autobiography of Ben Franklin*
✓ An essay written in 1758, *the Way to Wealth* serves as a short summary of the advice from *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. It holds that with industry and frugality, people could obtain wealth, and thus reaping virtue. Lots of the sentences are still familiar to modern people’s ears. It is also called “Father Abraham’s Sermon”. There are only 2,064 words in this essay, so it is an easy read.
✓ Written from 1771 to 1790 and in fact unfinished, *the Autobiography of Ben Franklin* is a record of Benjamin Franklin’s life. This book revolves around his self-betterment, thus helping others better themselves. In this book, Franklin described his life journey from rags to riches, therefore establishing himself as the prototype of a self-made man in America.

Horatio Alger, Jr., *Ragged Dick, or, Street Life in New York*
✓ One of the most popular “rags-to-riches” novels by Horatio Alger, Jr, this book is about a 14-year-old bootblack’s life in New York, and how he achieved success despite adversity as a result of his honesty, industry, and frugality.

Phase II: Survival of the fittest and material wealth (corporate America)
As a result of the post-Civil War industrial revolution, success is more and more understood in the material sense and equated with wealth.
Required readings:
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

- This novel is Fitzgerald’s *magnum opus*, and also a representative of the Gilded Age. This is a story about the mysterious millionaire Gatsby and his burning love for Daisy, as well as his tragic fate in the end. A penetrating depiction of the American society in the Roaring Twenties, this book reveals a totally different understanding of the American success, which is characterized by its flashiness and the inevitable disillusionment.

Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*

- Veblen brought up the concepts of ‘conspicuous consumption’ and ‘conspicuous leisure’ in this book and exerted great influence on later economists and sociologists. This book may be a bit difficult for undergraduate students.

Other Books on American success:
Seth Rockman, *Scraping By, Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore*

Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*

Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk about what they Do all Day and how they Feel about what they Do*

Michael Harrington, *The Other America*

Barbara Erenreich, *Getting By (Or Not) in America*

Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution, Sustainable Activism for the 21st Century*

Jeffrey Louis Decker, *Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey*

Irvin G. Wylie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches*

Rex Burns, *Success in America: The Yeoman Dream and the Industrial Revolution*

Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale*


Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*

Richard M. Huber, *The American Idea of Success*

Loren Baritz, *The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class*

Martha Banta, *Failure and Success in America: A Literary Debate*

Moses Rischin, ed. *The American Gospel of Success: Individualism and Beyond*


Julie Levinson, *The American success myth on film*

David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (This is a historian’s exploration into how the economic abundance of the U.S. has shaped the American national character.)

Edward Crapsey, *The Nether Side of New York*

Warren Susman, *Personality and the Making of Twentieth-century Culture*, from
Culture and History (The exploration into the changing vision of self, and the transition from a culture of character to a culture of personality)

**Other Novels on American success:**
James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*
John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
Edith Wharton, *The Pot-Boiler*

**Films on American success:**
Gabriele Muccino, *The Pursuit of Happyness*
Frank Capra, *It’s a Wonderful Life*
Curtis Hanson, *8 Mile*
Elia Kazan, *A Face in the Crowd*
David Fincher, *The Social Network*

**Pictures:**
*Idleness*, by John William Godward: The subject of this painting is a woman from the leisured class, revealing the prevailing attitude of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure of that age. The students can be guided to observe and comment on the dressing, facial expression, manner of the woman, and therefore, how the American success influenced the American life.

**Books and magazines selling success**
Wallace D. Wattles, *The Science of Getting Rich*
Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*
Jack Welch, *Winning*
Fortune, Money, and other magazines about getting rich

**American failure**
Without the understanding of American failure, one cannot fully understand the American success.

**Required reading:**
Arthur Miller, *Death of a salesman*: This is a play about the disillusionment of American success. By analyzing the difference characters of the father and his two sons, the students can learn about the different aspects of American success and failure.

**Other books on American failure:**
Timothy Egan, *The worst Hard Time*
Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The disuniting of America*
Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A history of failure in America*
Chang-rae Lee, “Coming Home Again”
Sophie Egan, “Junior Fear Abroad”
Edward Crapsey, *The Nether Side of New York*
W. E. B. Du Bois, selections from *The Souls of Black Folk*
Christine Ruotolo, "JWJ and The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Musician"
Martin Luther King, Jr., “The American Dream” sermon
Chris Ware, *The ACME Novelty Library Final Report to Stockholders and Saturday Afternoon Rainy Day Fun Book*
Chris Ware, cover illustration of *The Comics Journal* 200; “Writers of Writers”
David Ball, “Chris Ware’s Failures”

**Pictures on American success:**
Laura Wexler’s Photogrammar website of Depression era photographs (photogrammar.yale.edu)

**Short video clip:**
Wealth Inequality in America

**Suggested activities**
1. Ask students to read *Ragged Dick* and *Great Gatsby*, and invite them to compare the virtues or qualities celebrated in the two novels about achieving success.
2. Some people say that “If you are not successful, you are not an American.” Some Americans see people’s failure as being a traitor to this country. Hold a discussion among the students.