Concepts and Terms

cosmopolitanism / deliberative democracy
Raymond Williams
model of culture: dominant, residual, and emergent
Puritanism vs. Jeffersonianism / “Yankee” vs. “Cavalier”
self-conscious reading
horizon of expectations
reader response / aesthetics of reception
national literature
canonization: the example of Moby-Dick
ideology
“America” as a trope
American exceptionalism
inclusion/exclusion
writing and colonialism (Columbus, Jefferson, Lewis and Clark)

Names and Quotes

Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature: See especially chapters 6-9 on
“Hegemony,” “Traditions, Institutions, and Formations,” “Dominant, Residual,
and Emergent,” and “Structures of Feeling.”

Bruce Robbins, Introduction to Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the
Nation, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of

Cosmopolitanism should be “understood as a fundamental devotion to the interests
of humanity as a whole.”

“Cosmopolitanism has often seemed to claim universality by virtue of its
independence, its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that
constrain ordinary nation-bound lives.”

David Hollinger, Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism (New York: Basic,

“Cosmopolitanism shares with all varieties of universalism a profound suspicion of
enclosures, but cosmopolitanism is defined by an additional element not essential to
universalism itself: recognition, acceptance, and eager exploration of diversity.
Cosmopolitanism urges each individual and collective unit to absorb as much varied
experience as it can, while retaining its capacity to advance its aims effectively. For
cosmopolitans, the diversity of humankind is a fact; for universalists, it is a potential
problem.”


“Often American history – and the meaning of America – has been framed as a political and cultural dialectic between Virginia and Massachusetts, Cavalier and Yankee.”

What Puritanism and Jeffersonianism share: “both reject the idea of difference. Neither can give positive cultural or political value to heterogeneity or conflict. Each in its own way is xenophobic, and that distances both of them from the conditions of modern life, especially as represented by the historic cosmopolitanism of New York and, increasingly, other cities in the United States.”

**F. O. Matthiessen**, *American Renaissance*

**Emma Lazarus** (1849-87), “The New Colossus” (1883)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridge harbor that twin cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Written to help raise funds for the construction of the Bartholdi Pedestal for the Statue of Liberty.

**William H. Prescott** (1796-1859), *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843); *History of the Conquest of Peru* (1847)

**George Bancroft** (1800-91), *A History of the United States*
**Frederick Jackson Turner** (1861-1932), "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893)

In 1893 a young historian named Frederick Jackson Turner addressed the American Historical Association during the great Chicago Exposition, and he presented a theory of American exceptionalism—known as the “frontier hypothesis”—that would remain influential for decades. Turner argued that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”

According to Turner, “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating the American character.” Here is Turner’s description of the “striking characteristics” bestowed by the experience of the frontier upon the American intellect:

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expediency; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.

What are the strengths of Turner’s analysis? What are its shortcomings?

**Toni Morrison** (excerpt from a 1989 *Time* magazine interview):

I feel personally sorrowful about black-white relations a lot of the time because black people have always been used as a buffer in this country between powers to prevent class war, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations.

If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other’s throats out, as they have done everywhere else. But in becoming an America, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for me—it's nothing else but color. Wherever they were from, they would stand together. They could all say, “I am not that.” So in that sense, becoming an American is based on an attitude: an exclusion of me.

It wasn’t negative to them—it was unifying. When they got off the boat, the second word they learned was “nigger.” Ask them—I grew up with them. I remember in the fifth grade a smart little boy who had just arrived and didn’t speak any English. He sat next to me. I read well, and I taught him to read just by doing it. I remember the moment he found out that I was black—a nigger. It took him six months; he was told. And that's the moment when he belonged, that was his entrance. Every immigrant knew he would not come as the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group—and that was us.
Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence”

In what ways does the following sentence encode the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that lie within the trope “America”?

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

What difference does Jefferson’s revision of Locke’s formula “life, liberty, and property” make? What does the use of the word “men” in this sentence signify? Are the exclusions codified here intrinsic to the idea of “unalienable Rights,” or they simply a historical accident, which can be pared away?

Thomas Jefferson to Lewis and Clark:

Your observations are to be taken with great pains an accuracy, to be entered distinctly, and intelligibly for others as well as yourself, to comprehend all the elements necessary, with the aid of the usual tables, to fix the latitude and longitude of the places at which they were taken, and are to be rendered to the war office, for the purpose of having the calculations made concurrently by proper persons within the U.S. Several copies of these, as well as your other notes, should be made at leisure times and put into the care of the most trustworthy of your attendants, to guard by multiplying them, against the accidental losses to which they will be exposed. A further guard would be that one of these copies be written on the paper of the birch, as less liable to injury from damp than common paper.

Further Reading


Today's Songs

“We're An American Band,” Grand Funk Railroad, We’re An American Band (1973)
“Born In The USA,” Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, Born In The USA (1984)