

St. Lawrence University

FYP Course Descriptions – Fall 2009

Identity and Belonging in the St. Lawrence Valley

Since the pre-contact period between First Peoples and Europeans, the St. Lawrence River Valley has served as an important place in the history of North America. It has served simultaneously as a place of residence, transportation route, conduit for commerce, and as a sometimes national symbol (the French explorer Jacques Cartier christened it the “River of Canada”). In this course, we will focus upon the differing local and national cultures of the United States and Canada as seen in the St. Lawrence Valley. Using a roughly historical approach, we will trace cultural contact, the portrayal of identities, colonization and expansion, and the development of each nation to the contemporary period. Our prime concern will be the definition of this borderland region as part of the two nation-states and the continuing place which its First Peoples play in it. Case studies can include differing approaches to Western expansion, models of settlement, trade (the fur trade to free trade), environmental issues, and approaches to social policy. We shall conduct at least one field trip as we compare the cultural experiences of Canada and the United States, both mythic and real.

Making A Difference: The Role of Active Citizenship in a Thriving Democracy

What should a thriving democracy look like? In an era of economic crisis, perhaps now more than ever we should be reflecting upon how well our democratic institutions meet the needs of our diverse citizenry and what role citizens should play in ensuring the health of these institutions. What does it mean to be a member of a society that proclaims a “government of the people, by the people, for the people?” As we wrestle with these questions, we’ll examine America’s founding principles and the fundamental debates over our core values as a nation. We will look at concerns about the wealth gap, racial tensions, a broken criminal justice system, a faltering public education system, and a disconnected citizenry. To enhance our engagement with these questions and to assume our role as active citizens, all of us will be volunteering in the local community throughout the fall semester. We hope this experience will push all of us to ask: Should we make a difference? If so, how?

Political Economy and Identity in the Age of Globalization

As people, capital, images, and ideas move around the globe in ways unimaginable even a decade ago, scholars debate the effects of an increasingly interdependent global culture. 'Globalization' is not one phenomenon but many, a set of interlinked social, economic, and political trends with complex causes and uncertain implications for the future. This course seeks to define 'globalization,' and examines the political, economic, and ethical debates that swirl around the term. We will look critically and self-consciously at the ways that globalization shapes individual, national, and transnational identities. We will consider in detail the evolution of a variety of international institutions, including the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund, and the ways in which they affect the course of world events and the daily lives of people around the globe. Finally, we will examine the ways in which images from commercials, popular film, or news broadcasts bring individuals, groups, and nations to define themselves and others in certain ways, and the consequences of this shaping power, both positive and negative.

The Fifties: The Way We Never Were

The myths of the 1950s set the stage for the rebellions of the 1960s. Even today we are nostalgic for the “perfection” of the 1950s—perfect family, perfect home, perfect life. This course will go beyond these myths to explore the reality of the 1950s in the United States, considering social constructions of gender roles, the function of science, the composition of families, the role of the economy, race and ethnic relations, and the power of technology and media. More than half a century later, the myths of the 1950s still have a hold on our imaginations, even though that era remains “the way we never were.”

Finding a Balance: Energy Use in the 21st Century

Was \$4 gas a brief anomaly? Should we drill in the Alaskan wilderness or buy more oil from OPEC? Why are there so many new wind farms in the North Country? Should we fund more nuclear plants or rely instead upon hydro-electric dams? Is “clean coal” really an improvement? What about new technologies? Questions like these, and dozens of other energy-related issues, have figured prominently in American politics during the past few years. Decisions being made today about energy production and consumption will lead to economic, political, social, and environmental consequences that will remain with us for decades. As a result, thoughtful citizens across the country are demanding to be a part of the decision-making process. In this course, we will delve into the energy debate that is taking place across the country. We will begin by analyzing past, present, and potential future sources of energy. Students will learn how to evaluate energy sources through a cost-benefit analysis and will explore how energy is used in our communities. The class will then move on to energy’s relationship to public policy. Environmental regulation, foreign policy, and transportation planning will be central to our own policy discussions and debates. We will conclude the course by turning our focus locally, identifying and evaluating energy use issues unique to the North Country.

Thoreau Lives!

When Henry David Thoreau published his memoir in 1854 about a year spent living alone and close to the land in a cabin in New England, he probably had no inkling that *Walden* would inspire the environmental movement of the twentieth century. He certainly would not have predicted the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s, which lives on today as ordinary citizens participate in community supported agriculture, “buy local,” and seek home-grown sources of energy. Nor could he have foreseen that his cranky, individualistic essay, “Civil Disobedience,” would inspire the action and thoughts of political leaders and activists, authors, and citizens across the globe wishing to resist the forces of global capitalism, consumerism, war, environmental plunder, and the fossil fuel-based economy. In this course we’ll begin with a study of Thoreau and then bring him up to date, studying twentieth and twenty-first environmental writers and note how the seeds of that prickly New Englander’s thought continue to bear fruit and offer hope for the future. We will visit with North Country citizens who have found ways to “live deliberately,” as Thoreau wrote, in a culture that tells us it is our patriotic duty to consume and spend. To finish the semester, we will push Thoreau into the future, to ask ourselves, as individuals, how it is that we wish to live, in what kind of community, and in what kind of world. One instructor will be co-director of the SLU abroad program in Rouen in the Spring of 2010, where she will teach an FYS in travel writing and literature. Therefore, the FYS in France might be of particular interest to students in this FYP.

Representations of Africa: Myth and Reality

Popular portrayals of Africa and the people who live there are often clouded by myths and stereotypes. Images of untouched landscapes filled with wild animals and depictions of widespread "tribalism" dominate many everyday conversations about the continent. But how have these contemporary descriptions been historically produced? And who is responsible for their production? This course will require students to consider the representation of Africa and Africans in a range of cultural texts from feature films, television documentaries and artworks to novels, travel writing and newspapers. By reading the work of scholars across the disciplines, students will be introduced to different perspectives on the ways African societies have been represented in popular discourse. Students will gain not only an understanding of the changing historical image of Africa from beyond the continent's borders, but also pay particular attention to the important role Africans themselves have played in shaping and combating these notions.

Youth Cultures Then and Now: The Fifties, the Eighties, and Today

Most members of the American public identify themselves as part of a specific generation, from "the Greatest Generation" who fought World War II, to their Baby Boomer children, to the Boomer offspring, so-called 'Generations X and Y.' Each generation of American youth seems to consider itself unique, throwing off the cultural and social values of previous decades and focusing on new and pressing concerns; yet each comes to see that certain inherent American—and human—values persist. Basic questions endure and demand to be confronted each time around about issues that cut across race, class, and gender. Such questions are: Who am I? What do I want? What obstacles confront my particular generation and how do they differ from those faced by previous generations? Through literature, film, and the study of political movements and events, we will examine the social and cultural climates of the 1950s, the 1980s, and of the current era—the first decade of the 21st century—asking you to construct a portrait of your emerging generation.

Canada's Great War

Trenches and endless mud; tanks, machine guns, air attacks, chemical warfare; millions upon millions dead amid horrific conditions: World War I, the First World War, the Great War. It raged in Europe from 1914-18 but, over here, the United States did not enter the fighting until April 1917. Canada, then still a colony of Great Britain, entered in 1914 and contributed significantly to the Allied war efforts—and for many reasons, its experience has proved central to its self definition as a nation and a culture. In this course, we will travel to Ottawa to examine the "Great War in Canadian Memory" by visiting museums and seeing the Great War iconography found there. The 1910s and '20s were an incredibly complex time: tangled political alliances wrought by the horrors of modern combat, flawed visions for peace, the dissolution of empires and the creation of new nations, and social and cultural effects of war felt far beyond the battlefields. To better understand these matters, we will consider the perspectives of soldiers and civilians; men, women, and children; war proponents and pacifists; artists and commentators. Our materials for study and discussion will include historical scholarship, literature, film, and our on-site experience of the war's memory in Canada. "In Flanders Fields the Poppies Grow"

Reading Contemporary Media

We live out our lives immersed in the products of various mass media--advertising, movies, newspapers and news broadcasts--and much of the time we allow the huge volume of information generated by the media to wash over us without critical reflection, often unconsciously adopting the norms and assumptions that shape media products. The aim of this course is to help students develop a more analytical role in relation to these products. By examining both the economic circumstances that govern media production and the actual content of various kinds of media, students will learn to become more active consumers of the images and messages that shape the way we live.

Mississippi Delta Blues

Characterizing the blues spawned in the delta region of Mississippi, Clarksdale resident Jasper Love explained, "Those blues come from way back when they had to study something to try to give them some consolation. The man was doing them so bad, taking all they had and working them to death. They just had to do something, so they sang about what they felt". What they felt and sang about may have been afflictions largely limited to African-Americans in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but in the intervening years, the blues have become a nearly universal expression of melancholy and joy. In this FYP, we will study the art of the blues and the consolation offered to African-Americans and to those far beyond Mississippi by this indigenous American musical form. Beginning with the roots of blues in Africa and in work songs and spirituals created by slaves, we will explore the evolution of the blues in the delta in the early 20th century, their development into a popular genre of music selling millions of records a year, and their ultimate transformation into rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll. Students in the college will not only study the form but will have the opportunity to perform it.

Narratives of Identity: Exploring Class, Gender, Race, and Sexual Orientation through Stories

Who am I? Who do I want to be? These are two important questions young adults ask themselves, and in this class we'll look at how our identities are shaped by society according to our race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as how we shape our own identities. One of the important ways that we do this is through the stories we tell others (and ourselves) about who we are. We'll begin with an exploration of the role of stories, asking questions such as: What exactly makes a story a story? How can stories be damaging? Healing? Then we will turn to the concept of identity, asking questions such as: Is identity who we are? What we do? Next, we'll read a wide range of fiction and non-fiction in which issues of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation (and often a combination of these) are important, including Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, a memoir. Finally, you'll experiment with constructing narratives of your own, by writing about your experiences and how they have shaped you, as well as about how you want to choose to shape yourself as you begin college and your journey into adulthood.

Lifestyles: Yesterday, Today, & Tomorrow

This course will examine historical, cultural, social, and psychological predictors of lifestyle behaviors, with a focus on physical activity and food choices. Statistics imply that Americans may be in the midst of an obesity epidemic. By understanding the various factors influencing our

lifestyle behaviors (including the mass media, age, gender, socioeconomic status, technology), we can hopefully devise ways to “get us out of this mess.” We will investigate changes in food sources, food production, and work/family life to understand our own and others’ food and activity choices within a broader historical context. We will also examine the social and global implications of these lifestyle decisions. Students will be partnering with groups in the local Canton community which promote responsible physical activity- and food-related lifestyle choices.

Finding a Voice: Creativity, Community, and Performance

Each of us is moved in a unique, individual way by the beauty of the art that we see, hear, or produce, but the meaning we draw from art is shaped as well by the experiences and ideals that we share within communities. This college will both investigate, and be invigorated by, the power of the social act of performance. We will learn, in part by regularly becoming performers ourselves, ways in which an artist can clearly communicate with an audience. We will also connect creatively with cultural realities outside of our experience, and attempt to understand forms of art whose meaning might otherwise elude us. The course requires no prior training or proficiency as a performer. We ask only that you be willing to express yourself creatively and to share that expression. The college will be housed in a residence that provides proximity to SLU’s Fine Arts, Music, and Performance and Communication Arts Departments. Taught by an ethnomusicologist and a historian, who sometimes share the stage as saxophonist and guitarist in a local rock and roll band, the college will seek to foster a community that connects serious academic inquiry with artistic creativity, where students can seek their own voices in an actively supportive environment.

Coldest Cold War Flicks: America At The Movies, 1945-1963

This course will examine the earliest and coldest days of the Cold War, a period extending from the end of World War II in 1945 to the signing of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1963, through a sampling of historical texts and American movies made during that time. Movies are often more than just mindless escapism: the stories and texts continually recast by our culture not only entertain but also can provide a window into who we are, and were. Because films, like literature, can reflect the time in which they are produced, we can study history and film together to gain insights into values, issues, beliefs, hopes, fears, and historical experiences. In this course specifically, we will be looking at how the motion pictures of the day reflected the major preoccupations of the early Cold War era: chief among them dealing with nuclear weapons, responding to the Soviet communist threat, and undertaking America’s new responsibilities abroad, as well as enjoying prosperity and mobility at home in the new suburbs while spawning a generation that eventually would be called the “boomers.” Special attention will be paid to the noir films of the 1940s and 1950s, family melodramas such as *Mildred Pierce* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, horror films of the 1950s such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and nuclear war films such as *On the Beach* and *Dr. Strangelove*.

Representations of the American Family

The American family has taken a variety of forms over the last 200 years—from extended families living under a single roof to single-parent families living on the street, from families brought together by poverty to families brought together by love. Given all this variety, what do we wish families would do, imagine that they should do, or fear that they actually do—to and for their members and their communities? How are families shaped by their members and their communities and how do they in turn shape the individuals within them? And finally, how have these wishes and fears evolved as family formations have changed in the last couple of centuries? This course will

explore these questions by examining fictional representations of families, in literary and popular works, from the Victorian period to the 21st century and beyond. Our examination will be informed by readings from a variety of disciplines, such as history, psychology, and anthropology.

Power, Sex and Money: Living in a World of Inequalities

"The worst form of inequality is to try to make unequal things equal" (Aristotle). This quote challenges our understanding of equality and begs the question: What is inequality, under what conditions can it be understood as necessary or even helpful, and when do we perceive it as a menace to society? Looking through the lens of social science, we will spotlight different forms of inequality and examine their societal foundations. The political, economic, and social dimensions expressed through the notions of power, money, and sex/gender will be the focal point of the course. Through scholarly literature as well as film, we will zoom in on examples of inequality such as gender discrimination, socio-economic classes, and decision making in international organizations. In addition, we will examine different real world solutions to inequality which have been attempted, both nationally and internationally, such as the welfare state and the Equal Rights Amendment, and we will evaluate how successful these different attempts have been. Each student will also develop his or her own expertise on one question of inequality in the United States or another country and will share with the class findings on which problems still exist and what kind of solutions can be proposed.

Having an Impact: Leadership, Teamwork, and Motivation

We will explore the themes of leadership, teamwork, and motivation from a variety of different perspectives. What makes an effective leader or follower? What does history teach us about leadership? What does science teach us about motivation? What do economic theories teach us about teamwork and group dynamics? Today's world is highly dynamic and diverse in nature, requiring adaptive thinking and individuals with the ability to lead amidst change. Today's world is also highly collaborative, requiring individuals who can work effectively in a wide range of different groups. We will study these issues both intellectually through readings and movies and practically through participation in activities such as group community service projects.