FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR

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Mission

Every Barnard first-year student is required to take a First-Year Seminar during her first or second semester at Barnard. First-Year Seminars are designed to develop further the essential and prerequisite skills a student brings to Barnard in critical reading and analysis, writing, and effective speaking. First-Year Seminars are intellectually challenging interdisciplinary courses which explore important issues through significant texts ranging across genres and historical periods. Seminars also serve to initiate students into the intellectual community of the college.

Student Learning Outcomes

1. Students in First-Year Seminars will develop their skills in critical reading and analysis, writing, and effective speaking.
2. They will assess and use textual evidence in support of oral and written arguments.
3. Students will explore important issues through significant texts ranging across genres, disciplines, and historical periods.

First-Year Seminars fall into two categories: Special Topics and Reacting to the Past.

Special Topics seminars reflect the variety of faculty interests and expertise, and thus vary in topic from year to year. They offer students and faculty opportunities to explore topics of interest across disciplinary lines, genres, and historical periods. Use the "Courses" tab above to view the full Special Topics offerings; current semester offerings are indicated with schedule details.

In Reacting to the Past seminars, students participate in role-playing games that enable them to relive important intellectual debates in three separate historical moments.

In The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 B.C., students draw on Plato's Republic as well as excerpts from Thucydides, Xenophon, and other contemporary sources to debate the prospects for Athenian democracy in the wake of the Peloponnesian War.

In Confucianism and the Succession Crisis of the Wanli Emperor, students study the Analects of Confucius and apply Confucian thought to issues of governance during the Ming dynasty. The final semester’s final game varies by section. Some sections explore seventeenth-century Massachusetts, drawing on the Bible, Calvin’s Institutes, and colonial trial testimony to participate in The Trial of Anne Hutchinson. Other sections draw on texts by Marx, Freud, and Wollstonecraft to explore the contest between women’s suffrage advocates and labor activists for the hearts and minds of ”Bohemian” Greenwich Village in the spring of 1913.

This program is supervised by the First-Year Seminar Committee:

Directors: Pamela Cobrin (Senior Lecturer in English), Laurie Postlewate (Senior Lecturer in French)
First-Year Class Dean: Wendy Garay

Director of First-Year Writing: Wendy Schor-Haim

Professors: Robert McCaughey (History), Kristina Milnor (Classics), Stephanie Pfirman (Environmental Science)

Associate Professors: Ronald Briggs (Spanish)

Assistant Professor of Professional Practice: Alice Reagan (Theatre)

Instruction in the First-Year Seminar Program is provided by the following regular members of the Barnard College faculty:

Professors: Elizabeth Bernstein (Sociology), André Burgstaller (Economics), Mark Carnes (History), Robert McCaughey (History), Kristina Milnor (Classics), Stephanie Pfirman (Environmental Science), Jonathan Rieder (Sociology), Herb Sloan (Professor Emeritus), Patricia Stokes (Psychology), Caroline Weber (French), Jennifer Worth (Reacting to the Past)

Associate Professors: Severin Fowles (Anthropology), Elizabeth Hutchinson (Art History), Brian Mailloux (Environmental Science), Lisa Son (Psychology), Claire Ullman (Political Science),

Assistant Professors: Orlando Bentancor (Spanish), Michael Campbell (Chemistry), Ralph Ghoeche (Architecture), Sandra Goldmark (Theatre), Bradley Gorski (Slavic), Ayten Gundogdu (Political Science), Daniel Kato (Political Science), Gale Kenny (Religion), Ellen Morris (Classics), Elliot Paul (Philosophy), Sonia Pereira (Economics), Alice Reagan (Theatre), Aaron Schneider (English), Michelle Smith (Political Science), Claire Ullman (Political Science), Manu Vimalassery (American Studies)

Lecturers and Other Faculty: Maureen Chun (English), Monica Cohen (English), Pamela Cobrin (English), Dennis Dalton, Margaret Ellsberg (English), Katie Glasner (Dance), Andrew Lynn (English), Linn Cary Mehta (English), Barbara Morris (English), John Pagano (English), Stefan Pedatella (English), Laurie Postlewate (French), Jennifer Rosenthal (English), Wendy Schor-Haim (English), Timea Szell (English), Margaret Vandenbarg (English)

Courses of Instruction

Every Barnard first-year student is required to take a First-Year Seminar during her first or second semester at Barnard. Transfer students are not required to take First-Year Seminars.

Special Topics

FYSB BC1189 Enchanted Imagination. 3 points.
A survey of fantasy works that examines the transformative role of the imagination in aesthetic and creative experience, challenges accepted boundaries between the imagined and the real, and celebrates Otherness and Magicality in a disenchanted world. Readings will be selected from fairy tales, Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream and The Tempest; Romantic poetry by Blake, Coleridge, Keats, and Dickinson; Romantic art by Friedrich, Waterhouse, and Dore; Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Lewis Carroll’s Alice books, Tennyson’s Idylls of the King, Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings; Magical Realist works by Borges, Garcia Marquez, and Allende; Sondheim & Lapine’s Into the Woods, Rushdie’s Haroun and the Sea of Stories.
FYSB BC1228 Ethnicity and Social Transformation. 3 points.
Novels, memoirs, films and fieldwork based on the American experience of immigration during the twentieth century. Readings will include works by Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Christina Garcia, Julia Alvarez, Fae Ng, Gish Jen, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, and Malcolm X.

FYSB BC1278 Economic Life and Human Character. 3 points.
Governing authority can be defined as the relationship between ruler and ruled in which the framing of issues, the myths and narrative history of the state, and the reasoned elaboration of the government's decision are accepted by the citizens of subjects of the state. The crisis of authority occurs when this relationship is disrupted. In this seminar we will examine such crises in Ancient Greece, Renaissance Western Europe, Twentieth Century United State, and post-communist Eastern Europe, through the writings of such authors as Plato, Machiavelli, Milton, Mill, de Tocqueville, King, and Michnik.

FYSB BC1286 Culture, Ethics and Economics. 3 points.
What if humans were only capable of caring for their own interests? What kind of economic world could we expect to find? One in which the common good would be attained by market forces, or one in which many would be left behind? This course uses a diversity of sources to examine the interplay of culture, ethics and economics. The starting point is Adam Smith's work. Economists and policy makers have focused on one side of Adam Smith's work represented by self-regarding behavior and the supremacy of the invisible hand in market functioning. However, Adam Smith also pointed out that one of humans' central emotions is "sympathy", a natural tendency to care about the well-being of others. In light of the recent events as well as research this other side of Adam Smith's work appears now more relevant. We analyze evidence of cooperative versus self-regarding behaviors and its relationship with the economy, human evolution and cultural values in a variety of settings. Readings include works from Adam Smith, Milton Freedman, Charles Dickens, David Rockefeller and Chris Gardner.

FYSB BC1291 Utopias. 3 points.
In his 1516 work Utopia, Englishman Thomas More created a name for a perfect society from Greek roots meaning either no-place or the good place (eutopia). More's vision of an ideal alternative world reflected his worries about social problems in England as well as the possibilities he imagined in America, which offered a real new world for most Europeans in the early 1500s. More was neither the first nor last person to imagine an alternate world, and this class will examine the ways writers, politicians, social critics, and revolutionaries have constructed eutopias (or good societies) as well as dystopias (bad societies) in fiction and in real life. We will ask how utopian fiction has developed as a distinctive genre, and we will also ask how utopian thought is a product of its particular time. What motivates writers and thinkers to come up with alternative models of society? What has made utopian fiction and science fiction so interesting to so many different kinds of writers? Additionally, what is the relationship between people who have written fictional visions of the future and those people who have tried to create real utopian societies? Can one person's eutopia become another's dystopia? Readings in the class will range from Plato's Republic through modern science fiction and studies of suburbia. Texts include More's Utopia, Columbus's journals, Shakespeare's The Tempest, the Communist Manifesto, Gilman's Herland, and Hopkins's Of One Blood. We will also examine attempts to create utopias, including several American experimental communes from the early 1800s, nationalist racial dystopias such as Nazi Germany, and master-planned communities in the modern United States.

FYSB BC1294 Art, Sex and American Culture. 3 points.
Sex is the ultimate forbidden public topic and yet from the New England Puritans' sermons to Bill Clinton's (in)famous affair, sex has often been publicly staged in dramatic, literary, religious, political, legal and social forums. In this seminar, we will explore how issues of sex and sexuality have insinuated themselves into the formation of American identity. We will examine texts from the seventeenth century to the present with a particular emphasis on the arts, politics and sex. Texts include Puritan sermons, Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Tennessee Williams's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Suzan-Lori Parks's Venus, photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, literature from Margaret Sanger's birth control movement, and theoretical works by Michel Foucault, Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler.

FYSB BC1295 Envisioning Equality Between the Sexes. 3 points.
What constitutes equality between the sexes? By studying visions of equality between the sexes offered in law, politics, international development, religion, literature, psychology, anthropology, and the writings of activists, we will explore what such equality must or might look like. Focusing on western authors, we will consider issues such as rights, equality and difference, reproductive roles, violence, and language. Texts will include Elizabeth Cady Stanton, A Woman's Bible; the U.N.'s Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women; Marge Piercy, Woman on the Edge of Time; Catherine MacKinnon, Only Words; and Rebecca Walker, "Becoming the Third Wave.

FYSB BC1296 The Hudson: America's River. 3 points.
Called "America's River," the Hudson not only runs right behind our campus, but right through American history. Throughout American history the Hudson River has been a complex social and cultural entity, simultaneously a commercial conduit, a historic place at the center of the American Revolution, an industrial resource, and a privileged site for aesthetic experiences and the as birthplace of modern environmentalism. In this course you will explore the Hudson in relationship to the varied historical communities which have made meaning with it, identifying its contributions to discourses of nation and nature, but also race, gender, art and science. Readings will include literary works by Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper as well as essays and poems on subjects from fairies to trees to architecture to railroad travel. Close analysis of works of architecture, landscape design, and the iconic paintings of the Hudson River School will be accompanied by an exploration of the various methods for "reading" these objects and paintings. Visits to Museum collections and to sites along the river will be an important part of the curriculum.

FYSB BC1297 The Middle Class. 3 points.
The focus on the "middle class" in American politics is not new. Indeed, the size and (seeming) success of the American middle class has long been treated as a mark of American exceptionalism. Why is the "middle class" so important in American politics? What does its much-reported decline mean? What, for that matter, is the middle class—a subdivision of American income? Personal rank? Status? If the middle class is such an important site of economic, social and political aspiration, why is it also so often a site for scathing criticism and cutting satire about the challenges of modern (suburban) life? What do we think about when we think about the middle class?
FYSB BC1460 Memory. 3 points.
Memory is arguably the most important faculty that we possess. Not surprisingly, memory has been a ubiquitous topic in poetry, science, fiction, and in the media. Ironically, memory’s value is perhaps best understood when it ceases to exist. Indeed, it isn’t hard to imagine the devastation that comes with memory loss. In this course, we will survey various components of memory, including its role in writing and history, and its existence in various non-human populations. In addition, we will explore the fragility of memory, including distortions, unusual memories, and basic forgetting. Readings will include poems, theoretical essays, scientific articles, and fiction. Assignments will consist of essays, opinion pieces, and creative stories. Students will also participate in a final in-class debate. Readings will include works from William Blake, James Joyce, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, Emily Dickinson, Ben Jonson, Mary Carruthers, Francis Yates, Aristotle, William James, Elizabeth Loftus, Spinoza, Luria, J.L. Borges, S. Freud, Oliver Sacks, Truman Capote

FYSB BC1465 On Dreams and Nightmares. 3 points.
In the dead of night it is not uncommon for even the most socially staid of individuals to fly, to ride an elephant at breakneck speed, to visit with the dead, or to expose themselves in public. Ancient Egyptians struggled to understand how and why we dream, as have countless individuals in other times and cultures. Some thinkers, ancient and modern, have dismissed dreams as essentially meaningless byproducts of natural processes. Others have taken dreams seriously as a primary means of access to an ordinarily imperceivable world in which one can commune with spirits and deities and receive from them valuable information about future events or even one’s own health. The implications of this belief have led to vigorous theological debates as to whose dreams may be trusted (and, alternatively, whose need to be actively suppressed). From Freud onward, many have felt that dreams offer the key not to other worlds but to the complicated realm of the psyche. Over the course of our semester we’ll look at how scientists, philosophers, hypochondriacs, pious pagans and monotheists, opium addicts, psychologists, playwrights, novelists, artists, and film directors have understood dreams and been inspired by them. Authors whose works we’ll read include Aristotle, Cicero, Chung Tzu, Freud, Carl Jung, Andre Breton, H.P. Lovecraft, Jorge Borges, Ursula Le Guin, Neil Gaimon, and many others. Special attention will likewise be paid to the phenomenon of lucid dreaming and to the immense influence this practice has had on the creative output of both writers and filmmakers.

FYSB BC1466 Sustainability. 3 points.
Sustainability is being hailed as the solution that is going to link activists, citizens, and corporations to solve the world’s environmental problems. However, there are many ways to define the term and assess the longterm effects of so-called “sustainable” measures. In this course, we will examine current and historical writings about human interactions with the environment in order to understand and identify our most profound environmental challenges and the most appropriate responses. Responding critically to the ideas of the past, we will also ask how our views have changed over time and what it might take to tackle the current large scale environmental issues facing society. Projects for the course include a critical essay, a political opinion piece, and a survey of environmental attitudes which is informed by the data studied and collected in class.

FYSB BC1467 Activism and Social Change. 3 points.
Frederick Douglass famously stated, ‘if there is no struggle, there is no progress.’ This quote captures the essence of activism, which is the struggle between that which is and that which ought to be. This course will trace the many ways in which activism has been defined over time, situating them within different historical social movements. We will also explore contemporary debates about the re-conceptualization of activism in the age of social media and the internet. Readings include texts from such canonical authors as Plato, Mary Wollstonecraft and Martin Luther King, as well as more contemporary works by Clay Shirky, Malcolm Gladwell and Alissa Quart. Questions that this class will examine include: what are the different ways in which activism has been defined, practiced and justified? To what degree do new forms of activism expand on or refuse more traditional forms of activism? How do social movements define, shape and challenge activists? What are some inherent problems within activist groups, and what are some of the challenges facing activists today?

FYSB BC1469 Liberation. 3 points.
Liberation can be defined as freedom from limits on thought or behavior. More specifically, it can be defined as setting someone (or oneself) free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression. This seminar examines political, philosophical, aesthetic, and theological traditions and movements for liberation, with an emphasis on collective liberation.

FYSB BC1546 Shapes and Shadows of Identity. 3 points.
A look at the elusive meaning of “black,” “white,” and other group identities in the United States and the forms—novel, literary essay, stand-up comedy, ethnography, performance, film, television, magazines, radio, memoir, sermon—through which such identities are depicted. Readings will include: Johnny Otis; upside you head; Upsky; Bomb the Suburbs; Nelson George, The Death of Rhythm and Blues; Mary Waters, Black Identities; James McBride, The Color of Water: A Black Man’s Tribute to His White Mother; Ann Douglas, Mongrel Manhattan; selected sermons and speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.

FYSB BC1572 Animals in Text and Society. 3 points.
Interdisciplinary examination of the intimate and fraught connections between animals and humans in literature, philosophy and culture. We will consider topics such as the historical constructions of species boundaries and of the multiple meanings and uses of animals in human life; animal and human identity; emotions evoked by animals; and conceptualizations of animals as colonized “others.” Readings include Aesop, Edward Albee, Angela Carter, John Coetzee, Geoffrey Chaucer, Gustave Flaubert, Jean LeFontaine, Marie de France, Michael Pollan, Ovid, selections from Genesis (in the Hebrew Bible), and Virginia Woolf.

FYSB BC1583 Global Literature: The Caribbean Diaspora. 3 points.
Historically, Caribbean cultures have been profoundly affected and shaped by the massive displacement and migration of their populations. In this course, we will examine how this condition of displacement is articulated in the writings of the Caribbean diaspora and how these literary representations of mobility, migration, and intercultural contact reflect current globalizing processes and discourses. Texts will be drawn from the Francophone, Anglophone, and Hispanic Caribbean diaspora. These include the novel The Mimic Men by the recent Nobel-Prize-winning Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul; the novel Lucy by the Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid; and short stories by Junot Diaz and Edwidge Danticat, writers of Dominican and Haitian descent respectively, the latter a Barnard graduate. These readings will be complemented by essays from critics such as Edouard Glissant, Stuart Hall, and James Clifford.
FYSB BC1597 Taboo and Transgression. 3 points.
This seminar explores taboo and transgression within a range of mythic, scientific, anthropological, psychoanalytical, feminist, and literary work. Topics include the treatment of the corpse during the Paleolithic, the centrality of the incest taboo in kinship studies, and the equation of secular modernity with the successive breaking of taboos.

FYSB BC1598 Building Utopia. 3 points.
Building Utopia examines the rich tradition of utopian thinking in literature, social philosophy, architecture, and the visual arts. Here, utopia is explored in its modern form: as a call to transform the world through human planning and ingenuity. Aside from a humanistic excursion on Thomas More’s pivotal novel Utopia (1516), the course centers on nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers whose often wild and idealistic imaginings profoundly affected the shape of the real world. We’ll read and explore the works of Charles Fourier, Edward Bellamy, the Italian Futurists, and Le Corbusier, among many others. The purpose of the course is to better understand the role that the utopian imagination has played in the construction of power.

FYSB BC1599 Tipping Points. 3 points.
The printing press helped pave the way for the scientific revolution and the invention of human rights. What will transpire in the digital age of artificial intelligence and globalization? This seminar questions whether intellectual, economic, technological, and ethical tipping points transform what it means to be human. Authors include Locke, Jefferson, Shelley, Freud, Rushdie, Ishiguro, McLuhan, Lyotard, and Offill.

FYSB BC1707 Confession. 3 points.
Not offered during 2019-20 academic year.
This seminar explores the notion of “confession” in many manifestations (autobiography, memoir, sacrament/ritual, political/judicial performance, public spectacle/confessional culture) and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (history, literature, psychoanalysis, theology, cultural studies). Readings include: Augustine, Confessions; Foucault, History of Sexuality; vol. 1; Ginzberg, The Cheese and the Worms; Dostoyevsky, Notes from Underground; Miranda v. Arizona; Gillian Slovo, Red Dust; Jackson, The Politics of Storytelling; Bauer, The Art of the Public Grovel; Cole, The Torture Memos; Asad, Genealogies of Religion; “The Lives of Others” (film; 2006, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck).

FYSB BC1709 Drama, Theatre, and Art. 0 points.
Not offered during 2019-20 academic year.
The seminar will explore multiple ways of perceiving the world through drama, theatre, and art. Beginning with Greek drama and Shakespeare, we will focus on 18th-20th century works that foreground aesthetics and metatheatricality, as well as individual agency and social change. We will investigate malleable categories such as realism, impressionism, and modernism. Performances, films, and museums will provide cross-disciplinary contexts. Authors include Euripides, William Shakespeare, George Farquhar, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Arthur Pinero, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Thornton Wilder, Tom Stoppard, Marie Irenes Fornes, and Yasmina Reza.

Reacting to the Past
In these seminars, students play complex historical role-playing games informed by classic texts. After an initial set-up phase, class sessions are run by students. These seminars are speaking- and writing-intensive, as students pursue their assigned roles’ objectives by convincing classmates of their views. Examples of games played in First-Year Seminar Reacting classes include: 1) The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 B.C. explores a pivotal moment following the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, when democrats sought to restore democracy while critics, including the supporters of Socrates, proposed alternatives. The key text is Plato’s Republic. 2) Confucianism and the Succession Crisis of the Wanli Emperor examines a dispute between Confucian purists and pragmatists within the Hanlin Academy, the highest echelon of the Ming bureaucracy, taking Analects of Confucius as the central text. 3) The Trial of Anne Hutchinson revisits a conflict that pitted Puritan dissenter Anne Hutchinson and her supporters against Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop and the orthodox ministers of New England. Students work with testimony from Hutchinson’s trial as well as the Bible and other texts. 4) Greenwich Village, 1913: Suffrage, Labor and the New Woman investigates the struggle between radical labor activists and woman suffragists for the hearts and minds of “Bohemians,” drawing on foundational works by Marx, Freud, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others.

FYSB BC1601 Reacting to the Past. 3 points.
In these seminars, students play complex historical role-playing games informed by classic texts. After an initial set-up phase, class sessions are run by students. These seminars are speaking- and writing-intensive, as students pursue their assigned roles’ objectives by convincing classmates of their views. Each seminar will work with three of the following four games: 1) The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 B.C. explores a pivotal moment following the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, when democrats sought to restore democracy while critics, including the supporters of Socrates, proposed alternatives. The key text is Plato’s Republic. 2) Confucianism and the Succession Crisis of the Wanli Emperor examines a dispute between Confucian purists and pragmatists within the Hanlin Academy, the highest echelon of the Ming bureaucracy, taking Analects of Confucius as the central text. 3) The Trial of Anne Hutchinson revisits a conflict that pitted Puritan dissenter Anne Hutchinson and her supporters against Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop and the orthodox ministers of New England. Students work with testimony from Hutchinson’s trial as well as the Bible and other texts. 4) Greenwich Village, 1913: Suffrage, Labor and the New Woman investigates the struggle between radical labor activists and woman suffragists for the hearts and minds of “Bohemians,” drawing on foundational works by Marx, Freud, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others.