

LITERATURE

Seminar

Dr. Steffen Wöll

AND

Utopian Futures in
American Literature

Summer 2026

CULTURE II

Mon 1-3pm @ MSG 320



AMERICAN
STUDIES
LEIPZIG



Moodle

Utopian Futures in American Literature

This seminar explores how American literature has imagined utopian futures and better worlds. Beginning with colonial and early national writings that framed the 'New World' as a space of possibility, we examine how these visions were entangled with dynamics of race, class, and gender.

From there, we follow alternative futures across the 19th and 20th centuries, including abolitionist imaginaries, Indigenous futurisms, feminist and queer utopias, and ecological visions that challenge human exceptionalism.

Throughout, we treat utopian thinking as a creative practice and an invitation to rethink community, technology, and morality. In the final weeks, we turn to present-day ecocriticism and the emerging solarpunk movement to consider how contemporary writers craft hopeful visions amid climate anxiety and structural inequality.

Literature and Culture II

Summer 2026

Monday 1–3pm
NSG 320

Seminar

Dr. Steffen Wöll

Moodle

Office Hour
Friday 4–5pm
via Zoom

OBJECTIVES

This seminar aims to:

- **Analyze** how American literature imagines utopian and future-oriented worlds across different historical periods and cultural contexts.
- **Assess** the political, ecological, and ethical implications of utopian thinking through close reading and relevant theoretical frameworks.
- **Develop** independent research by formulating questions, connecting texts and concepts, and presenting findings in written and oral formats.

REQUIREMENTS

To successfully complete this seminar, you are expected to:

- **attend class regularly (university policy applies)**
- **complete** the assigned readings and bring them to class
- **actively** participate in discussions and group work
- **complete** the *Prüfungsvorleistungen* (PVL)
- **complete** the final exam (*Prüfungsleistung*)

SEMINAR JOURNAL (PVL)

The **Seminar Journal** is a continuous reading and reflection task completed throughout the semester, designed to practice close reading, conceptual work, and analytical writing.

You must submit **5 journal entries** in total, each within one week after the session it addresses. You may choose freely which sessions you respond to. Each entry must follow **1 of the formats listed below**, and across your five entries you must cover at least **3 of the following formats**:

A. Key Concept

Describe one central concept from the week's readings. How does it shape your understanding of utopian thinking?

B. Close Reading

Focus on a concrete passage. How does it construct hope, critique, or an alternative future?

C. Critique

Identify a contradiction, blind spot, or problem within the text or its utopian logic. Why does it matter?

D. Comparison

Connect this week's reading to an earlier one. What changes in tone, structure, or vision?

E. Method / Perspective

Discuss how a theoretical lens (from this or other session, e.g., Indigenous futurism, ecofeminism, ecocriticism) has transformed your understanding of a certain text.

Overview Seminar Journal

- Submit via Moodle (PDF or text field)
- Around 300-400 words per journal entry
- Indicate your selected format
- Written by yourself, without AI assistance
- Graded on pass/fail basis
 - Pass requires: 5 entries, on time, serious engagement, at least 3 distinct formats
 - You may resubmit each entry once if the initial submission does not pass the PVL requirements

BA STUDENTS (MODULE LITERATURE AND CULTURE II)

- As explained above, the Seminar Journal will serve as your **Prüfungsvorleistungen** (PVL).
- In the module LC-II, you will prepare a project (= 10-minute **presentation** [33,3%] + a 10-page **essay** [66,6%]) in one of the two seminars you are attending. Both parts of the project must be completed, regardless of the individual grades. You will also take a written exam in the lecture. Your module grade is a composite grade of these two tasks (seminar project + lecture exam). Students will have to choose (within the limit of available slots) a seminar in which to prepare their project by **June 21**. To do so, write a brief email to the seminar instructor with your project idea. We recommend to start thinking about your projects early in the semester.
- Your presentation will be a digital audiovisual presentation, which can range from a PowerPoint presentation with slides and built-in audio recordings to a video that includes audio. It has to be uploaded to the Moodle course of the seminar in which you pursue your project by **July 12**. The essay is due by **August 23**. You will receive more guidelines for the projects in a separate document.

LEHRAMT STUDENTS (MODULE US POPULAR CULTURE AND AMERICAN LITERATURE)

- Your grade will be based on a **portfolio** consisting of your **Seminar Journal** and a final **reflection paper** (due **July 26**) of approximately 4-5 pages. The portfolio will allow you to hone your competences and skills in careful and critical reading, practical analysis, theoretical abstraction, and academic research.

- In order to pass the module, you have to **submit all parts** of the portfolio (i.e., 5 weekly reading responses per seminar + the reflection paper). Failing to do so will result in an incomplete exam.
- For your final portfolio submission, you should also again include your reading responses, and you may **revise** your responses as part of this final portfolio. (Feel free to take notes on potential revisions after our classes, so that you continuously work on your portfolio over the semester.)
- The **reflection paper** should briefly discuss and reflect on the most important aspects (specific topics, texts, theories, perspectives, issues, etc.) you learned throughout the seminar, going beyond your individual responses and the assigned readings. You should focus on combining things you learned in individual sessions and how they have helped you understand something about our overall seminar topic and the questions we've been raising throughout our discussions.
- You can choose yourself whether you want to write two separate sections for the two seminars (about 2-3 pages each) or combine them into one larger reflection (4-5 pages).

The seminar consists of a topical section from April 13 to June 22 and two consultation sessions meant to help you prepare your presentation and paper.

CODE OF CONDUCT

This seminar enforces the American Studies Leipzig Code of Conduct. Respectful academic and social engagement is expected at all times.

PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism means submitting the work of others as your own. While academic writing regularly builds on existing scholarship, using such work without proper citation constitutes fraud and can have serious consequences.

GENERATIVE AI

Generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini) can be useful for idea generation or initial research. However:

- Do not rely on AI-generated content without verification.
- Do not represent AI-produced text as your own writing.
- Cite and document any use of generative AI.

American Studies Leipzig uses tools that help detect plagiarism and AI-generated text.

SCHEDULE

1	Apr 13	Key Concepts: Utopias and Futures	<p>Be prepared to introduce yourself. Think about what you expect from this seminar.</p> <p>Ruth Levitas. <i>Utopia as Method</i>. 2013. Introduction</p> <p>Fredric Jameson. <i>Archaeologies of the Future</i>. 2005. Introduction & Ch. 1</p> <p>New York World's Fair Newsreel "World of Tomorrow." 1939.</p>
2	Apr 20	Imagining a 'New World'	<p>John Winthrop. "A Modell of Christian Charity." 1630.</p> <p>John Gast. <i>American Progress</i>. 1872.</p> <p>Selected maps of North America</p>
3	Apr 27	Utopias in Early American Writing	<p>Thomas Jefferson. <i>Notes on the State of Virginia</i>. 1785. Query XIV.</p> <p>Herman Melville. "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." 1855.</p>

4	May 4	Indigenous Critiques	<p>Chris Eyre, dir. <i>Smoke Signals</i>. 1998. [Screening: May 3, 8PM via Zoom]</p> <p>Gerald Vizenor. "Postindian Warriors." In <i>Manifest Manners</i>. 1999.</p>
5	May 11	Abolitionist Futures	<p>W.E.B. Du Bois. "The Comet." In <i>Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil</i>. 1920.</p> <p>Martin R. Delany, <i>Blake; or, The Huts of America</i>. 1859–1862. Ch. VII–IX, XXIII, XXIV, LXXIV</p>
6	May 18	Feminist and Queer Utopias	<p>Charlotte Perkins Gilman. <i>Herland</i>. 1915. Ch. 1–4</p> <p>Ursula K. Le Guin. "Coming of Age in Karhide." In <i>New Legends</i>. 1995.</p>
	May 25	No class (Pentecost)	

7	Jun 1	Progress — Automation — Social Engineering	<p>Edward Bellamy. <i>Looking Backward: 2000-1887</i>. 1888. Ch. I-V</p> <p>Langston Hughes. "Let America Be America Again." 1935.</p> <p>Charlie Chaplin, dir. <i>Modern Times</i>. 1936. Factory scene. Volume Warning!</p>
8	Jun 8	Bodies and Environments	<p>Octavia E. Butler. "Bloodchild." In <i>Bloodchild and Other Stories</i>. 1984.</p> <p>Rob Nixon. <i>Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor</i>. 2011. Introduction</p>
9	Jun 15	Dystopian Turns	<p>Cormac McCarthy. <i>The Road</i>. 2006. pp. 1-24; 86-110; 231-41</p> <p>You are encouraged to read the full novel, but only selected passages are required.</p>

10	Jun 22	Solarpunk: Theory, Aesthetics, Politics	<p>Various authors. "A Solarpunk Manifesto." 2014.</p> <p>Read two of the following:</p> <p>A) Daniel José Older. "Dust." <i>Sunvault</i>. 2017.</p> <p>B) T.X. Watson. "The Boston Hearth Project." <i>Sunvault</i>. 2017.</p> <p>C) Nisi Shawl. "The Colors of Money." <i>Sunvault</i>. 2017.</p>
11	Jun 29	Consultations	<u>No class</u>
12	Jul 6	Consultations	<u>No class.</u>
<p>BA Presentations due by <u>July 12</u>. Term Paper due by <u>August 23</u>. Lehramt Portfolio Reflections due by <u>July 26</u>.</p>			