Course Description
Since the founding of the United States, Americans have been profoundly ambivalent about cities. Thomas Jefferson famously wrote in 1785, “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God.” On the other hand, according to the Sage of Monticello, “The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body.” Yet from the beginning of colonization, Americans sought to transform the “wilderness” they confronted and to construct towns and cities. Witness Puritan Massachusetts Bay’s projection of its Bible Commonwealth as a “Citty upon a Hill.” The United States would develop substantial cities, of course, and despite the invocation of the Frontier and Nature as the critical forces in the American experience, these cities became engines of American economic development, vital centers of American social and cultural life, and places where dreams were made.

This course will study the American city, from the colonial period to the present, focusing particular attention on some great Americans cities, particularly New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Given the vastness of the subject, our study cannot be exhaustive; rather, it will look selectively, thematically, episodically at the American city, exploring urban America as a cultural site of phenomenal complexity. Like the city itself, our investigations will be diverse, necessitating a cross-disciplinary approach that is historical, geographic, cultural, literary, political, economic, sociological, and architectural.

Learning Objectives & Outcomes
By the end of the term, you should be able to:

- Understand and explain the growth and transformation of American cities
culturally and historically, and the fundamental impact of cities on the social, cultural, and economic life of the United States.

- Understand and explain American cities as physical and human “landscapes”—that is, as social and cultural as well as physical spaces.
- Understand and explain American cities as dynamic, culturally diverse, politically contested places.
- Critically engage and interpret diverse “primary” sources (historical, literary, artistic, architectural, sociological, journalistic, and visual), the basis for valid description, analysis, and interpretation of cities, cityscapes, and their denizens.
- Write short essays that present and develop your own argument or thesis, illustrated and supported by historical evidence.

Course Format & Requirements
This course will combine lecture with discussion, often weaving the two together to make class sessions interactive. Brief lectures will generally build upon, not simply recapitulate, readings. Students are responsible for completing reading assignments by the time indicated on the syllabus. These assignments will often provide the basis for class activity; students are expected to attend all class meetings and participate actively.

Note: because of the critical role of discussion in this course, excessive absence from class (more than 4 absences) will result in a failing grade. Grades will be assigned according to students’ performance on the following:

- Weekly Journal entries (see below) (50 percent)
- Final take-home examination/paper (25 percent).
- Quality of class participation (25 percent).

Academic integrity is important. I will hold all students to the UO “Standards of Conduct.” Plagiarism will not be tolerated; all work must be your own, written for this class.

Weekly Journals
Write a response to the assigned readings each week, beginning in week 2 and continuing through week 9 (8 entries total). These responses should be mini-essays, approximately 500-700 words in length, written in full, clear, and grammatical sentences (that is—not mere undigested notes). Responses must be uploaded each Tuesday by 8 a.m., in the “Journal” section of Blackboard.
If your entry/essay does a nice job of engaging and incorporating the readings into a thoughtful, analytical or interpretive discussion, you will get full credit. Responses may address the study questions provided, but they might also be framed by other relevant questions or themes of your own devising. Make sure to confront the primary sources, not merely the secondary commentary on, or the introductions to, assigned selections. Entries that are incomplete, ill considered, or fail to address the readings adequately will receive partial or no credit. Students who complete all the entries in ample fashion will earn full credit—that is, an A on this component of the course (50 percent of the total grade). Fewer acceptable entries will produce a lower grade according the following schedule: 7 = B+; 6 = C; 5 = D; 4 or fewer = F.

These journal entries are an opportunity to grapple with the readings, to synthesize and interpret them, to integrate them with other weeks’ readings, and to pose questions and issues that you might like to see discussed in class. Though they will not be graded formally, quality—not merely quantity—counts. I will comment on each week’s entry, offering feedback designed to allow you to gauge your approach and monitor your progress.

Reading
Readings include four required books, available at the University of Oregon Bookstore:


**Additional required readings, as outlined below, are available on Blackboard in Course Documents.**

Course Schedule
**Week 1: What is a city? What is an American city?**  [January 6 | 8]
1. Introduction
2. The urban idea and American ambivalence.
Questions to Consider: What makes a city a city? How have they fit into American life, historically? Why do Americans love or hate them?

Week 2: The colonial and early national city.  [January 13 | 15]


Questions to Consider: Why did New York grow phenomenally, relative to other great colonial cities? How and why did the texture of life there change? Consider Irving’s mythic description of New York in light of other assigned pieces—if Irving’s myth is not exactly true, what made it so engaging, popular, or useful in the 19th century and beyond? What does it tell New Yorkers about themselves and their city that they wanted to know or to believe as they rushed into the future?

Week 3: New York: Commerce and the Empire City.  [January 20 | 22]

1. Pastoral cities / The Empire City

Reading: Writing New York, 153-90 (Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener; A Story of Wall-Street”).

Questions to Consider: What do the assigned primary sources tell us about the impact of economic growth on New York City? Consider the transformed urban spaces of New York as well as the nature and social quality of city life produced by such developments, not just on the economy itself.
Week 4: City and Country: New York. [January 27 | 29]

1. New York at Mid-Century.

2. Late 19th-Century New York.
Reading: *Writing New York*, 278-93, 320-26, 347-54, 382-86 (Howells, Cahan, Plunkitt & Riordan, O. Henry).

Questions to Consider: New York in the 19th century was famously big, diverse, and tense—consider the meaning and impact (both positive and negative) of this size, diversity, and tension for the human denizens and citizens who live there. New York was, paradoxically, both successful and dysfunctional. What sorts of reform were proposed, and how did they fare? Why? It’s still astonishing that New York’s Central Park was ever built, setting aside 800 acres of some of the most expensive real estate in the world. How and why it was built? What was the park’s relationship to the New York?

Week 5: Chicago and the West. [February 3 | 5]

1. The city and country, and the West.

Reading: *Nature’s Metropolis*, either chapter 3 (97-147), or 4 (148-206), or 5 (207-259), as assigned in class.

Questions to Consider: William Cronon writes in *Nature’s Metropolis*, “City and country formed a single commercial system, a single process of rural settlement and metropolitan economic growth. To speak of one without the other made little sense” (47). Using Chicago as a case study and drawing on the particular chapter of you read, assess the essential connection between the city and the countryside. Why does Cronon subtitle his book, “Chicago and the Great West”? How did Chicago relate to the West, to the East, to both simultaneously?
Week 6: Chicago and New York: Migration, Immigration, and the Challenges of Modernity.  [February 10 | 12]

1. Ethnic and Working-Class Chicago.


Questions to Consider: What was the impact of migration and immigration on city life in Chicago? Compare ethnic and working-class life in the two great 19th-century metropolises: New York and Chicago. Compare and contrast the experiences of African Americans and other ethnic minorities in these cities.

Week 7: Modernism and the Metropolis. [February 17 | 19]

1. 20th-Century New York Modern.

2. Chicago as a work of art.

Questions to Consider: Assess the transformation of Chicago’s built landscape in the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries. How and why was Chicago transformed? Assess the impact or consequence. What was “modern” about modern New York and Chicago? What does “modern” mean, and how did these cities embody modernity or modernism?
Week 8: Myth and a City Born Modern: Los Angeles.  [February 24 | 26]

1. Early history of a city without history.


2. Los Angeles on the make.

Reading: Writing Los Angeles, 170-217 (Chandler); McWilliams, 113-37, 165-82 (“Years of the Boom,” “I’m a Stranger Here Myself”).

Questions to Consider: Compare the origin myth of Los Angeles with those of New York and Chicago. Assess LA’s connection to (or disconnection from) its physical or natural environs. How does the physical environment of Los Angeles figure in Chandler’s story, “Red Wind”? And why is the story—and others like it in the noir genre—so dark, even though it’s set in a place of “eternal sunshine”?

Week 9: Modern Los Angeles.  [March 3 | 5]

1. Los Angeles on the make.


Reading: Writing Los Angeles, 269-72, 320-35 (Reznikoff, McWilliams); McWilliams, 350-70 (“Slight Case of Cultural Confusion”).

Questions to Consider: Carey McWilliams has written that the history of Southern California “is the record of its eternal quest for water, and more water, and still more water.” Do you agree? How has water been essential in making and defining Los Angeles? Ironically, though LA has too little water, it seems unnaturally prone to mudslides, floods, and other “natural disasters.” Why and how natural are such natural disasters?

Many see climate as critical in explaining the origins and nature of Los Angeles. But McWilliams discounts it when he writes, “The volume and velocity of migration, rather than the fabled climate, account for most of the unique features of the region’s cultural landscape”(227). What’s McWilliams’s point? Do you agree? Why?
Week 10: Late Modern | Postmodern City: LA and New York.  [March 10 | 12]

1. Late Modern and Postmodern Landscapes of Los Angeles and New York.
   Reading: Writing New York, 802-807, 811-18, 841-50, 942-47, 995-1003, 1014-37

2. Conclusions?
   Reading: On Blackboard: excerpts from City Reader, 189-206, 470-74 (Soja, Davis, Webber).

Questions to Consider: New York and Los Angeles are often characterized by the following tourist line: “it’s a wonderful place, but I’d hate to live there.” What do you make of this love/hate assessment of these two extraordinary metropolises?

A social critic has written the following about Los Angeles: “Because of its size, fragmentation, diversity, and dynamism and its role as the epicenter of global image and fantasy, Los Angeles is often held out as the quintessential postmodern city.” Assess this characterization.

Edward Soja writes that “Los Angeles is peculiarly resistant to conventional description—it generates too many conflicting images, [it] . . . seems limitless and constantly in motion; it generates little more than illusionary stereotypes or self-serving caricatures.” Do you agree?

Take-Home Final Examination: Due Monday, March 16, 2014, 12:30 p.m.