

# "What is an American?" (1782–2024) Narratives and Counternarratives of an Imagined Nation

CALL FOR PAPERS

In a period of tumultuous changes like the ones brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise of far-right governments, racism, and international tensions caused by the war in Ukraine and Gaza, a great reckoning is happening in the Western cultural context, especially with regard to the Atlantic and Transatlantic world. No nation has undergone more rapid and sometimes contradictory transformations than the US, showing tensions between its foundational narratives and counternarratives rising from its too often neglected socio-cultural realities. Culturally embedded American ideals have always emphasized a single unifying narrative capable of synthesizing the plurality of voices on US soil. Michel-Guillaume Jean **de Crèvecoeur**'s musings in *Letters from an American farmer* (1782) about what constitutes an American can be considered one of the earliest contributions in a centuries-long debate that is as open as, ultimately, without resolution. In alignment with the discrepancy between the professed inclusivity of the American national project and the persistence of conditions of profound social injustice, the US has historically been represented in literature (and beyond) through an intricate web of **narratives** and **counternarratives**. Mainstream portrayals of the nation by the dominant group that view the American identity as exclusively available to white people – particularly men – with Anglo-Saxon ancestry project a monolithic narrative of the US. However, a myriad counternarratives of the country and its people articulated by minority groups have resisted, and often subverted, the mainstream portrayal of the nation, challenging idealized or normative standards of race, gender, and sexuality. Hence, the stability of enduring national narratives (in the form of **myths** or logos) is being questioned, revealing their flexibility and precariousness.

From **Benedict Anderson**'s (1983 [2006]) theory of imagined communities to **Lauren Berlant**'s (1991) notion of the subconscious form of 'national fantasy' and **David Suzuki**'s (2001; 2003) 'imaginary of hope', scholars have highlighted the central function of **imagination** and narrative in both manipulating and restoring history and, consequently, in both oppressing and liberating marginalized subjects whose future would otherwise be foreclosed. **Central to our call** is the idea that imagination and narratives play a combined, fundamental role in unthinking, (re)thinking and (re)building both the collective identity of a nation and the individual identity of its citizens – as well as, by exclusion, of its alien enemies.

Based on these premises, **we invite papers** that not only describe the great and small narratives of American history, but also suggest alternatives, speculate about their future, and/or include dimensions that have so far been ignored or actively excluded. **We seek contributions** that elaborate on the dichotomy between narrative and counternarrative, investigate the complementary and – at times – overlapping dimensions of **American dreams** and **nightmares**. We further look for papers that can assess and reevaluate the classic American narratives in light of historical shifts, new literary canons, and previously ignored perspectives through **transdisciplinary**, **transnational**, and **intersectional** lenses.

## Suggested Topics

- American myths (e.g., Melting Pot, Reconstruction, Virgin Land, Manifest Destiny...) and their status as dreams/nightmares
- American identity and the Great American Novel, the Canon and its revisions and exclusions
- American Dreams and nightmares in genre fiction (Gothic, noir, horror, ...)
- Utopias, dystopias, and speculative takes on the US
- Cancel culture, hate campaigns and witch hunts broadly understood, historical or fictional
- "Scares" and conspiracy theories
- Religion, doctrine, and religious cults
- Identity politics, real or perceived
- Revolutions, political and cultural
- Empire and the dream/nightmare of American expansion
- The role of media in shaping American identity
- The dimensions of identity, from the personal to the collective
- The tension between real, fake, and perceived American identity

The conference is organized by the AISNA Graduate Forum and welcomes contributions from **PhD students and Early Career Scholars**. It will be held fully in person at Centro Studi Americani, Via Michelangelo Caetani, 32, Roma (Italy).

There is no conference fee.

Those interested in presenting a contribution should submit a **300-word abstract and a bio by April 30th, 2024** to [aisnagraduatesforum@gmail.com](mailto:aisnagraduatesforum@gmail.com). Notification of acceptance will be sent by **May 30th**.