

By Way of Conclusion

Twenty-Five More Study Questions

1. Beside those American foundational myths that I have discussed in this book, many other US myths about individuals, groups, documents, buildings, and historical events could be identified. Give examples for each of those five categories, and describe their national, subnational, and/or transnational dimensions.
2. American sociologist Robert Bellah writes in *The Broken Covenant* (1975): “[W]hen we look closely at the beginning time of the American republic we find not a simple unitary myth of origin but a complex and richly textured mythical structure with many inner tensions” (4). Discuss this statement especially with regard to the “inner tensions” that Bellah refers to.
3. Identify the civil religious dimension of the myths discussed in this book, and relate it to the notions of a ‘national spirituality.’
4. American foundational mythology provides a meaningful past as well as future for the US nation. Compare the ways in which the myths discussed in this book conceptualize national pasts and/or futures.
5. Historian and geographer David Lowenthal reminds us in his book of the same title that “the past is a foreign country” to which we have only limited access. Discuss how the myths addressed in this book attempt to presentify this “foreign country,” and in how far these attempts succeed (or fail).
6. Contextualize and interpret the quotations by Gertrude Stein, Henry David Thoreau, and Studs Terkel with which this book opens, and relate them to the book’s overall analysis of foundational mythology.
7. In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams describes “dominant,” “residual,” and “emergent” forms of culture. Use these concepts to analyze the making, remaking and unmaking of US foundational mythology in general as well as one specific myth of your choosing in particular.

8. Discuss the following paragraph from Amy Kaplan's *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture* in the context of foundational mythological constructions of the US as both democracy and empire.

A key paradox informs the ideology of American exceptionalism: it defines America's radical difference from other nations as something that goes beyond the separateness and uniqueness of its own particular heritage and culture. Rather, its exceptional nature lies in its exemplary status as the apotheosis of the nation-form itself and as a model for the rest of the world. American exceptionalism is in part an argument for boundless expansion, where national particularism and international universalism converge. [...] If the fantasy of American imperialism aspires to a borderless world where it finds its own reflection everywhere, then the fruition of this dream shatters the coherence of national identity, as the boundaries that distinguish it from the outside world promise to collapse. (16)

9. In an editorial published in the February 17, 1941 issue of *Life*, *Time* magazine co-founder Henry Luce called the 20th century the "American Century." Contextualize this claim and discuss its implications. Also discuss 1898 and 2001 as possibly marking the beginning and the end of the 'American Century' in light of foundational American myths.
10. Relate the following definition of the American dream from James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* (1931) to notions of American exceptionalism and to the foundational myths discussed in this book.

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, also too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (317)

11. Many writers and critics have employed the metaphor of the American nightmare to counter the ideology of the American dream. Discuss for instance Henry Miller's essay collection *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945), the first chapter of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965, which is titled "Nightmare"), Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* (1965), or Adam Simon's film *American Nightmare* (2000). What kinds of grievances are articulated in these texts, and what exactly is it that they deem nightmarish about the US?

12. One of the most iconic manifestations of American exceptionalism is the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. For all its national symbolic capital, it is, in fact, a transnational symbol. Research its history, and analyze the following description in light of the statue's iconicity:

She sits like a great witch at the gate of the country, showing her alluring white face and hiding her crooked hands and feet under folds of her wide garments – constantly enticing thousands from far within, and tempting those who come from across the seas to go no farther. And all these become the victims of her caprice. Some she at once crushes beneath her cruel feet; others she condemns to a fate like that of galley slaves; a few she favors and fondles, riding them high on the bubbles of fortune; then with a sudden breath she blows the bubbles out and laughs mockingly as she watches them fall. (Johnson, *Autobiography* 65)

13. In this book, I have repeatedly discussed the foundational quality of artistic representations in and around the US Capitol. Among the rotunda paintings I have not discussed are William Powell's *Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto* and John Trumbull's paintings of the *Surrender of General Burgoyne* as well as the *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*. How do these three paintings fit (or do not fit) into the framework of a foundational mythology? Along similar lines, discuss the Frieze of American History (which is also to be found in the United States Capitol rotunda). What kind of mythic and "usable" past do the frieze's 19 scenes convey? Which scenes do you find conventional and expectable, which surprising?
14. At the age of 87, Robert Frost read his poem "The Gift Outright" (1942) at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy on January 20, 1961. For the occasion, it was requested that Frost change the "would" in the last line of his poem to "will" in order for it to end on a more optimistic note. Analyze the poem with regard to its references to US mythology, and research and discuss its performance at the presidential inauguration.

The land was ours before we were the land's.
 She was our land more than a hundred years
 Before we were her people. She was ours
 In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
 But we were England's, still colonials,
 Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
 Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
 Something we were withholding made us weak
 Until we found out that it was ourselves
 We were withholding from our land of living,

And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.

15. Memorial culture plays a major role in the foundational mythology of the US. Research and analyze one of the memorials on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. in light of the ‘myths that made America.’
16. Early Americanist scholars have been described collectively as the American studies *movement* (Wise, “‘Paradigm Dramas’” 294). What does this appellation imply? Characterize the differences between a movement and a discipline and relate them to the development of the field of American studies in the United States.
17. Browse the official website of the American Studies Association (ASA) and discuss the description of American studies as well as of the organization itself that are provided there (www.theasa.net). Also look at the list of past ASA presidents (www.theasa.net/about/page/past_presidents) and research the titles of their presidential addresses. How do they reflect the history and development of the field of American studies?
18. How can the notions of repetition and seriality be related to the processes through which the myths discussed in this book have been appropriated and re-appropriated time and again?
19. Discuss the connection between myth and narrative (or myth *as* narrative), and relate your discussion to the following excerpt from Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (1977):

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren’t just entertainment.
Don’t be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
All we have to fight off illness and death.
You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories. (2)

20. Outline how a counter-hegemonic, women-centered foundational US mythology would possibly look like.
21. Michael Novak famously referred to the American president as “priest,” “prophet,” and “king” (cf. *Choosing*). Discuss the role of the president in the American political system and in political culture as well as popular rep-

- resentations of the presidency (e.g. in Hollywood films and television series) in light of Novak's assessment.
22. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler analyzes the means and the results of the so-called "War on Terror" after 9/11 with regard to its media portrayal. How can this "War" (as it manifests itself in names such as Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib) be related to US-foundational mythology on the whole and/or to individual myths in particular?
 23. From architectural styles in the early republic (as evidenced by buildings and monuments on the National Mall) to contemporary mass cultural productions (*Gladiator* [2005], *Troy* [2004], *Rome* [2005-07]), US culture has appropriated classicist forms and themes and retold classicist (mythic) narratives. How do the references to ancient Greece and Rome time and again play out with regard to US foundational mythology?
 24. In the context of the so-called transnational American Studies, various perspectives have been introduced. Research and discuss the following: Hemispheric American Studies, Planetary American Studies, and Cosmic American Studies.
 25. How can we approach US foundational mythology from an intercultural and comparative perspective? Identify non-American national myths that are comparable to those of the US, and describe their (structural) similarities as well as (culturally specific) differences. How can we envision a foundational mythology or mythic repertoire with regard to other than national entities? Identify and discuss European myths.

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