

# Voices of America: Summer Reading Assignment

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**Synopsis:** Welcome to Voices of America. Our course is unique in that it is open enrollment to both Juniors and Seniors and our coursework centers on the language and perspectives of American voices.

American literature is the product of a diversity of peoples, regions, philosophies, and ways of life. Beyond the intrinsic pleasure and usefulness of knowing more about the history of this literature, a focus in American voices can benefit you in several ways. Our fields of critical investigation are wide-ranging. In addition to more traditionally defined areas of literature, our work addresses a variety of media and genres focusing on expression from across America in both literature and other source material (including print, sound, photography, and film) from the last 100 years. Selected from among a diverse group of authors for what they reflect and reveal about the evolving American experience and character, this wide range of selected texts and other sources will be used by students to develop and refine their close reading skills, writing and thinking critically about not only what we read but how it moves us and shapes our understanding of the world.

From the colloquial to the informal to the formal, this course examines the development of the writing voice and explores the stylistic and rhetorical choices writers make to communicate meaning and knowledge. As such, our own writing and reflections will be a range of styles and genres. Our reading and writing reflect 5 central tenants (The American Dream, Freedom, Integrity, Resistance and Revolution, and Diversity) Our mentor texts and sources reflect those five thematic topics but student choice will drive which subtopics our class focuses on as we proceed throughout the year. Ultimately, this course will offer students an opportunity to "experience" and appreciate where we come from and the rich tapestry that reflects all the Voices of America.

**Task:** Our first task this summer is to expose ourselves to a variety of voices that will help us uncover central themes of the American Identity. You will read all of the articles, speeches, poems, and short stories provided below, and you will be expected to watch at least TWO of the suggested documentaries. Most of the documentaries overlap between themes. You only need to watch two but in your note taking, identify which thematic topics are addressed in the film. Upon our return in the fall, the expectation is that you will be able to create a reflection on what you hope to discover or learn in this course. Your reflection should include evidence from the selected texts and the chosen documentary and highlight specific aspects of each topic you may want to further explore. You will also be expected to submit your [notes](#) on the sources.

\*\*Evidence gathering while reading and watching can be annoying due to the interruptions it causes. Have a pack of sticky notes with you and any time you have a strong reaction - any time you are moved, angry, impressed, disgusted, etc., that's likely great to analyze. So just put the sticky note there and keep reading, but when you are done go back and determine which of those noted areas you want to write about. After you have finished reading and gone back over those noted areas, put your

best examples in the charts I provide. You can also do this note-taking style when viewing the documentary. As you are watching, I suggest you take down the timestamp of powerful scenes or quotes so you can get back to that quickly. It's like the sticky note version of videos. An organizer for your notes can be found [here](#).

**Audience:** Your peers, myself, and you!

**Purpose:** The goal of this assignment is to introduce you to some of the larger ideas we will be discussing but also gain insight into areas you and your peers may be interested in exploring. Our focus is on learning. I want you to drive that. And the only way to begin is to start exploring what you are interested in. Listen to the varied voices and topics expressed in the material and start thinking about what ideas and questions you want to think about.

## Sources for Reflection:

[What is an American? by J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur](#)

[I Hear America Singing by Walt Whitman](#)

[Let America Be America Again by Langston Hughes](#)

[What is an American? By Edward L. Hudgins](#)

[Indispensable Opposition](#)

[President Barack Obama's First Inaugural Address](#)

[America in 3 words by Facing History](#)

[The Collapse of the American Identity by Robert P. Jones](#)

[End of American Exceptionalism \(2014\)](#)

[President Donald Trump's Inaugural Address](#)

[End of American Exceptionalism \(2020\)](#)

[Hymn of Optimism and Countercultural Anthem of Resistance and Resilience](#)

[What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?](#)

# Documentaries

\*Documentaries should all be available on Netflix. Please contact me with concerns about access and availability.

## **Thematic Topics:**

**The American Dream**

**Freedom**

**Resistance and Revolution**

**Integrity**

**Diversity**

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\*\* All options have been carefully reviewed and evaluated by the teacher and are determined to meet identified learning objectives. Each film follows unique topics and can contain potentially mature themes. Academically, this serves to create a rich tapestry of perspectives and voices you may not traditionally hear in your daily lives. However, you are presented with options and have the ability to choose others, so please do not hesitate to discover other additional sources to use in your future reflection. Please discuss it with me, and if approved, then cite them in your notes and reflection piece.

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## **Option: American Factory**

In post-industrial Ohio, a Chinese billionaire opens a factory in an abandoned General Motors plant, hiring two thousand Americans. Early days of hope and optimism give way to setbacks as high-tech China clashes with working-class America.

The filmmakers implemented a fly-on-the-wall documentary filmmaking approach, in which no dialogue external to the subjects of the film is included, and the sounds of the factory and the dialogue of the workers is prioritized. In order to make focal such an audio/visual approach, the filmmakers implemented the use of lavalier microphones to effectively balance worker dialogue amid noise emanating from the factory's machinery. The voice-over narration provided by the factory workers was often recorded at their respective homes, independently from the factory setting. According to Bogner, implementing the film's narration in this way creates an effect of depicting a worker's inner monologue.

## **Option: We, The Marines**

*We, The Marines* is an action-packed adventure into the unparalleled experience of becoming a member of the U.S. Marine Corps. Narrated by former marine and actor, Gene Hackman, the film offers an unforgettable glimpse into the first-hand experiences of America's "first responders" and what it takes to become the men and women who honor and defend our country.

A 40-minute journey from boot camp to the Corps' most rigorous and dynamic training locations, the film is shot almost entirely digitally, the film is visually sumptuous and constantly entertaining, with wide vistas and up-close views of the dirt, sweat, and tears that go into the making of a Marine.

### Option: Flint Town: Episode 7 "Two Worlds"

*Flint Town* is an eight-episode American documentary television series. The documentary focuses on thoughts and conflicted emotions of the men and women serving to protect urban areas of Flint, Michigan (unofficially nicknamed "Flint Town") struggling with poverty, crime, financially strapped public services and the Flint water crisis. The department captured on-screen is down from 300 cops to 98 for 100,000 people, the lowest number out of comparably sized cities. Over the course of the episodes, the police faced a crucial millage vote and a city government wrangling over funding.

It's ultimately less of a "portrait of a city" documentary than a *Cops*-style look at the particulars of police work that just happens to be set in Flint, with artier, more atmospheric filmmaking (lot of tight, abstracted close-ups of objects illuminated by flashing red-and-blue lights), a much more frank assessment of how race and class issues affect community relations, and the kinds of glimpses of the officers' home lives that the Fox series abandoned early in its run. For the most part, *Flint Town* considers these issues in a universalizing way that could apply to any police department in any city with a diverse population. **In episode 7**, Election Day 2016 arrives. As officers await the results, it's business as usual on the streets. President Elect Trump's win exposes divisions in the department.

### Option: The Rachel Divide

The film is a mix of observational and interview-style documentary styles. The observational documentary attempts to provide a faithful record of some activity, as a fly-on-the-wall, with little or no narration or music. Observational documentary attempts to show the thing-as-it-is. An Interview film is a record of a conversation, discussion or interview of one or more subjects. While this could be considered a type of performance film, the content is delivered directly to the interviewer and not through the medium of music/drama/dance.

Dolezal's troubles in her professional life began when journalists in the Spokane, Washington area received tips by her brother, Joshua Dolezal, that she was hiding a secret. As her background was further investigated, her secret was revealed: Dolezal was born white, with blonde hair and blue eyes, not African American as she claimed. President of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People \(NAACP\)](#) chapter in [Spokane, Washington](#) from February 7, 2014 until June 15, 2015 when she resigned, Dolezal left amid suspicion she had lied about [hate crimes](#) that had been committed against her. Following these reports, Dolezal's parents, Ruthanne and Larry Dolezal, stated publicly that their daughter Dolezal was not Black but a [white woman passing for black](#). The documentary explores what led up to Dolezal's fall from being a respected university instructor and activist, the circumstances surrounding it, and the aftermath of the scandal.

### Option: Crip Camp: The Disability Revolution

In the early 1970s, teenagers with disabilities faced a future shaped by isolation, discrimination and institutionalization. Camp Jened, a ramshackle camp "for the handicapped" in the Catskills, exploded those confines. Jened was their freewheeling Utopia, a place with summertime sports, smoking and makeout sessions awaiting everyone, and campers felt fulfilled as human beings. Their bonds endured as they migrated West to Berkeley, California -- a promised land for a growing and diverse disability community -- where friends from Camp Jened realized that disruption and unity might secure life-changing accessibility for millions. A participatory documentary told from the point of view of former camper Jim LeBrecht, LeBrecht and his wife trace the journeys of campers up to the present day, in this compelling and untold story of a powerful journey towards inclusion.

### **Option: Woodstock: THREE DAYS THAT DEFINED A GENERATION.**

In August 1969, nearly half a million people gathered at a farm in upstate New York to hear music. What happened over the next three days, however, was far more than a concert. It would become a legendary event, one that would define a generation and mark the end of one of the most turbulent decades in modern history. Occurring just weeks after an American set foot on the moon, the Woodstock music festival took place against a backdrop of a nation in conflict over sexual politics, civil rights and the Vietnam War. A sense of an America in transition—a handoff of the country between generations with far different values and ideals—was tangibly present at what promoters billed as "An Aquarian Exposition: 3 Days of Peace and Music."

*Woodstock* turns the lens back at the audience, at the swarming, impromptu city that grew up overnight on a few acres of farmland. What took place in that teeming mass of humanity – the rain-soaked, starving, tripping, half-a-million strong throng of young people – was nothing less than a miracle of teamwork, a manifestation of the "peace and love" the festival had touted and validation of the counter-cultures promise to the world. Who were these kids? What experiences and stories did they carry with them to Bethel, New York that weekend, and how were they changed by three days in the muck and mire of Yasgur's farm?

### **Option: A Secret Love**

"A Secret Love" is several stories in one, each of them worthwhile. The Netflix documentary ostensibly focuses on the decades-long relationship between two women, Terry Donahue and Pat Henschel, who -- having met not long after World War II -- hid the truth from their families. Yet while the love story looks back at that history, it's also a poignant account of what to do with loved ones as they grow older, infirm and in need of care.

That's the territory Chris Bolan mines in his heartfelt documentary *A Secret Love*, streaming on Netflix, the story of Terry Donahue and Pat Henschel, who met and fell in love in 1947, though it would be more than 60 years before they felt they could come out to their families. In that time, they lived full and happy lives, working for the same interior-design company in Chicago and building a home in the house they owned together. In 2009, they cautiously revealed the nature of their relationship to Terry's niece, Diana Bolan. She seemed more relieved than surprised, telling them, "Now you can tell your story."

### **Option: Becoming**

The warm, down-to-Earth accessibility that statement implies is certainly on display throughout the film from director Nadia Hallgren, the first feature from the cinematographer who's worked with Obama before. First Lady Obama is enormously charismatic and a gifted storyteller, expertly hitting the same beats and sparking the same laughter again and again. The mixed documentary style of interview, expository, and observational allows Hallgren to interweave archival photos and footage of a young Michelle Robinson, behind-the-scenes moments of Obama joking around with her mom and big brother and interviews with members of the former first lady's trusted inner circle: her chief of staff, her stylist and the head of her Secret Service detail. All provide affectionate anecdotes.