

ENGL 2530: Ethnic Literature

Syllabus

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"I think there's something really painful about your identity being entirely composed of ghosts. For me, I didn't want to be this kid whose Dominicanness was something caught utterly in the past, is an abstraction, the thing that I write about. Instead I wanted it to be, first and foremost, a thing that I lived." ~Junot Diaz

This class will focus on storytelling (in a variety of genres) as a way ethnic American authors have negotiated between worlds, allowing them to construct an identity both within and outside dominant American culture.

We will use the **essays** of N. Scott Momaday (*Man Made of Words*) as a lens through which to examine what Momaday calls the Native Americans' "unique investment in the American landscape" and the "deep and unconditional belief in the efficacy of language."

We will use the documentary **theatre** of Anna Deavere Smith (*Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*) to consider challenges to "break[ing] the silence about race" on the path to redefining American identities and Smith's call for race dialogue that "desperately needs [a] more complex language."

We will use the **short stories** of Jhumpa Lahiri (*The Interpreter of Maladies*) to investigate immigrant experiences and the effects of balancing expectations from a traditional culture against the realities of contemporary American culture.

We will use a short **novel** by Helena Maria Viramontes (*Under the Feet of Jesus*) to explore migrant worker conditions and the hopes that fuel the struggle against poverty and powerlessness.

We will use **poetry** of many ethnic-identified writers (including Lucille Clifton, Li-Young Lee, Sherman Alexie, Willie Perdomo, and Pat Mora) to imagine how language ties us to our pasts and helps create our futures.

STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS AND PROJECTS:

Personal Narrative/Mythology/History Illustrated Project (10%).

Students will create a project consisting of three parallel prose sections and an illustration after Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Projects will contain an episode from a story from their personal past, the natural history of the site of that story, a related myth or handed-down story, and an illustration that captures the essence of this episode in their life.

Critical Reading Journal/Discussion. (20%/10%)

Students will regularly write reading responses based on specific reading strategies and/or guiding questions. The Journal will serve to generate more thoughtful and invested responses in class discussion.

Critical Review. (10%)

Students will attend a local performance of documentary theatre (*Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years* at OCP) and write a review applying their understanding of class topics to the play.

Novel Presentation (preferably a group project, depending on enrollment). (20%)

Students will select one of the four novels from the following (tentative) list:

Beloved – Toni Morrison
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao – Junot Díaz
Ceremony – Leslie Marmon Silko
Typical American – Jen Gish

Students will study their novel (with class partners) outside of class. Each group will present a Power Point or comparable presentation to the class to review the book and highlight features relevant to our course.

Exam. (30%)

Students will identify passages from assigned readings and explain thematic significance of each passage.