

English 33082-001: Ethnic Literature of the United States

Professor Martha Cutter
Satterfield 205C (672-2802)

Offices Hours: Tues., Thurs. 12:00-1:30 & By Appointment

Voices of An(other): Ethnicity and the American Experience

Focusing on a wide range of ethnicities and fictional genres, this course will investigate the role of race in the American experience. How are ethnic peoples construed as alien "others" by American culture? How do they resist this othering? These questions will be examined in terms of four cultural/historical issues which are of recurring interest to particular "minority" groups in America: Slavery (African American Writing), The Land (Native American Fiction), Being "American" (Asian American Writing) and Memory (Mexican American Literature).

Particular attention will be paid throughout this course to whether language and writing allow ethnic writers to construct a self which resists discrimination. Authors from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds recognize the importance of gaining control of spoken and written language. And yet, literacy is also a problematic attainment, for ethnic writers find that to become literate in the "white man's tongue" is to become part of an abusive and coercive system of power. Throughout the semester we will be sensitive both to how these authors manipulate language, but also to how they may seek an alternative language which allows them to reconcile their own cultural values and needs with the dominant society.

I. Readings (Available for purchase at the bookstore)

Frederick Douglass, <i>Narrative of the Life...</i>	Cynthia Kadohata, <i>The Floating World</i>
Toni Morrison, <i>Beloved</i>	Gish Jen, <i>Typical American</i>
Zitkala-Sa, <i>American Indian Stories</i>	Sandra Cisneros, <i>The House on Mango Street</i>
Susan Power, <i>The Grass Dancer</i>	Gary Soto, <i>Living Up the Street</i>
John Okada, <i>No-No Boy</i>	

Please note: All books for this course are also available on 2-hour reserve at the library.

Additional Readings (on reserve at the library): Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House"; Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (excerpts); Amy Ling, "A Perspective on Chinamerican Literature"

II. Schedule

Unit One: Slavery and Freedom in African American Writing

Jan 21: Introduction to the Course; Course Policies and Requirements

Jan 23: "I Rose and Found My Voice": Introduction to the Slave Narrative

Reading: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of...* (pp. v-58)

Jan 28: Manipulating Authority and Marshalling Language: Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*

Reading: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative* (pp. 59-126)

Jan 30: The Slave Narrative as a Literary Genre: Douglass v. Morrison

Reading: Morrison, *Beloved* (pp. 1-105)

Feb 4: Unspeakable Thoughts Unspoken: *Beloved* and the Ghosts of Slavery

Reading: Morrison, *Beloved* (pp. 105-199)

Feb 6: "This is not a Story to Pass On": Language and Storytelling in *Beloved*

Reading: Morrison, *Beloved* (pp. 199-275); Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (on reserve at the library)

Feb 11: Slavery and the Literary Imagination (Unit Conclusion)

Unit Two: Dispossessed: Native American Perceptions of the Loss of the Land

Feb 13: No Class--Instructor's prior commitment

Feb 18: Introduction to Native American Fiction

Reading: Zitkala-Sa, "Impressions of an Indian Girlhood," "The School Days of an Indian Girl," "An Indian Teacher Among Indians" (pp.7-99)

Feb 20: Disillusionment with the White Man's Ways and Tongues

Reading: Zitkala-Sa, "A Warrior's Daughter," "A Dream of Her Grandfather" (pp. 137-158)

Feb 25: Possession, Dispossession, and Repossession of the Land

Reading: Susan Power, *The Grass Dancer* (pp.3-122)

Feb 27: Repetition with a Difference

Reading: Power, *The Grass Dancer* (pp. 125-236)

Mar 4: Recovering Ritual and Language

Reading: Power, *The Grass Dancer* (pp.239-333)

Mar 6: The Value of Ceremony (Unit Conclusion)

Unit Three: What is an "American"?: Asian American Experiences in the U.S.

Mar 11: Introduction to Asian American Literature

Reading: Gish Jen, *Typical American* (pp.1-96)

Mar 13: What is an "American"?

Reading: Jen, *Typical American* (pp.97-194)

Mar 18: Assimilation and Ethnic Identity

Reading: Jen, *Typical American*(pp.195-296)

Mar 20: Conclusion: Jen's *Typical American*

Mar. 25-27: No Class: Spring Break

Apr 1: The Meaning of "American" History

Reading: John Okada, *No-No Boy* (pp. vii-101)

Apr 3: Rethinking American Myths

Reading, John Okada, *No-No Boy* (pp. 103-171)

Apr 8: The Elusive Gleam of Hope

Reading: John Okada, *No-No Boy* (pp. 173-251)

Apr 10: Displacement: The Geography of Asian American Identities

Reading: Cynthia Kadohata, *The Floating World* (pp.1-86)

Apr 15: America and the Meaning of "Home"

Kadohata, *The Floating World* (pp.87-151)

Apr. 17: Seeking the Heart of America (Unit Conclusion)

Unit Four: Memory and "Rememory" in Mexican American Writing

Apr 22: The form and style of memory

Reading: Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (pp. 1-66)

Apr 24: Memory and the Writing of the Past

Reading: Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (pp. 67-110)

Apr 29: The Styles of Memory: Soto v. Cisneros

Reading: Gary Soto, *Living Up the Street* (1-75)

May 1: TV, Sports, Violence!

Reading: Soto, *Living Up the Street* (pp. 102-167)

May 6: Ethnic Identity and Americanness in *Living up the Street*

May 8: Course Conclusion: Is there such a thing as "minority" literature?

III. Course Policies and Requirements:

A) Class Participation (10%). This class will be centered on discussion of texts by students, and as such it necessitates that all students participate on a regular basis. Class participation is a requirement for successful completion of this course. If you don't like to talk in class, you should consider switching to another class. I

will also call on members of the class who don't seem to be getting the chance to state their point of view. Also, I will insist that you bring to class the book(s) we are discussing.

- B) A Critical Reading Notebook (30%).** While reading the books for this class, you should keep a critical reading notebook, and you must use the kind of notebook designated by your instructor. In this notebook, you should write down: 1) the page numbers of important thematic passages, with some commentary as to why these passages are important; 2) interesting stylistic techniques the writers use; 3) questions you had while reading the book, as well as questions for class discussion; 4) ideas about how this book connects to others we've read; 5) any other useful information that occurs to you while you are reading. Taking notes while you read will help you remember the books better for class discussion, and also encourage you to read more actively and think critically while reading. I will be collecting these notebooks at random unstated intervals; therefore, you should always bring them to class with you, and you should always have notes about the current reading assignment. I know that this part of the class-work is time-consuming, but keeping up with your journal ensures that you are prepared for class discussion and that our conversations will be lively and informed.
- C) A Paper (10-12 pages) (35%) (due April 17) (typed or word-processed).** This paper will include some research into historical or cultural contexts of the literary works we are reading. The instructor will give students a list of topics to choose from, and students may also (after consultation with the instructor) devise a topic of their own. Some of these papers may be xeroxed by the instructor and distributed to the class in preparation for the final exam.
- D) A Final Exam (Identification passages and Essay Questions) (May 16) (25%)** This final exam will ask you to identify passages from the texts we have read by author and work, and then to briefly state the thematic significance of the passage. There will also be one or more essay questions.
- E) Attendance is mandatory in this class.** If you miss more than three classes, your GPA will drop one third of a grade; for every subsequent absence after this your GPA will continue to drop a third of a grade. More than six absences will mean that you cannot receive credit for the course. I also expect students to come to class on time; if you are more than ten minutes late this will count as an absence.
- F) Quizzes.** If I do not feel that people are keeping up with the reading, I will conduct unannounced or announced reading quizzes. Should you receive three "F"s on these quizzes you will fail my course. Failure to take a quiz will also count as an "F."

Questions for Discussion: Frederick Douglass'
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

- 1) How does Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* compare with other autobiographies you've read? What kind of materials does Douglass include which are not usually present in an autobiography? Why does he include these materials? What information does he exclude? Why does he exclude this information?
- 2) One way of defining autobiography is that it is a "reflective reshaping of events." Does Douglass seem to be reflectively reshaping events? What are the tensions between this definition of autobiography and the political goals of the slave narrative?
- 3) What kind of identity does Douglass shape for himself in this narrative? Where do you see him shaping his identity most explicitly?
- 4) Consider the full title of this work: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. Why is this title so long? What elements of the title seem most important to you? How many times does Douglass himself appear in the title? How do you interpret this title?
- 5) Why do you suppose Douglass includes so little description of his relationship to his family? Why does he downplay his personal life (such as his marriage to his wife) so much? What aesthetic or political purpose might this serve?
- 6) Does Douglass' *Narrative* seem to fulfill the elements of the slave narrative, as described in the handout? What kinds of innovations in the genre of the slave narrative does Douglass make?
- 7) Does language help Douglass shape his identity? Why or why not?
- 8) What are the limitations of language? What can't it describe?
- 9) In a society where slavery is legal and slaves are considered "subhuman," who controls language? Can control of language be gained by a "minority" writer? How?

- 10) Does Douglass criticize the law? What is the nature of his critique?
- 11) What is Douglass' attitudes towards religion? Does he shape an identity for himself which involves a spiritual component?
- 12) What purpose does Douglass' appendix serve? Does this appendix seem fragmented to you? How many voices do we hear in it? Does this seem like an unusual ending? Why does Douglass choose to end his text this way?