

Graduate Liberal Studies. HUMS 641, Multiethnic Literatures of the U.S.
Professor Indira Karamcheti, Spring 2009

Literatures produced by the many ethnic and racial minorities of the United States ask readers to consider some of the most volatile of contemporary issues: immigration, cultural “rights” and assimilation, national identity, gender, youth and age, popular as opposed to high cultures. What is the role of history, and of the immigrant’s past, in the United States? What do we mean when we say that we are a nation of immigrants? What does “race” mean in a country that espouses the myth of the “melting pot”? How do we balance cultural traditions with the need to adapt to the host country? Can we achieve a sense of a unified national identity while respecting cultural differences? How do race and culture interact with the formation of masculine and feminine identities? What are the relationships among the older and younger generations in ethnic communities? How do minority communities negotiate relationship with other minority communities, as well as with the dominant culture?

Central to our study is the role of literature both as mirror and as lamp: as a reflection of our nation, illuminating corners that might otherwise be invisible, and as a light that half-creates what it illuminates. Thus, a major premise of the course is that literature plays a significant role in shaping our cultural beliefs and identities. We will discuss one selected novel from each of the major minority ethnic groups in the United States: African American, Latina/o, Asian, and Native American, as well as some selected shorter texts and critical articles.

The following texts have been ordered from Broad Street Books:

Required

Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*, Vintage

Sherman Alexie, *Flight*, Black Cat

Junot Diaz, *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Riverhead

Gish Jen, *Typical American*, Vintage

Robert A. Lee, *Multicultural American Literature*, U. of Mississippi

Optional: I will post selections from some of the following anthologies on Blackboard; you are free to purchase the following if you wish but are not required to.

Lauro Flores, ed., *The Floating Borderlands*, U. of Washington Press

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, ed., *Asian-American Literature: An Anthology*, McGraw-Hill

John Purdy and James Ruppert, eds., *Nothing But the Truth*, Prentice Hall

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie McKay, eds. *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Norton

Blackboard: all members of the class are enrolled in the Blackboard site for the class, which is accessed from your electronic portfolio on the Wesleyan site. You will find here all supplemental readings, both primary texts as well as critical articles for discussion, and class assignments (essay and response topics).

If you are not familiar with Blackboard, please let me know immediately. There is some training available. If you would prefer to have hard copy, again, please let me know as soon as you can.

Requirements: As this is an immersion course, meeting for five meetings over one Friday and two weekends, attendance is necessary. If you must be away for any portion of our meetings, please let me know immediately, and we will make some arrangements to make up for the missed time. While I will lecture as needed, the course is primarily designed as a seminar; thus, most of the work will be accomplished through class discussion. A response of between one and two pages will be written on three of the novels for the course, and two essays of between four and five pages. A final project or essay of about ten pages will serve as the culmination of the course.

Syllabus

- Friday, January 17: *Tar Baby*
Essay # 1 due
- Saturday, Jan. 18: *Flight*
Response # 1 due
- Sunday, Jan. 19: *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*
Response # 2 due
- Saturday, Jan. 31: *Typical American*
Essay # 2 due
- Sunday, Feb. 1: Response # 3 due
Conclusions