

ENG 6800 Racial Landscapes in American Literature & Culture

Spring 2013

Jolie Sheffer

This course focuses on contemporary American literature that interrogates the relationship between race and space, identity and landscape. In American literature, race and ethnicity are not merely descriptive terms, they are lived conditions. To be a raced or ethnic subject is to live in a different America, sometimes a physically segregated one, sometimes a metaphoric one. The texts we study in this course portray the geography of race and ethnicity in a variety of innovative, illuminating ways. America can be a promised land, a prison, a home, a hotel, an elevator shaft, or a wilderness, among other things.

Additional texts may include novels by Octavia Butler, Philip Roth; short stories by Barry Lopez and Grace Paley; plays by Anna Deavere Smith and Tony Kushner; and critical theoretical essays by George Chauncey, Elizabeth Cohen, Rachel Lee, and others.

Primary Readings:

Bruce Norris, *Clybourne Park*

Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*

Karen Tei Yamashita, *I Hotel*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues*

Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*

Jessica Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*

Junot Diaz, *Drown*

Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*

Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*

NOTE: Additional Readings indicated with an * can be found on Canvas.

ASSIGNMENTS:

1) Teaching Presentation

Each student will **co-lead discussion** with another student once during the semester.

These are teaching presentations, which means that you and your partner will be responsible for making a lesson plan and leading discussion. Be prepared to ask discussion questions, clarify difficult points, connect the articles to the primary texts, etc. When you are discussion leader, you will *not* post a reading response to Canvas; instead, you will submit a copy of your lesson plan to me by Sunday at 5 pm prior to our class meeting.

2) Reading and Film Responses

Six times throughout the semester you will submit a thoughtful, critical response (250-500 words) to the week's readings on Canvas; you should *not* submit during a week you

are giving a teaching presentation. Responses must be submitted by 5 pm on Sunday, in advance of our Monday class meeting. In addition, you are expected to read your classmates' responses in advance of our meetings. These responses should exhibit strong close reading skills and should offer thoughtful analysis of a key idea and/or literary trope in that week's reading. This is an opportunity to make observations about, ask questions about, and begin to craft your own interpretations of the work(s). You may certainly post extra responses to improve your score, and/or to help you to articulate your observations about the reading.

3) Short essay

Midway through the semester, you will submit a short essay (1200-1500 words) to me via Canvas. This essay may be an extension and elaboration of an idea first developed in a reading response or as part of your teaching presentation. This is an opportunity to more fully develop your ideas about a given text, and to craft a concise argument about its depiction of race and space. See note below about the format for the essays.

4) Final Essay

Every student will submit a final essay (3,000-4,000 words; 15 pages maximum) on a topic of your choosing relating to the themes and concerns developed in the course. You may write about a text we did not read for class, but you must run all ideas by me ahead of time. You must include at least three new secondary sources. **Every student must see me in office hours before April 5th to finalize your paper topic.**

A WORD ABOUT ESSAYS

Each essay should have an introduction and conclusion, and should articulate and sustain an argument over the length of the essay. Each essay should provide an analytical close reading of a text, craft an argument about its meaning and significance, and exhibit strong writing skills. Give careful attention to your analysis, organization, transitions between paragraphs, grammar, and citations. Please format in Times New Roman, 12-point, double-spaced, with one-inch margins and MLA-style in-text citation and works cited list.

Creative options are allowed and encouraged. See me for suggestions or to propose your own idea for an alternative topic or non-traditional format (creative writing, short film, performance, etc.).

5) Participation

This is a discussion-based class that requires your ACTIVE participation. I will primarily serve as a discussion moderator, not as lecturer. It is your responsibility to come to class with questions about the texts, as well as interpretations (from the tentative to the well-formulated), and to engage in active discussions. Thus, each class member is responsible for the direction of the conversation in class, for keeping it lively, and for coming to class prepared. You should be prepared to share ideas, to engage with your classmates' ideas, and to disagree productively and respectfully. Our goal is to investigate these fascinating texts from a variety of angles. You are allowed one absence without penalty. Each additional absence will drop your final grade by 5 percentage points (from a 90 to an 85,

for example). Because this is a small class, every person should speak multiple times at every class period.

CALCULATING GRADES

Teaching Presentation	15%
Weekly Reading and/or Film Responses	20%
Short essay	20%
Final Essay	30%
Participation	15%

COMPLETE SCHEDULE:

URBAN LANDSCAPES

- January 7 Film: *Candyman*
Aviva Briefel and Sianne Ngai, “‘How Much Did You Pay for this Place?’: Fear, Entitlement, and Urban Space in Bernard Rose's *Candyman*”^{*}
Elvin Wyly et al., “New Racial Meanings of Housing in America”^{*}
William Gleason, introduction to *Sites Unseen*^{*}
Ian Grandison, “Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America”^{*}
- January 14 Bruce Norris, *Clybourne Park*
Information on housing law in 1950s and on gentrification (from program)^{*}
Kristin Matthews, “The Politics of 'Home' in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*”^{*}
- January 21 **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day**
- January 28 Karen Tei Yamashita, *I Hotel* (through page 369)
- February 4 Karen Tei Yamashita, *I Hotel* (finish book)
David Palumbo-Liu, “Embedded Lives: The House of Fiction, the House of History”^{*}
- February 11 Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*
Betsy Huang, “Citizen Kwang: Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and the Politics of Consent”^{*}

RURAL LANDSCAPES

- February 18 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*
Sandy Alexandre, “From the Same Tree: Gender and Shared Iconography in Representations of Violence in *Beloved*”^{*}

February 25 Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues*
Philip Deloria, "Geronimo's Cadillac"*

SUNDAY, MARCH 3: SHORT ESSAY due by 5 pm via Canvas.

March 4 Spring Break

SUBURBAN LANDSCAPES

March 11 Terrance Hayes, *Wind in a Box*
Gaston Bachelard, selections from *The Poetics of Space**

March 18 Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land*
Sau-ling Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*

POSTCOLONIAL & TRANSNATIONAL LANDSCAPES

March 25 Jessica Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*
Viet Nguyen, "Queer Bodies and Subaltern Spectators"*

April 1 Junot Díaz, *Drown*
José David Saldívar, introduction to *Dialectics of Our America**

FRIDAY, APRIL 5: DEADLINE TO DISCUSS FINAL PAPERS WITH ME

COUNTERFACTUAL & ALTERNATIVE LANDSCAPES

April 8 Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*
Michael Bérubé, "Race and Modernity in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*"*
Stephanie Brown, "Horizontal Thinking in a Vertical World"*

April 15 Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*
Margaret Scanlan, "Strange Times to Be a Jew"*

April 22 Discussion of film: *Code 46*
Adilifu Nama, excerpt from *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film**

MONDAY, APRIL 29TH: FINAL ESSAY DUE by 5 pm via Canvas.