Course Information: Cultural Diversity in the Literature of the Americas

Hil 2520/Spring 2011
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This course will focus on literature written by authors from three historically underrepresented groups of American people: Mexican American, Native American, and African American. Cultural anthropologist, John Ogbu, characterizes these three groups as “involuntary minorities,” signifying that they do not share the history of voluntary immigration and settlement in the U.S. to achieve a “better life” for their families. Mexican Americans and Native Americans share a history of being indigenous to the Americas and experiencing conquest by Europeans. African Americans, for the most part, arrived in this country as captured slaves. Ogbu points to these histories to explain why members of these groups may be skeptical about the ‘American Dream’ and the master narrative of the ‘Great American Democracy.’ The literature we read this semester will provide some insight about the extent to which these histories enter into the realities of 21st century America.

A central goal of this course is a deeper understanding of diversity, not just of others but especially of ourselves, and with that a deeper wisdom and a more nuanced understanding of how we are all connected. Only by learning about the lives and histories of others do we gain a perspective on our own lives and histories and thus learn more effective ways to conduct our relations with one another.

Important Assumptions

The most important assumption underlying the design of this class is that today’s students are interested in designing a better future, a future based on respect and understanding of others. Although some of the literature and history we examine may challenge us emotionally, the aim is to deepen understanding and strengthen imagination.

The class also rests on the assumption that “knowing where people are coming from” enhances understanding and communication across differences. Another important assumption is that although people everywhere share some fundamental human needs, making us all “the same” in many respects, we also have very different histories that shape our actions and interpretations, thus making us all “very different.” Even within the manufactured categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc., we are all very different from one another.

Scope of the Course

The generic title of this course suggests a very broad scope: “the literature of the Americas,” a term that includes all of North America, Central America, and South America. Each instructor must narrow that scope to create an effective course, which is why I chose literature from these three groups. Even at that, this course will only scratch the surface, so be careful not to develop stereotypes based on this limited information. The best outcome would be for you to develop a curiosity, a desire, and an educated imagination that craves more information about diversity and a commitment to continue reading.

Today more than a third of Americans do not trace their heritage to a European culture, so it’s especially important to learn about the ways non-European cultures contribute to American identity. Typically, American schools avoid engagement with racial identity to the detriment of students who often know only their own racial group. I wish we had the time to do additional cultural explorations. I hope you’ll have a desire to continue learning more about cultural diversity when the course is over, and I hope this course provides you with a framework for doing that.

What you can expect to gain from the course
Reading literature allows us to occupy the lives of others who are different from us, thus it expands our moral and ethical intelligence. Through the reading this semester, we will engage with issues that are endemic in our culture but not often effectively addressed in school, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, physical and emotional abuse perpetrated by others as well as abuse inflicted on the self (anorexia, drug and alcohol addiction).

A thoughtful engagement with the course material will prepare you to live and work as a member of a complex society and to identify your options for transforming the social future.

**Discussing controversial topics**
The course reading material and the films include some controversial topics, including race relations, social class, sexual orientation, sexual development, and sexual relations. Some of the authors use coarse language. A mature attitude and open mind are required. You will not be pressured to change your values, but you will be expected to think about controversial issues, to express and listen to a range of perspectives, and to understand the values and experiences of others.

**Required Course Texts**
- **Mexican American**
- **Native American**
- **African American**

**Selected Course Readings**. Copies posted on Blackboard.

**Grade Distribution** (all assignments must be completed to pass the course)
- Weekly Quizzes/Reflection Memos 35%
- Context Report 10%
- Panel Discussion 10%
- Final Project and Presentation 35%
- Peer Evaluations 10%

Criteria for peer evaluation include: Quality of preparation and reliability; quality of insight and ideas, quality of respect for individuals, quality of contribution to group process.

**Course Policies**
The course is enriched by everyone's preparation, attendance, and full participation. Thus, the following policies are in effect throughout this course

- **Absence and participation policy**
  - More than 3 absences will lower your final grade. The limit of 3 absences includes both excused and unexcused. So think of this policy as a sick-leave policy. If you are sick, particularly if you have flu symptoms, stay home and take care of yourself. Send me an email to let me know what's going on. If you are traveling for a Michigan Tech sport, let me know your status and anticipated absences. If you are traveling for a special family or work occasion, let me know that. Otherwise, come to class. If I do not receive an email, I'll assume you are engaging in behavior that detracts from your success. Regardless of the reason for your absences, you are expected to make up the work you missed, including missed quizzes. Contact me before the next class period if you want to make up a missed quiz—otherwise, it averages in as a zero.

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Participation includes more than physically showing up in class. It means completing the reading on time, marking significant passages in your books, reviewing the reading material before class; bringing the book to class; asking other people what they think; listening with respect; speaking from your experience and with reference to the readings; sharing what you think; allowing others to think differently. You will be marked “absent” if you come to class without the reading material, if you adopt a posture of non-engagement, and if you fall asleep.

If you are dealing with legitimate life challenges that affect your level of participation, please keep me informed so that I don’t assume you are slacking off. If I can make accommodations, let me know that too.

- **Electronic Device policy**
  Use of cell phones, computers, and other electronic devices can distract from the work of the class. They compete for your attention, and they distract the people near you. If you have a need for an adaptive device, please let me know. If you are using an e-book version of the class material, be sure to let me know that too. **Otherwise, turn your equipment off and put it away before class begins.** If there is an extenuating circumstance that requires the use of a device, such as a day when you are presenting, or when you are taking notes for a group discussion, then give me a heads up.

- **Academic Integrity policy**
  Some class assignments call for research. In oral presentations and in written reports, **document all of your sources.** Do this in parentheses after each direct or indirect use of every source. At the end of the presentation or report, **provide me with a list of all the sources you used.** Be especially attentive to the quality, credibility, and trustworthiness of all your sources.

**Course Assignments/Course Work**

1. **Reading Quizzes**
   - The reading/film quizzes are intended to promote timely and careful reading and viewing. If you do the reading, you’ll find it easy to do well on the quizzes, and your good quiz grades will be **your reward for being prepared.** The quizzes focus primarily on factual recall rather than interpretation. Because of this, they require that the reading or film be fresh in your mind. If you read the assignment well ahead of a quiz day, be sure to review it right before the quiz. Let me know if you find that a question on a quiz can be interpreted in more than one correct way.
   - If you are absent on a quiz day, you must contact me before the next class to make up the quiz. You are responsible for following up on this. Missed quizzes count as 0%.

2. **Reflection Memos**
   - Bring a one-page (typed) reflection memo for the readings scheduled on Jan. 13, Feb. 1, and Feb. 15. Your memos will form the basis of class discussion. These memos are an opportunity to practice the reflective, interpretive, critical, and creative thinking that success in this class requires.

   In contrast to the quizzes, which focus on factual information, the memos should focus on interpretive issues. They should be thoughtful, explorative, creative, personal, and invitational. The memo should be addressed to the class as a group and it should focus on issues, perspectives, themes, character, and tensions in the novel.

   Below are a few suggested prompts that you can use to get started, or you can create your own entry point.
a. What is my personal response to this reading? What has the reading left me thinking or wondering about? What in the reading triggers my response? What in my experience triggers my response? What do I learn about myself and the culture I take for granted by thinking about this reading? Are people from different cultures likely to share my response? How might their responses differ from mine? What would I like to know about how others respond to this reading?

b. What perspective does this reading offer about a current social issue or about relationships across cultures? What questions does it raise that are important for us to think about? What does it say about the challenges of interactions among people from different cultural or racial backgrounds? Are the challenges faced by the people in this reading character-forming or character-destroying challenges?

Grades on Reflection Memos
To earn a C, memos must be clear and reflective.
To earn a B, memos must be clear, reflective, contain specific references (including page numbers and some direct quotes) to scenes, characters, etc.
To earn an A, memos must be clear, reflective, contain specific references, and prompt others to think more deeply about the novel, either in terms of their own experiences, the current social context, the value of this novel to other young adults.

3. Context Reports
Prepare and deliver a report that provides historical, cultural, geographic, economic, political, biographical, sociological, scientific, spiritual, or ecological information that contributes to deeper understanding of a reading selection.
More information will be provided on a separate handout.

4. Discussion Panel
A group leads discussion of one of the readings, beginning Feb. 3 and continuing through the term. More detail on separate handout.

5. Final Project and Presentation
More information will be provided on a separate handout.

6. Large and Small Group Participation

University Policies
Academic regulations and procedures are governed by University policy. Academic dishonesty cases will be handled in accordance with the University's policies.

If you have a disability that could affect your performance in this class or that requires an accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act, please see me as soon as possible so that we can make appropriate arrangements. The Affirmative Action Office has asked that you be made aware of the following:

Michigan Tech complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at Michigan Tech, please call Christy Osland at 487-1494. For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department head or the Affirmative Action Office, at 487-310.

Academic Integrity:
http://www.studentlife.mtu.edu/sen/judicial/academic_integrity.html

Affirmative Action:
http://www.admin.mtu.edu/hr/6062

Disability Services:
http://www.studentlife.mtu.edu/sen/tudent_handbook/openpolicy.html#disability

Equal Opportunity Statement:
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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jan. 11</td>
<td>Course Intro</td>
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<td>Jan. 18</td>
<td>Tatum, “Talking about Race, Learning about Racism” (print pdf file)</td>
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<td>Jan. 20</td>
<td>Viaramontes, pp. 48-90; Context Rpts. begin</td>
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<td>Jan. 25</td>
<td>Viaramontes, 93-130; Context Rpt.; Reflection Memo Due</td>
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<td>Jan. 27</td>
<td>Fox, “Insider’s Guide: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity” (print pdf file)</td>
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<td>Feb. 3</td>
<td>Cisneros, &quot;Los Boxers,&quot; 130; &quot;Bien Pretty,&quot; 137; Context Rpt.; Panels Begin</td>
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<td>Feb. 8</td>
<td>Cisneros, &quot;Bread,&quot; 84; &quot;Anguiano Religious Articles,&quot; 114; &quot;Little Miracles,&quot; 116</td>
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<td>Feb. 10</td>
<td><strong>Winter Carnival Recess</strong></td>
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<td>Feb. 15</td>
<td>Alexie, <em>Flight</em>, pp. 1-106; Reflection Memo Due</td>
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<td>Feb. 22</td>
<td>Alexie, “Indian Education” 171; “The Lone Ranger” 181; “Somebody Kept Saying&quot; 199; “Witnesses” 211</td>
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<td>Feb. 24</td>
<td>Alexie, “The Only Traffic Signal” 43; “This is What it Means to Say” 59</td>
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<td>March 1</td>
<td>begin screening of <em>Smoke Signals</em></td>
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<td>March 3</td>
<td><em>Smoke Signals</em> screening continues</td>
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<td><strong>Spring Recess</strong></td>
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<td>March 15</td>
<td>Talking Leaves; King “A Seat in the Garden” 184; Sears “Dancer” 250; Roberts “It’s All in How You Say It” 229</td>
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<td>March 17</td>
<td>Screening of Gates; <em>African American Lives</em></td>
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<td>March 22</td>
<td>Talking Leaves; “Erdrich, “The Bingo Van” 82; Hogan “Aunt Moon’s” 147</td>
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<td>March 29</td>
<td>Crossing, McPherson, “A Loaf of Bread” 81</td>
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<td>March 31</td>
<td>Screening of <em>Beauty Shop</em></td>
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<td>April 5</td>
<td><em>Crossing</em>, Walker, “Advancing Lana—and Ida B. Wells,” 120; Grooms, “Food that Pleases, Food to Take Home,” 133 (Last day for panels and context reports)</td>
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<td>April 7</td>
<td>screening of PBS, “The Murder of Emmett Till”</td>
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<td>April 12</td>
<td>Final Presentations</td>
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