

**CES / Engl 220.01**  
**Introduction to Multicultural Literature**  
**HUM: 3 credits**  
**Fall 2015**  
**T/Th 2:50 - 4:05**  
**CUE 119**

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**office hours:**  
**M 2:00 – 4:00**  
**and by appointment**

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**NOTE: Your enrollment in this course after the first week means that you have read and understood the syllabus and that you agree to abide by its policies and procedures.**

**Required texts** (available in bookstores and online)

Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*

Juan Felipe Herrera, *187 Reasons Mexicanos Can't Cross the Border: Undocumented 1971-2007*

LeAnne Howe, *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story*

Kristiana Kahakauwila, *This Is Paradise: Stories*

Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*

Tracy K. Smith, *Life on Mars*

We will also read and view various handouts and films. You are responsible for keeping up with these as they are assigned. *Since this is a literature course, you will be expected to have the books. If you cannot afford them, let me know. I will try to have at least one copy of each text placed on reserve at the library, though not all of our books are owned by the library. But you must keep up with reading assignments, or else your grade will suffer. This is not negotiable. Do not come to me in the fifth week of the semester to say that you do not have the books.*

**Catalogue description**

Survey of multicultural literature including European American, African American, Asian American, Chicana/o, and Native American authors. (This is the text of the 2008-09 catalogue.)

**Course objective and “learning outcomes”**

Our purpose is to read, study, discuss, and write about U.S. literature by writers of color and by white writers concerned with racism. Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death”—which is surely different from any definition we were taught by our schools and the media. We have been conditioned to define racism as a product of personal hatred, but Gilmore says that it comes from institutions, and it is exploitative (ie, it makes a profit for the institutions), and it renders victims vulnerable to premature death. Keep this definition in mind as we read Alexie, Howe, and our other writers.

Conservative skeptics wonder why we need to study “multicultural” texts, suggesting that the only criterion for selecting books should be literary excellence. Liberals argue that, by

reading the variety of perspectives afforded by writers of color, we realize that the very idea of “standards of excellence” is not universal but is peculiar to a dominant culture. Both positions are flawed. The conservative notion is flawed by the very fact that it is advanced by white people who just happen to think that the very best books and ideas come from white people—they have an investment in proving themselves superior. The liberal notion is flawed in two ways: First, it threatens to replace one standard with another; and second, it risks abolishing all standards by claiming that, even at the same time, all differences are unique even as all differences are equal.

Ishmael Reed famously wrote that “writin’ is fightin’”—that every literary act is a political act. As the struggle for gender-neutral language should have proven, language is never neutral. Even the simplest language of race is troubled. In his history of the color black, Michel Pastoreau discovers that the word “black” as the absence of all “natural” colors was once synonymous with “white.” Why do we assign the language of color to humans who are not really yellow, black, red, white, or brown? Even terms that avoid such color-based nomenclature, that derive from culture or from geographical regions, are problematic. For example, why did the U.S. Census form for 2010 restore the word “Negro” to racial categories? Why are Pacific Islanders grouped with Asian Americans in some systems and with Native Americans in others? And what does “Hispanic” really mean? Language is inadequate to name all aspects of social relations, and so we must be sensitive in our usage. It is also always changing, always trying to catch up. Writers of short stories, poems, novels, and plays must be especially sensitive to the politics of language. For all its inadequacies, language remains our best tool for framing our experiences, our memories, our feelings and ideas. Consider the ancient Chinese claim that a picture says ten thousand words: Does it say the same ten thousand words to everyone? Of course not. At its clearest, language remains our best tool for communication.

*Literature is a record of the evolution of social relations.* The best literature succeeds not only because it is most beautiful but also because it most faithfully and honestly tells the stories of those changing social relations.

By term’s end, you should have developed a better appreciation of the social as well as aesthetic role of literature.

## Methods

Close reading of texts: any cultural production, including written texts, visual or aural images, historical and/or “natural” phenomena, personal experience and observation, etc

Discussion and analysis of texts and contexts

Contextualization: situating a text in its historical moment, relating it to the present

## Course requirements

**Attendance:** If you are absent from class you are responsible for obtaining all missed materials and making up all of the assigned work. If you know in advance that you are going to be absent, you are required to submit *in advance* any work that is due during your absence. You are expected to attend every meeting, arrive on time, leave only when class is over, and participate in an informed way. Anything less is unacceptable and will result in penalties. After two unexcused absences (for absences resulting from university-sanctioned activities, please see me), each missed class will lead to a half-letter-grade deduction from your course grade. You will be allowed to accumulate seven absences: The first two are “free,” without consequence, after

which each of the next five costs you a half-letter grade. **Your eighth absence results in an automatic F for the course.** If this seems harsh, note that, as a community of learners, we cannot learn from you if you are not here. If you repeatedly sleep, text, read the newspaper, or chat with friends during class I will mark you absent. Respect your community.

I will distribute an attendance sheet in each class meeting after the third meeting. And then the attendance policy takes effect. As this is a literature class, and as we will be discussing these books individually, attendance is especially important. Doctors' appointments, study sessions or tests for other classes, and job interviews are *not* excusable absences. Do not come to me late in the semester with explanations for earlier absences. It is your responsibility to let me know as soon as possible about excusable absences. If you wait till weeks later, those absences will not be excused. This policy is absolute, and it is not negotiable.

*Participation:* Class discussions will depend on your reading the assigned texts and coming to class ready to talk about them. Participation takes many forms: for example, discussing issues raised in class or in our texts and keeping up with issues that are relevant to our texts. Some form of participation is required. If you do not participate, you will not receive a high grade.

*Presentations:* You will lead the class in both 1) discussion of an assigned reading and 2) discussion of your final paper. Text presentations involve your reading the text, discussing an aspect of it that you find significant (a theme, an issue, a historical figure, etc), and raising a question suggested by the text. Paper presentations involve your explaining your paper's argument and evidence.

*Reading Journal:* You will submit four Reading Journals. Each Journal will consider two of our books and will fill at least two typed pages, that is, roughly 550 to 650 words. Each journal entry is a personal response, but it should say more than "I liked Butler's book better than Alexie's." Give a detail or example: Exactly *why* did you prefer Butler? And *why* do you think as you do about her book and Alexie's? The key is to focus on the why. In 600 words, you can provide enough detail to explain yourself. Your responses will be graded, and so be careful with grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Your grade will be based not on your opinions but on your ideas and observations. Each journal will count toward ten percent of your course grade, and all four journals will count for forty percent. **I will accept no late journals.** Most journals are due on the last day we spend on the second book. For example, the first journal, on Alexie and Butler, is due September 17, our last day on Butler.

*Paper:* You will write one paper. You will compare two works we will read, though not in any pairing you will have discussed in a Journal. Your paper should fill four or five pages (1100 – 1500 words) and discuss an issue raised by the text. You will be required to cite the literary text in MLA or Chicago style. Your grade on the paper will be based on your writing and persuasiveness. It will count as forty percent of your course grade.

*Midterm and exam:* There will be no exams of any sort in this class. However, I may ask you, at the beginning of an occasional class meeting, to respond to a quick and easy question on the reading assigned for that day. These questions will count toward your participation grade.

*Format for written assignments:* In-class writing should be done legibly in ink. Out-of-class graded assignments should have a title and be prepared in twelve-point standard font, preferably Times New Roman, double-spaced with standard margins. If you do not know the standards for formatting formal manuscripts, then consult me or the appropriate style manual. Cite in the MLA or Chicago reference style. Papers that do not comply with the standards will suffer reduced grades. You must also remain consistent with your chosen style.

### **Grades (on a 400-point system)**

Attendance and participation	10 percent	40 points
Presentations	10 percent (5 percent each)	20 points
Journals	40 percent	160 points
Paper	40 percent	180 points

*Grading criteria:* Generally, to get an A you should observe the policies cited above at a high level. B represents observation at a good if not outstanding level, C at a moderate level, D at a substandard level, and F at little or no level at all. For written assignments, an A represents, first, a grasp of ideas, arguments, and contexts and, second, a writing style tailored to that grasp, clear and sophisticated. B represents a good grasp and clear if not altogether fluid prose. C represents a moderate grasp and at least a readable prose. D represents substandard work, and F represents little if any accomplishment. General university definitions of grades are available at: [www.registrar.wsu.edu/Registrar/Apps/Acadregs.ASPX/#90](http://www.registrar.wsu.edu/Registrar/Apps/Acadregs.ASPX/#90)

### **Course policies and community standards**

Ideally, each class meeting will be a lively, student-directed discussion of our course material. Short of that ideal, I will try to lecture as little as possible. I hope we will model a “good” community, driven by shared concerns even when we disagree. To do well in this class, please note the following guidelines:

Read the assigned material when it is due. *Bring the assigned reading to class.*

Come to class on time, and leave only when class is over. Late arrivals and early departures count as absences.

Do not read newspapers or magazines in class, and turn off phones and all electronic devices, unless you can show that you are using them for note-taking.

Do not use class time for sleeping or otherwise disengaging, or you will count as absent.

Name-calling and other signs of disrespect will result in your removal from class.

Feel free to disagree, respectfully.

Consider others’ views. Reflect on your own social location, your privileges and power.

Learn a historically informed definition of racism, and challenge all racist discourse.

Reflect your grasp of history and social relations by respecting shy and quiet classmates, and by deferring to each other’s experiences.

Finally, understand and consider the rage of people who are victims of systematic injustice. James Baldwin wrote that people of color have an obligation to feel rage over this nation’s history of racism. If injustice does not fill you with rage, then perhaps you should ask yourself why.

*Note on language:* In our books we may read some words or phrases that will be, to some sensibilities, coarse or vulgar or racist. By themselves, no “mere” words are offensive. What makes a word vulgar or racist is its usage by a particular speaker in a particular context.

Insensitive whites such as Glenn Beck complain that, for example, they are not allowed to say the “n” word without being labeled racist but that black men use it among themselves all the time. To “earn” the right to that word, Beck must first endure 500 years of racism. When you see such words in our books, consider their context. Who speaks them? Why? And to whom?

**Academic integrity:** Cheating of any kind will result in your failing the course. See the WSU Standards for Student Conduct WAS 504-26-010 (3). Read and familiarize yourself with these definitions and standards—you are responsible for knowing them. You may work with classmates to grasp concepts, but each of you must turn in original work. In general, in any work you submit, the source of every word, image, and idea must be easily attributable. Cite your sources. Failure to cite properly in graded writing will result in your failing the course.

**Students with Disabilities:** “Reasonable accommodations are available for students with a documented disability. If you have a disability and need accommodations to fully participate in this class, please visit or call the Access Center (Washington Building 217; 509-335-3417) to schedule an appointment with an Access Advisor. All accommodations **MUST** be approved through the Access Center.”

**Safety and Emergency Notification:** “Washington State University is committed to enhancing the safety of the students, faculty, staff, and visitors. It is highly recommended that you review the Campus Safety Plan (<http://safetyplan.wsu.edu/>) and visit the Office of Emergency Management web site (<http://oem.wsu.edu/>) for a comprehensive listing of university policies, procedures, statistics, and information related to campus safety, emergency management, and the health and welfare of the campus community.”

### **Schedule**

***Assignments are negotiable and subject to change. You are responsible for keeping up with all changes. Texts are identified by their authors: ie, Alexie or Howe.***

8/25: Introductions. Read and discuss the syllabus. Watch online: Bao Phi.

8/27: Alexie, pp 1-53.

9/1: Alexie, pp 54-158.

9/3: Alexie, pp 159-230.

9/8: Butler, pp 9-107.

9/10: Butler, pp 108-188.

9/15: Butler, pp 189-264.

9/17: Butler, Reader’s Guide. **FIRST JOURNAL DUE (ALEXIE AND BUTLER).**

9/22: Howe, pp 1-81.

9/24: Howe, pp 82-124.

9/29: Howe, pp 125-187.

10/1: Howe, pp 188-221.

10/6: Cisneros, Introduction.

10/8: Cisneros, pp 3-57.

10/13: Cisneros, pp 58-100.

10/15: Cisneros, pp 101-10. SECOND JOURNAL DUE (HOWE AND CISNEROS).

10/20: Smith, pp 3-24.

10/22: Herrera, pp 17-69 and 131-49.

10/27: Kahakauwila, "This Is Paradise" and "Wanle."

10/29: Kahakauwila, "The Road to Hāna" and "Thirty-Nine Rules for Making a Hawaiian Funeral into a Drinking Game."

11/3: Kahakauwila, "Portrait of a Good Father" and "The Old Paniolo Way."

11/5: Smith, pp 25-53.

11/10: Herrera, pp 171-227. THIRD JOURNAL DUE (SMITH AND HERRERA).

11/12: Ozeki, pp 1-108.

11/17: Ozeki, pp 109-203.

11/19: Ozeki, pp 204-258.

11/24 and 11/26: NO CLASS.

12/1: Ozeki, pp 259-356.

12/3: Ozeki, pp 357-418.

12/8: Smith, pp 55-70 and Herrera 267-80 and 343-53.

12/10: Conclusions. FOURTH JOURNAL DUE (KAHAKAUWILA AND OZEKI).

12/16: PAPER DUE in my office, Wilson-Short 118, by 3:00 PM.

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**Two observations by Eduardo Galeano, from his book *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World* (translated by Mark Fried; New York: Picador, 1998)**

Time pays no attention to the borders we erect to fool ourselves into believing we control it. (333)

The map they taught us gives two-thirds of the world to the North and one-third to the South. Europe is shown as larger than Latin America, even though Latin America is actually twice the size of Europe. India appears smaller than Scandinavia, even though it's three times as big. The United States and Canada fill more space on the map than Africa, when in reality they cover barely two-thirds as much territory.

The map lies. Traditional geography steals space just as the imperial economy steals wealth, official history steals memory, and formal culture steals the word.\* (315)

\*In the same year that Galeano published this claim, physicist Stephen Hawking wrote, in the Foreword to his updated edition of *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1998), we are "unable to represent the surface of the earth on a single map and [have] to use different maps in different regions" (viii).