

COLI 331D: American History through its Literature

Spring 2006

TR, 4:25-5:50

SW 323

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Office Hours: TR, 3-4pm in LNG 204

But there is no such thing as a pure fact, innocent of interpretation. Behind every fact presented to the world – by a teacher, a writer, anyone – is a judgment. The judgment that has been made is that this fact important, and that other facts, omitted, are not important.

-Howard Zinn

Course description:

This course will address American history with the help of literature, both fictional and non-fictional. We will investigate not only how historical ‘facts’ and ‘fiction’ have mutually constituted each other (the line between the two, in fact, appears quite blurry sometimes), but we will also look at the way in which the validation of one story as historical truth and the devaluation of another as fiction is very much tied to hegemonic power structures. The main aim of this course is then not to show history as a single, unitary, objective Truth, but rather as a constellation of various stories and acts that may both contest and confirm each other. Such concepts like the ‘progress’ of the nation-state, the civilization of ‘free land’, or the triumphal march of ‘freedom’, can thus never be considered impartial but are rather driven by specific interests and ideologies. In order to make possible such reading/s of history we will engage with texts of various temporal, social and ethnic spaces, recognizing the voices of both the ‘white establishment’ and those who have in history often been overlooked by it: African Americans, Latina/os, Native Americans, the poor and working class. We will also look ways in which history has been challenged by various her-stories. Thus, we will start with the famous captivity narrative of the Puritan Mary Rowlandson who was taken hostage by the Wampanoags, before proceeding to two rather different ‘captivity’ narratives: one, by Harriet Jacobs, depicts her own harrowing experiences as a slave and fugitive until her eventual escape to a new and precarious freedom. The other tale, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, describes the miseries of a 19th century middleclass white woman, struggling to maintain a sense of personal identity at the hands of a patriarchal society that labels women who seek fulfillment outside the home as ‘hysteric’. Apart from those tales, we will read two essays by Emerson who, perhaps more than anyone else, helped to define a new sense of distinctly ‘American’ identity. Ralph Ellison’s novel, like the aforementioned tales, presents an interesting intersection of a celebration of American optimism and freedom, while at the same time undermining the validity of such a concept. Philip Caputo’s memoir of the Vietnam War touches upon a subject matter that seems still relevant these days: the idea of defending ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ by going to war with another country. Sandra Cisneros’ short stories will bring us back from the Pacific frontier to the more immediate borderlands within and around the US that, for Mexican American migrants have become both spaces of exclusion and of resistance. Finally, Sherman Alexie brings us full circle, as his short stories offer an ironic counter narrative to Rowlandson’s, from the perspective of those indigenous people vilified and objectified within the white American mainstream.

Texts:

Rowlandson, Mary. *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*.
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance" and "The American Scholar"
 Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
 Perkins Gilman, Charlotte. "The Yellow Wallpaper."
 Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*.
 Caputo, Philip. *A Rumor of War*.
 Cisneros, Sandra. *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*.
 Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

The purchase of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present* is not mandatory, but highly recommended!

Assignments:

Since this course is a seminar **attendance and participation** are vital elements of your grade! More than three unexcused absences will thus result in the lowering of your grade. If you have more than four unexcused absences you will fail this class!!!!!! An excused absence means that you will notify me ahead of time (in an emergency as soon as possible). You will also be responsible for making up missed assignments.

It is expected that you come to class prepared, having completed the assigned readings and able to contribute to class discussions. Approximately every other week there will be an **in-class writing response** based on the respective reading/s, in which you will be asked to write about 1 page on a question given to you in class. There will be in-class **midterm exam** and a **final take-home exam**, which will be due during finals week.

Grade assessment:

Attendance and participation	20%
In-class writing responses	25%
Midterm exam	25%
Final exam	30%

Schedule of classes:

1/24	General introduction
1/26	Read <i>Captivity of Mrs Mary Rowlandson</i>
1/31	Rowlandson, part 2
2/2	Read Emerson "Self-Reliance" and "the American Scholar" in-class writing response # 1
[2/3: course-drop deadline; 2/5 course-add deadline]	
2/7	<i>Incidents</i> , part 1 and Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?"
2/9	<i>Incidents</i> , part 2
2/14	<i>Yellow Wallpaper</i>
2/16	<i>Yellow Wallpaper</i> In-class writing response # 2
2/21	<i>Invisble Man</i>
2/23	<i>Invisible Man</i>

2/28 *Invisible Man*
3/1 *Invisible Man* **in-class writing response #3**

3/7 finish *Invisible Man*. Review for Midterm
3/9 **In-class midterm exam**

3/14 SPRING BREAK
3/16 SPRING BREAK

3/21 *Rumor of War*
3/23 *Rumor of War*

3/28 *Rumor of War*
3/30 start movie *Born on the 4th of July*

4/4 *Born on the 4th of July* **in-class writing response #4**
4/6 Read part of Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Anzaldua's "Mestiza Consciousness"

4/11 *Woman Hollering Creek*
4/13 RECESS (Passover, Easter)

4/18 *Woman Hollering Creek*
4/20 watch movie *The City/la Ciudad*

4/25 finish *The City* and start *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*
4/27 *Lone Ranger...* **in-class writing response #5**

5/2 *Lone Ranger*
5/4 *Smoke Signals*

5/9 *Smoke Signals*
5/11 review for final exam and **final take-home exam handed out at the end of class! Due date and time TBA!**