

21W.742J, Writing about Race
(Cross-listed with Women's Studies)
A HASS-CI Course

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the great cultural critic W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that "...the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line." A century after Du Bois penned those words, most Americans would agree that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the color line remains one of our most pressing social issues. In this course, we will explore the terrain of race in America by reading the works of writers of color and others concerned with the issue of race, by viewing films that address racial issues, and by writing to explore how the fictions and facts of race condition all our lives, social and civic, private and public. We will consider the complex question of racial identity, test the givens of history by uncovering histories that have been more elusive or more thoroughly suppressed, and explore how writing and reading can both reflect and challenge racial categories, hierarchies, and perceptions. The reading is at once wonderful and disturbing, and the writing you will do will, I hope, open up arenas of increased understanding for both you and your readers.

Texts: The following are the texts I have chosen for the course.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*.

Erdrich, Louise. *Love Medicine*. (New Expanded Edition.)

Faulkner, William. *Go Down, Moses*.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*.

Mitcham, Judson. *The Sweet Everlasting*.

Morrison, Toni *The Bluest Eye*.

I will supplement these texts with handouts or e-reserves of shorter works (essays and stories). I have ordered a handbook, *EasyWriter* for you to use as a reference.

We will view five films this semester: Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals*, Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*, Richard Pearce's *The Long Walk Home*, Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: LA* and John Sayles' *Lone Star*. We will schedule the showing of the films at a time I hope will be convenient for most of you, but if you can't make the showing for the class, you may watch the video on your own.

Because the reading for this course is considerable, I will offer you the option of choosing one novel to exclude from your reading responsibilities. (Of course you may choose to read all of them!) We'll talk more in class about how that will work so as not to leave any of the novels out altogether.

Course Requirements: You will be expected to have completed the assigned reading on the day it is to be discussed in class. Short, informal in-class writing assignments will help you stay disciplined about getting the reading done.

The major writing for the course will be three essays of about 6-8 pages each, along with a few shorter writing assignments. One of the essays will be a response to one or more of the texts we read, in a form of your choice—imitation, reflection, critical analysis. The other two assignments will be essays related to the material of the course—personal memoir, autobiography, investigation, or other nonfiction narrative or persuasive essay. You are welcome, indeed encouraged, to investigate some issue or topic on your own on which to write—education; interracial dating and relationships; housing segregation; the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality; race in advertising or film; or other topics

you are interested in pursuing. With my permission, one of your papers may be a work of fiction, accompanied by a critical commentary addressing the ways your story engages the issues we have read about and discussed in the course. For each essay, you will write a proposal, draft the piece, and then get feedback on your writing from a workshop group in class as well as from me. The responses from other readers in the class and from me will help you revise your paper before submitting the revision. There will also be occasions for you to make one substantial oral presentation to the class and to be responsible for leading class discussions of the reading and films.

I also ask that you keep a Reader's Notebook—a place where you will respond informally to the reading as we go along. The notebook is the place for you to read critically, to explore connections between the reading and class discussion and your own past and present experience, to record and test insights, to react as you feel moved to do, to draw connections among the various texts we will investigate as well as with other things you have read, films you have seen, places you've been; to raise questions, record observations, and test and challenge assumptions. For additional information on my expectations for your notebook writing, see the handout I will give you on the Reader's Notebook.

At the end of the semester, you will prepare a portfolio of all the writing you have done in the course, including your essays and the reader's notebook, so that I can review your work in order to give you a grade for the course. In deciding on semester grades, I will consider the quality of your writing, the degree and consistency of your effort throughout the semester, the success you demonstrate in revising your written work, how actively you participated in class discussion and workshops and the quality of your classroom contributions. I am of course happy to talk with you at any time about your work and your progress in the course.

Our schedule is tight, so **all written work must be handed in on time. No exceptions**, unless for real and serious emergencies, in which case you should get in touch with me at once. Extensions for emergencies will be granted **only once per student per semester**. Your responsibility in the class is to be not only a writer and reader, but also to serve as a reader and responder for other members of the class. It is essential, then, that you **attend class faithfully and come to each class fully prepared to participate in discussions of assigned reading and in writing workshops**. Lateness for class, if extreme or chronic, will be counted as an absence. You must notify me as soon as possible when a real and serious emergency keeps you from attending class. **More than three unexcused absences will result in your course grade being lowered; more than five absences will result in a failing grade.** So **don't take casual cuts**, and come to class **faithfully and on time and prepared to participate fully** in class activities. **All required work** (reading and writing assignments, assigned revisions, notebook and in-class writing) **must be completed satisfactorily in order to receive a passing grade for the course**. It goes without saying, I hope, that everything you submit must be your original work, written for this course. Plagiarizing from others' writing or resubmitting work you've done for another course will result in withdrawal and a grade of F for the course. MIT's academic honesty policy can be found at the following link: <http://web.mit.edu/policies/10.0.html>

We will work hard together this semester, and much of our reading and discussion will take us into difficult territory. If we can support each other in our quest for greater understanding and work together with openness and trust, I believe the rewards of our work together will be great. I also hope we can have fun; I believe firmly that people learn best when they are enjoying themselves. I promise always to be open to questions and suggestions and to treat you and your work seriously and with respect. I look forward to a productive and rewarding semester.

The following schedule is **tentative and subject to change** to accommodate our needs. Use it as a guide, but **stay alert to changes we are sure to make** as we go along.

- Class #1: Reflections on racial identity due.
Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, 1-17; Ellis Cose, “Our New Look: The Colors of Race”; Robin D. G. Kelley, “The People in Me.”
- Class #2: Essays: Chang-Rae Lee, “Coming Home Again”; Lenore Look, “Facing the Village”; Patricia J. Williams, “Reflections on Law, Contracts, and the Value of Life”; Amy Tan, “Mother Tongue”; Geeta Kothari, “If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?”
- Class #3: Sherley Ann Williams, “Meditations on History”
- Class #4: James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”
- Class #5: Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*.
- Class #6: *The Bluest Eye*.
Proposals due for first essay.
- Class #7: Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*.
- Class #8: Film showing, *Smoke Signals*.
- Class #9: *Love Medicine* and *Smoke Signals*.
First essay due.
- Class #10: Workshop of essays.
- Class #11: Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*.
- Class #12: Film showing: *The Long Walk Home*
- Class #13: *The Woman Warrior* and *The Long Walk Home*.
Revisions of first essay due.
- Class #14: Film showing: *Mississippi Masala*.
- Class # 15: *Mississippi Masala* and a mosaic of short stories.
Proposals due for second essay.
- Class #16: Poetry Day.
- Class #17: Judson Mitcham, *The Sweet Everlasting*.

- Class #18: *The Sweet Everlasting*.
Second essay due.
- Class #19: Workshop of second essays.
- Class #20: Film showing: *Twilight L.A.*
- Class #21: *Twilight L.A.*
- Class #22: **Revisions of second essay due.**
- Class #23: William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*
Proposals for third essay due.
- Class #24: *Go Down, Moses*.
- Class #25: *Go Down, Moses*.
Third essay due.
- Class #26: Workshop of third essays.
- Class #27: Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*.
- Class #27: Film showing: *Lone Star*.
- Class #28: **Revisions of third essay due.**
- Class #29: *Lone Star*.
Course summary and evaluations.
- Class #30: Last class: Tea and Celebratory Reading at the Instructor's house.
Portfolios due.