

ENGL 349W: Contemporary American Literature Borders and Horizons



I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large
so that there is room for paradoxes.

—Maxine Hong Kingston

Katy Ryan
Colson 221; 304.293.9729
Office Hours: T/Thurs: 1:00-2:00 and by appointment
kohearnr@mail.wvu.edu
Spring 2011

Course Description

If borders are meant to limit or track movement, the horizon signals freedom and possibility. In this course, we will study contemporary American literary works that move across borders—geographical, genre, even metaphysical borders—and imagine new horizons of possibilities for personal and political relationships in our postmodern age. By “postmodern,” I mean in part post-World War II: the period after the Holocaust, after the atomic bomb, after the war after the other war that was to end all wars. I also refer to a set of formal and stylistic literary devices that attempt to register the psychic and spiritual breakdowns that accompany catastrophe. We will begin, perhaps unexpectedly, with Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, a quiet novel that meditates on the space between life and death, self and others, inside and outside, all narrated by a young girl in that urgent space between child and adult. Next, we turn to Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, which reminds us that any historical moment is haunted by the past. By imagining the history of enslavement as an ongoing reality, this novel breaks down temporal borders as well as genre borders between science fiction and literary fiction. Leslie Marmon Silko merges genres as well in *Ceremony* (oral storytelling, poetry, the novel) and adds to our conversation the uncertain lines between mind and body, wellness and unwellness, human and nonhuman animals. Set in Afghanistan in 1998, Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* dramatizes relations between poor and wealthy nations in the aftermath of the Cold War, introducing the audience to multiple languages, global economic disparities, and a lost mother. The title of this play contains a slash, a grammatical mark that captures the focus of our class: what divides us, what connects us? We will conclude with the philosophical insights that compel Mark Brazaitis's *The Other Language*, a book of poems that spirits us to hope and uncertainty, to loss and back. Throughout the semester we will ask why borders inspire such passion and what it means to traverse or to live within them.

We will read three novels, one play, and one book of poems as well as critical essays. You will write four reader responses, one six-page essay, and one ten-page research essay. The class is designed to give you ample time to read our works carefully, to learn to do literary research, and to compose compelling, insightful essays.

Required Books

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (1980)
Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)
Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977)
Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* (2000)
Mark Brazaitis, *The Other Language* (2009)

Grade Breakdown

4 Reader Responses	20%
Participation	20%
6-page essay	20%
10-page essay	40%

Reader Responses -- Single-spaced, 500-750 words

You will write four responses to our literary works. The due dates for these responses are on the syllabus. To avoid plot summaries, you should begin with a question that you have about the material—a real question to which there might be several answers. You should choose one scene, one character, or one idea to analyze closely, rather than attempting to explicate an entire work. Go deep rather than wide. **Your responses must include direct quotations with proper citation.** (Put the page number in parenthesis at the end of the sentence.) As the semester progresses, I will expect your responses to become more searching and polished.

One of these responses can be a creative response. You might write a letter to a character or an author; imagine a new scene related to the original; compose a dialogue between characters from different literary works; write a poem. Be as creative as you would like with this option.

Participation & Attendance

This class will strengthen your ability *to think*—to question, analyze, reflect, dispute, and reason. Dialogue is essential to this process. There will be a variety of ways to participate:

- Come to class with one or more questions about our readings
- Ask questions of one another during discussion
- Read excerpts from your written responses

In order to receive an A for **participation**, you must have a stellar attendance record and contribute to class discussion regularly—which means at least once a week. More than three unexcused absences will lower your final grade one full letter. Habitual lateness will count as an absence.

Essays

You will compose two essays, turning in a draft for each one prior to the final due date. The first six-page essay assignment will ask you to analyze one of our literary works and to incorporate at least two secondary sources. The second ten-page essay will involve a comparative analysis and will require at least five secondary sources. For the research essay, you will also turn in a thesis paragraph, annotated bibliography, and working outline.

My **criteria** for evaluating analytical essays will be the following:

- A complete draft that engages with a difficult, original, or complex question
- A revision that clearly demonstrates a reworking of the draft in terms of argument, content, and organization.
- A clear thesis or insight, which is suitably complex and provides a blueprint for the essay
- Smooth and grammatical integration of critical and/or historical sources
- Solid evidence from the literary works (in the form of quotations, paraphrases, and summaries) to support your interpretations
- Strong transitions that move the essay forward logically and thoughtfully
- A polished, clean final essay free of grammatical and surface errors. **Proofread several times.** Read your essay outloud. You will *hear* mistakes that you do not see.
- Consistent use of MLA style for documentation. Purdue has a useful website on this at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/11/>. You can find “Basic in-text citation” at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/02/> and “Basic Works Cited” at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/05/>.
- The Writing Center is available for writing assistance. Colson G02. You can drop in or call for an appointment: 304.293.5788. Also, feel free to visit me in office hours or to make an appointment.

Important Tip

After you have a solid draft, **make an outline**. This should help you do two important tasks: strengthen connections *between* the parts of your essay (arguments are often conveyed in transitional sentences between paragraphs); and eliminate repetition.

Doing Research

Here are two basic ways to find scholarly articles on your subject:

- 1) WVU Library Mountainlynx will locate books on your subject that are available in our library.
- 2) Project Muse, EBSCO Host, and JSTOR are useful online databases of humanities, arts, and social science journals. You will find them through the library’s webpage. Here you will also find the MLA (Modern Language Association) International Bibliography database, which will locate books and articles on your author or text that may be available in our library or online.

Revision Option

You will have the opportunity to revise your first paper within ten days of receiving the graded essay. In order to receive credit for a revision, the essay must be substantially changed, and you must make an appointment with me to discuss your plan.

CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

Plagiarism/Cheating. The following definitions are from the *West Virginia University Undergraduate Catalog*. Please see the section on Academic Integrity and Dishonesty for the full definition and discussion of procedures.

Plagiarism: material that has been knowingly obtained or copied in whole or in part, from the work of others . . . including (but not limited to) another individual's academic composition.

Cheating: doing academic work for another student, or providing one's own work for another student to copy and submit as his / her own.

Scholastic dishonesty: involves misrepresenting as your own work any part of work done by another; submitting the same paper or substantially similar papers to meet the requirements of more than one course without the written approval and consent of all instructors concerned; depriving another student of necessary course materials; interfering with another's work.

If you have any questions about how to document sources, just ask.

Social Justice. I share the university's commitment to social justice and try to foster a learning environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. Our University does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veteran status, religion, sexual orientation, color, or national origin.

Spectrum of Disabilities. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation, please let me know. You may also want to make arrangements with Disability Services (293-6700).

Emergencies or Health Crises. If you have an emergency or serious health problem in the course of the semester, you or your family should contact the Office of Student Life in E. Moore Hall (293-5611). The Dean of Student Life will communicate with me and authorize arrangements for you. Please reserve the Dean's services for emergencies.

Calendar:

Tues. Jan 11	Introductions
Thurs. Jan 13	Wai Chee Dimock, "Planet and America, Set and Subset"
Tues. Jan 18	Marilynne Robinson, <i>Housekeeping</i> chaps 1-4
Thurs. Jan 20	Marilynne Robinson, <i>Housekeeping</i> chaps 5-6 First Reader Response due
Tues. Jan 25	Marilynne Robinson, <i>Housekeeping</i> chaps 7-9
Thurs. Jan 27	Marilynne Robinson, <i>Housekeeping</i> chaps 10-11
Tues. Feb 1	Martha Ravits, "Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson's <i>Housekeeping</i> ." Find in EbscoHost Bring one-paragraph summary of Ravit's argument. Provide at least one direct quotation in your summary
Thurs. Feb 3	Octavia Butler, <i>Kindred</i> pp. 1-51
Tues. Feb 8	Octavia Butler, <i>Kindred</i> 52-107 Second Reader Response due
Thurs. Feb 10	Octavia Butler, <i>Kindred</i> 108-189
Tues. Feb 15	Octavia Butler, <i>Kindred</i> 190-264 Drafts of Essay One due in class

- Thurs. Feb 17 Sarah Eden Shiff, "Recovering (from) the Double: Fiction as Historical Revision in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." Find in Project MUSE
Writing Workshop
- Tues. Feb 22 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* 1-64
First Essay Due
- Thurs. Feb 24 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* 65-116
- Tues. Mar 1 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* 167-201
- Thurs. Mar 3 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* entire novel
Third Reader Response due
- Tues. Mar 8 Interview from *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*
- Thurs. Mar 10 Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* Act One
Thesis paragraph due for research essay / Research Questions
- Tues. Mar 15 Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* Act Two
- Thurs. Mar 17 Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* Act Three + Periplum

Spring Break

- Tues. Mar 29 Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*
Afterword
Outline and Annotated Bibliography for research essay due
- Thurs. Mar 31 Mark Brazaitis, *The Other Language* Section One
- Tues. Apr 5 *The Other Language* Section Two
- Thurs. Apr 7 *The Other Language* Section Three
Fourth Reader Response due
- Tues. Apr 12 *The Other Language* Section Four
- Thurs. Apr 14 Visit from Mark Brazaitis
Drafts of final essay due
- Tues. Apr 19 Writing Conferences
- Thurs. Apr 21 Writing Conferences
- Tues. Apr 26 Discussion of papers / Bring revised drafts and questions to class
- Thurs. Apr 28 Final thoughts

Final essay due on Monday, May 2, in Colson 221 by 2PM