

Black (and Brown) Lit Matters:**Voices in Contemporary African American and Hispanic/Latino Literature**

The outpouring of literature-in all its forms-created by current generations of African American and Hispanic writers is artful, powerful, and evocative. The intention of this course is to dignify and demystify these literary voices and bear witness at this fraught and pivotal moment in the history of America.

At its best, literature deepens our appreciation of the human condition, inviting readers to move outside of their own experience of life into places that are sometimes unsettling. Certainly the literature of American blacks, with the added burden of being marginalized at best and enslaved and targeted at worst, has also contributed to resilient and improvised forms of expression. Many scholars have noted that Jazz and Blues—with their origins in African American communities-- are the only uniquely American art forms. Echoing venerated black intellectual Albert Murray, documentarian and scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. said, “Signifying and riffing and laughing and being ironic about the world, it’s about transcendence. The most fundamental value of black aesthetics is transcendence, and that’s at the heart of the blues and jazz.” Gates’ essential work compiling the definitive anthology of African-American literature places these oral and musical traditions at the core of black literary sensibilities.

When we survey the sweep of African American literature, we recognize that, like all forms of literature, it has been evolving for centuries. From the oral storytelling tradition, to vernacular riffs on language, to imitative forms of the arts and letters, to a more mature and confident synthesis of genres throughout the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, African American literature has always been intertwined with mainstream American literature, even when the gatekeepers barely noticed.

In a more highly-evolved multi-cultural universe of ideas that many Americans now enjoy, iconic names such as Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson, and Maya Angelou are known to most students of literature. By the 1970s, the magnificent Nobel Prize winner, the late Toni Morrison, served as a guiding light to her generation and subsequent generations of both black and white writers. Now Black Literature is flourishing and has certainly become mainstream. We recognize prominent literary and scholarly names such as Rita Dove, Ta-Nehisi Coates, James McBride, Zadie Smith, Henry Louis Gates, just to name a few. I trust that this course will reveal an ever-widening array of lesser-known writers and scholars and stimulate further exploration. (See Recommended Reading).

For Hispanics/Latinos, the legacy is likewise nuanced and eclectic. Literary expression has become a force for the diverse and ever-increasing tens of millions in Latino communities and has only recently been melded into the consciousness of contemporary mainstream American literature. With this renaissance comes an inherited Latin American literary and cultural tradition, something like a blended language (Spanglish), the immigrant experience, and distinctive forms of musical expression that incorporate strains from Spain, Africa, and the Americas.

A generation ago, the Magical Realism of iconic Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Carlos Fuentes was reimagined in the Latin diaspora into the USA by the likes of notable female writers such as Isabel Allende (Chile to Marin County), Sandra Cisneros (Mexico to Chicago), Julia Alvarez (DR to Vermont), and Cristina Garcia (Cuba to Texas and currently a visiting professor at USF)---all still active and influential, as we shall see. In the 21st Century, many decorated literary figures with Latin roots have emerged, such as novelists Luis Alberto Urrea (Mexican) and Junot Diaz (Dominican), story writer Kirsten Valdez Quade (Latina New Mexican), scholar Ilan Stavans (Mexican Jewish, distinguished professor at Amherst), and playwright/actor Lin Manuel Miranda (Puerto Rican, "In the (Washington)Heights"-NYC) of "Hamilton" fame.

Using "Hamilton" as a case in point, it is important to recognize that many of these artists whose roots are in predominantly black and brown communities have also blurred the lines of traditional mainstream culture, as with the Hip Hop and Latin strains present in the reimagining of American history in Miranda's works. Of course, in the multi-hued rainbow that is contemporary and youth-infused American literature in its broadest sense, people of all stripes exert influence on one another, such that a leading Jamaican British novelist and public intellectual, Zadie Smith, is one of the foremost advocates for the greatness that is Jewish American writer, Philip Roth. The New Yorker Magazine (our primary literary source for this course), once the bastion of sophisticated urban white Protestant sensibilities from the era of John Updike, later embracing Jewish sensibilities, has now evolved into a leading advocate for Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and Native American writers and critics of distinction. For those of us who still believe in the multi-cultural and enlightened future of America, this natural progression in the arts and literature is both heartwarming and exciting.

Now, finally, as to the matter of the so-called Literary Canon, it is clear that we must discard antiquated Eurocentric notions of who and what belongs. Likewise, we must be aware that some Black and Hispanic/Latino cultural nationalists and separatists reject the very notion of fitting into the mainstream and are wary of "cultural appropriation." I return to Gates again who stands apart from those who would "racialize" culture. He opposes those who would say, for example, that "you have to be black to teach black studies or to understand black history." He goes on to say, "That's not true! You just have to be sensitive and motivated. If someone says I could not teach Shakespeare because I am not of Anglo-Saxon descent or Saul Bellow because I am not Jewish American, (I would say) that this is rubbish!" Amen to that!

So, in closing, this course is all about the pleasure of the literature that ultimately speaks for itself. I have assigned a number of short stories and one novel for “required” at home reading (See Week by Week Reading Calendar). Other literary works, including select novels, history, and criticism, appear as “recommended.” In class, we will also sample some poetry, drama, music in a multi-media format, as best we can remotely. I hope that the lectures and discussions prove to be stimulating for all who cherish diversity in literature as in life.

Required Readings:

James McBride: Deacon King Kong. (Purchase novel).

Short Stories from The New Yorker magazine as noted (*) on the Reading Calendar. Purchase a short-term 12 week discounted (\$12) print and paper subscription for full access or, if you prefer, a discounted yearly subscription.

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