

ENGL 4319/CRN 27280: American Fiction 1945 to the Present
“Contemporary Historical Fiction Confronts the Archive”
M/W 12-1.20pm
Hudspeth Hall 100

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Office: Hudspeth Hall 321
Office Hours: M/W 1.30-3pm (in my office) and by appointment (preferably via zoom)
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Course description

One of the most prominent literary trends in American Fiction after 1945 is the re-emergence and creative reinvention of the literary genre of historical fiction. Many canonical classics and award-winning novels of post-WW II American fiction, such as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), N. Scott Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), Louise Erdrich’s *The Beet Queen* (1986), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* (1997), Julia Alvarez’s *In the Name of Salomé* (1999), Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World* (2006), Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016), George Saunders’ *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), and Myriam Chancy’s *What Storm, What Thunder* (2022) to name but a few, engage with the mode of historical fiction, and strive to recover, reclaim, and reimagine complex and often distorted or silenced histories in the Americas.

In this course we will read award-winning historical novels that were published by a diverse set of US-American writers since the early 1970s, and which continue to inform key debates in literary and cultural studies in the United States and beyond. The narratives are published since the 1970s but are set between the early 16th and late 20th centuries and focus on protagonists who experience multiple forms of alienation and migration—geographical, cultural, linguistic, racial, gendered, and spiritual. The selected texts cover a broad range of contemporary American fiction in terms of themes, setting, and narrative form, and the diversity of authors reflects the diversity that makes contemporary US-American fiction so innovative, exciting, and provocative. Many of our authors (and/or protagonists) are first- or second-generation immigrants from, for example, Cuba, Haiti, Morocco, or Vietnam, and for several authors English is their second language. Some novels feature well-known historical figures, such as Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Billy the Kid, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and Rafael Trujillo, and all are grounded in historical events and processes central to foundational histories in the Americas, such as the “discovery” of the New World, the ensuing genocide and enslavement of Native Americans, the Salem witchcraft trials, the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery, Manifest Destiny, the Mexican-American War, the long legacy of plantation slavery, the Roaring Twenties and expat culture, US-military interventions and imperialist expansion in the Caribbean Basin, World War II and the Holocaust, migrant labor and immigration, the Cuban Revolution, the Korean War, the Civil Rights movements, and the war in Vietnam.

In this class, we will ask important and exciting questions such as: How do we come to think of an event as historical? Whose histories are remembered, and whose are forgotten, and why? How do these processes of memorialization and amnesia function in the construction of national identities? How is memory, collective and individual, connected to the official archive? Do we learn from history or are we destined to repeat our mistakes from the past? Where are the boundaries between historiography and historical fiction, and how do they mutually inform each other? To what extent can historical fiction help us access forgotten or marginalized histories, especially if public education is failing students? Whose histories make it into the official archive and whose are marginalized, distorted, or forgotten? Which role do important efforts like the 1619 project play in the reading, studying, and teaching of historical fiction in the United States?

We will contextualize our conversations in class within relevant historical debates, practice the art of close reading, engage relevant literary theories such as Cultural Studies, New Historicism, Postcolonialism, Feminist and Queer Theories, Translation Theory, Critical Race and Affect Theory, and apply them to our readings and discussions. I consider you fellow literary scholars on a shared journey of intellectual inquiry, and expect everyone to come to class prepared, curious, and full of questions.

Required texts (all titles available at the UTEP bookstore):

I require you to **use paper copies** of all assigned novels. Ebooks usually do not have page numbers and therefore make focused in-class discussion and documentation of your close readings impossible. You do not have to purchase your books at the UTEP bookstore if you can find more affordable copies online or in local bookstores, but please make sure to purchase the **assigned edition** whenever possible, so we are literally “on the same page” when we read and discuss the novels in class. To this end I add the correct ISBN numbers to the reading list below, in the order in which we will read the texts.

Laila Lalami. *The Moor's Account*. 0804170622

Toni Morrison. *A Mercy*. ISBN 0307276767

Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian*. ISBN 0679728759

Rosario Ferré. *Sweet Diamond Dust and Other Stories*. ISBN 978-0452277489

Monique Truong. *The Book of Salt*. ISBN 0618446885

Edwidge Danticat. *The Farming of Bones*. ISBN 1616953497

Leslie Marmon Silko. *Ceremony*. ISBN 0143104918

Tomás Rivera. *...Y no so lo tragó la tierra/ ...and the Earth Did not Part*. ISBN 1558858156

Cristina García. *Monkey Hunting*. ISBN 0345466101

NOTE: Texts marked with an asterisk (*) in the syllabus are scholarly articles, available on JSTOR or MLA Ebsco. It is paramount that we, as members of the College of Liberal Arts, frequently use the databases that contain these scholarly articles; if we do not access them, the university will cancel these (fairly expensive) subscriptions, which will make future scholarly research all but impossible. I will therefore only post book chapters or other sources not readily available on these databases and will ask you to access the assigned scholarly articles yourselves. This will ensure that we will both keep our subscriptions and that you will hone your own research skills. Reading scholarly articles on a regular basis is especially important for students in a senior level class who may wish to go on into graduate school.

Course Requirements:

Readings

This is a reading, writing, and thinking intensive course. Students are expected to do all the required readings before the class in which they are due and bring the discussed text and hardcopies or electronic versions of any assigned secondary sources (articles, reviews, etc.) to class. A fair warning: Be prepared to read between 200-300 pages a week. If you cannot make a significant time commitment, this may not be the right class for you. NOTE: The bulk of heavy reading will happen earlier in the semester.

Attendance and participation

25%

Regular attendance and active participation in class discussion (f2f and online) are essential to your success in this course. By active participation I mean coming to each class on time, with your books and notes on the films you watched, as well as printouts or digital copies of additional assigned texts in hand. I expect you to ask concrete questions or offer specific comments about the assigned readings and films, volunteer questions and responses to both me and your classmates in discussion, engage in group work, and be active listeners to my mini-lectures and to your classmates' comments. You can earn up to 100 points over the course of the semester for active and meaningful participation in class discussion and group work.

As part of your participation, you are expected to **submit 2 questions and 2 responses** (to my or your peers' questions) over the course of the semester to the **discussion board** on Blackboard (BB). It is important that you **spread your questions and responses out over four units**, rather than submit all questions and all responses on the same unit. You will be assessed not only based on the quantity but the quality of your contributions to class discussion. This gives you a lot of choice and control over your interests and time management– it also helps us keep up class discussion if we should have to move online.

Questions: Your questions need to be posted on BB **by noon on Sunday**, to give you and your peers enough time to read the material before articulating (and potentially responding to) a question. Your questions must be formulated in a concise (**250-300 words**), but thoughtful, way and I expect you to always **incorporate at least one direct citation** from the assigned primary or secondary texts via parenthetical documentation. You can earn up to 100 points for each question.

Responses/Reflections: Every Wednesday evening I will post a question on the readings assigned for the following Monday on blackboard (BB). Over the course of the semester, you must respond either to 2 of my questions OR you can choose to respond to 2 of your peers' questions – or one of mine and one of your peers – this is up to you. These responses to or reflections on your peers' or my questions must be submitted online via blackboard **by 10.30 am the following Monday**, so I have time to read your responses prior to our class to have a better understanding of what your readings of these texts are. Like the questions, your responses/reflections need to be articulated in a concise (**250-300 words**) but thoughtful way and I expect you to always incorporate at least one direct citation from the assigned primary or secondary texts via parenthetical documentation. Again, it is important that you **spread these answers out over several units**. You can earn up to 100 points for each response/reflection.

Note: You may of course always submit your questions and responses early if you want or need to keep your weekends work-free.

Please do not submit these assignments as an attachment but copy and paste your work in the provided space on BB. The quality and number of these questions and responses/reflections factor into your participation grade, prepare you for class discussion, and encourage a conversation between you and your peers beyond the classroom (which may become even more important if we should have to go online at any given moment in the semester). No late submissions will be accepted - the idea is that you engage with the assigned materials **before** we meet in class.

Attendance:

Every student may **miss four classes** without giving me an explanation and without suffering any repercussions (i.e. I neither need nor necessarily want to know why you were not able to come to class – you are all adults and I trust you make smart decisions). **Choose your freebies wisely and plan ahead**; it might be a good idea not to use up all freebies in the first two weeks, since emergencies with family, cars, and health may happen later in the semester. It is your responsibility to catch up on missed work and turn in assignments, such as response paragraphs, on time, even and especially after you missed a class. If you fall ill, or anticipate any emergencies during any point of the semester that will force you to miss more than 4 classes, make sure to set up an appointment with me ahead of time, so we can find a workable solution.

Book/film review:

20%

Based on a list of additional novels, short stories, feature films, or TV series I will provide in the second week of classes, I ask you to write a professional journalistic book or film review, modeled in style, tone, and length after an existing publication that focuses on American cultural production, such as *The Atlantic*, *The Nation*, *The National Review*, or *The New Yorker*. Do NOT model your work after a daily newspaper such as *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, because they tend to be too short (your review needs to have at least 1000 words). I will provide you with a list of suggestions and samples in the second week of classes; note that this assignment

requires you to read or view an additional novel or short story or watch a film or select episodes of a TV show. In your review you are also asked to connect your additional novel/film to one of the novels on our syllabus in a meaningful way. The deadline for your review will be the last day of discussion of said novel, i.e. if you choose to write a review of an episode of *Deadwood*, *Hostiles*, or *The English* or on a film like *Woman Walks Ahead*, it would make sense to link the review to *Blood Meridian*, hence your review will be due on March 6, the Monday after we conclude our discussion of *Blood Meridian*. Or if you write a review of, for example, Myriam Gurba's collection *Painting Their Portraits in Winter* and connect it to *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, your review will be due on Monday April 17, the Monday after we conclude a discussion of Rivera's novella. If you decide to write a review of Myriam Chancy's novel about the 2010 Haitian earthquake, *What Storm, What Thunder*, and connect it to *The Farming of Bones*, it will be due on Monday, April 10. Regardless which option you choose, it is a good idea to use your presentation or review as a starting point for your final project to streamline the research process, and to contact me early on with ideas.

Quizzes: 15%

Because I have come to believe in continuous rather than singular assessment, I will administer 5 short quizzes over the course of the semester instead of one final exam at the end of the semester. Each quiz will ask questions to ensure you have read or viewed and understood the assigned materials for that day. Each quiz can give you up to 60 points. You cannot make up a missed quiz, but I will offer plenty of opportunities for extra credit.

Project proposal and annotated bibliography 10%

Your submission consists of one document, made of two parts: one, a proposal, consisting of 2-3 paragraphs, in which you offer an original tentative thesis on one or more of the assigned texts, and clearly showcase how your essay will contribute to existing scholarly conversations about the text of your choice. Ideally, focus on one of the key terms and/or key debates and offer a different and/or dissenting view; and two, an annotated bibliography featuring at least 4 scholarly articles taken from JSTOR and/or MLA/EBSCO only (NO Explicator please!). Only one of these 4 articles may be taken from the syllabus. I will post a sample project proposal and annotated bibliography on BB 2 weeks before the deadline. One week before your submission (by **April 24**), you need to send me an **informal email** letting me know your primary text(s) and research question. Your project proposal and annotated bibliography are due as ONE word.docx attachment on BB by 11am on Wednesday, **May 3 (hard deadline)**. I will also ask you to bring 3 hardcopies of your proposal to class that day, so you can workshop your work with your peers in an effective manner. The purpose of this exercise is to increase accountability and responsibility for your scholarly work and to share your work with and receive feedback from a larger and well-informed public of peers. I strongly encourage you to come by for office hours to discuss your ideas and sources with me prior to submitting your proposal to maximize effectiveness. I will provide constructive feedback as quickly as possible.

Research Paper 30%

Your final project in this class is a research paper on one (or possibly more) of the texts assigned in this class in which you articulate an original argument that engages current theories and debates on contemporary historical fiction. Because this is a senior level class, there will be several students who wish to apply for graduate school in the following year; to do so, they need a writing sample – the work produced in this class can be used as the beginning of such an important document that is evidence of your ability to do independent research, engage current scholarship, and show your familiarity with scholarly writing in our academic discipline. In your

research papers, students will offer a critical intervention in existing scholarly debates on the text, using your close readings and a clearly outlined theoretical framework. If productive and of interest to you, you are encouraged to connect our texts to current events. Your paper will be 10-12 pages long (Times New Roman font size 12, double spaced, 2500-3000 words), excluding the works cited list, which forms the last page of your document. More details will be posted 3 weeks on BB before the deadline. The firm deadline for submission, as a word.docx attachment on BB, is 6pm on Thursday, **May 11**.

Grade breakdown

Attendance and Participation: 500 points	A= 1800-2000 90-100%
Book/Film review: 400 points	B= 1600-1799 80-89.9%
Proposal and Annotated Bibliography: 200 points	C= 1400-1599 70-79.9%
Research paper: 600 points	D = 1200-1399 60-69.9%
Quizzes: 300 points	F = 0-1199 0-59.9%
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Total: 2000 points	

Students with special needs:

If you have a documented disability and require specific accommodations, you will first need to contact the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS) in the East Union Bldg., Room 106, within the first two weeks of classes. The Center for Accommodations and Support Services can be reached in the following ways:

Web: <http://www.utep.edu/cass>

E-Mail: cass@utep.edu

Phone: (915) 747-5148 voice or TTY

Fax: (915) 747-8712

I am happy to make any reasonable accommodations for students with challenges and limitations due to disabilities, including learning disabilities. Please see me personally before or after class in the first two weeks, or make an appointment, to discuss any special needs you might have so that I may assist you in the best way possible. Thank you.

Email:

It is your responsibility to activate your UTEP webmail and blackboard accounts within the first week of classes. It is generally a good idea to check your email once a day. If you do not have internet access at home, plan ahead and check your blackboard when on campus. Responding to emails sent by your professor in a timely manner (usually within 24 hours during the week and 72 hours on a weekend) is good professional practice and will be part of your participation grade. When sending me an email, remember to always put a relevant subject in the subject line, to address me in an appropriate way, and to sign your emails with your full name, so I know who you are and in which context you are writing me. This is a professional setting, and I expect everyone to act and write accordingly. Note that I won't read or respond to emails during the weekend. Thank you!

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is an offense against academic honesty and any instance of plagiarism will immediately be handed over to the Dean of Students without exception, who will decide on your penalty. Be aware that I take all instances of plagiarism very seriously. Each plagiarized assignment will automatically receive 0 points. I do not accept revisions or late submissions, or assignments that do not meet the minimum length requirement of original work, therefore you will fail each plagiarized assignment. Every time you use someone else's ideas or words in your papers you must reference the source. This is true for both direct quotes and paraphrasing. The same rules that apply to print sources also apply to web-based sources. You may safely assume that if you find a source on the internet, so will I. If you have any questions or uncertainties, contact me well before your paper is due. I also strongly encourage you to consult the following useful website for further information: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/2/>.

Syllabus

- Wednesday, January 18 Introduction to the course:
What is "American" fiction? Why "after 1945"?
Why historical fiction? What is the archive?
Course expectations, goals, assignments, syllabus, etc.
- Monday, January 23 *Nikole Hannah-Jones. Preface to *The 1619 Project*
Memorialization and national symbols
*Megan O'Grady. "Why Are We Living in a Golden Age of Historical Fiction?"
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/07/t-magazine/historical-fiction-books.html>
- Wednesday, January 25 Review of research methods and scholarly documentation (MLA)
*The 1619 Project continued
*Richard Slotkin. "Fiction for the Purposes of History."
*Amy Elias. "Metahistorical Romance"
- UNIT ONE: Rewriting Colonial America(s): 16th and 17th centuries**
- Monday, January 30 *The Moor's Account* (3-103)
*Shamsie, Muneeza. Reconstructing the story of Mustafa/Estebanico: A Moor in the New World: An interview with Laila Lalami"
- Wednesday, February 1 *The Moor's Account* (105-219)
Monday, February 6 *The Moor's Account* (221-321)
*Modarres, Andera. "Re-Placing the Muslim in Early American History: *The Moor's Account*"
- Wednesday, February 8 *A Mercy* (3-49)
*Warren, Wendy Anne. "'The Cause of Her Grief': The Rape of a Slave in Early New England."
- Monday, February 13 *A Mercy* (50-118)
Wednesday, February 15 *A Mercy* (119-195)
*Markus Nehl. "From Human Bondage to Racial Slavery: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*."
- UNIT TWO: Manifest Destiny and American Empire: mid 19th to early 20th century**
- Monday, February 20 *Blood Meridian* (3-127)
Wednesday, February 22 *Blood Meridian* (128-251)
Monday, February 27 *Blood Meridian* (252-349)
*Moos, Dan. "Lacking the Article Itself: Representation and History in *Blood Meridian*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2002, pp. 23-39.
- Wednesday, March 1 *Sweet Diamond Dust* (1-34)
Monday, March 6 *Sweet Diamond Dust* (35-85)
*Ana Rodriguez Navas. "Gossip and Nation"

UNIT THREE: Labor Migration, Structural Racism, and (Neo)colonialism: 20th century

Wednesday, March 8 *The Book of Salt* (1-100)

March 13-19: Spring Break

Monday, March 20 *The Book of Salt* (101-175)
Wednesday, March 22 *The Book of Salt* (176-261)
*Edwards, Naomi. "Melancholic Ghosts in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*." *Women's Studies Quarterly* vol. 40, no.3/4, 2012, pp. 167-186.

Monday, March 27 *The Farming of Bones* (1-114)
Wednesday, March 29 *The Farming of Bones* (115-241)
Monday, April 3 *The Farming of Bones* (242-306)
*Harford Vargas, Jennifer. "Novel Testimony: Alternative Archives in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*." *Callaloo*, vol. 37, no.5, 2014, pp.1162-1180.

Wednesday, April 5 *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* (75-111)
Monday, April 10 *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* (112-145)
*Grajeda, Ralph F. "Tomas Rivera's *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*: Discovery and Appropriation of the Chicano Past." *Hispania*, vol. 62, no. 1, 1979, pp. 71-81.

UNIT FOUR: War, Re-Migration, and Healing: Late 19th and Late 20th centuries

Wednesday, April 12 *Ceremony* (Preface, Introduction, 1-105)

Monday, April 17 *Ceremony* (105-181)

Wednesday, April 19 *Ceremony* (181-244)
*Akins, Adrienne. "Next Time, Just Remember the Story: Unlearning Empire in Silko's *Ceremony*." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-14

Monday, April 24 *Monkey Hunting* (3-119)
Email me your selected text and research question by 6pm

Wednesday, April 26 *Monkey Hunting* (123-251)
*Moiles, Sean. "Search for Utopia, Desire for the Sublime: Cristina García's *Monkey Hunting*." *MELUS*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2009, pp. 167-186.

Monday, May 1 Review of main scholarly debates and key terms, major themes, narrative strategies, and theoretical frameworks.

Wednesday, May 3 Submit on BB by 11am (hard deadline)
Workshop project proposals and annotated bibliographies
Bring **3 hardcopies** of your work to class

Thursday, May 11 Final papers are due as word.docx attachments on BB by 6pm
(**hard deadline**)

Wednesday, May 17 Grades are due

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