

Instructor: Mikhail Kleynman
Sample Syllabus: Lower-Level Elective

20th-Century American Immigration Narratives

Course Description

We all know the clichéd phrase: “America is a nation of immigrants.” By turning the plural (immigrants) into a singular (a nation), however, the truism obscures more than it clarifies, collapsing the distinctions between radically divergent experiences of immigration.

This class looks at how memoir, fiction, and film expose the narrative disparities elided in this phrase. At heart, this is a class about the “immigrant story” as a narrative form. As we read works from a range of times, perspectives, and genres, we’ll explore how different writers have experimented with the immigrant story and consider what’s at stake in how we narrate immigration.

We will start with a unit on immigration narratives from the first half of the 20th century, exploring short fiction (by Willa Cather, Abraham Cahan, Toshio Mori), poetry (by Claude McKay), film (by Charlie Chaplin), and excerpts from longer works (by Carlos Bulosan), all of which attempt to capture the experience of arrival in America. From there, we’ll cross the Atlantic with a unit on how American expat writers—including Ernest Hemingway, James Baldwin, and Gertrude Stein—understood their identities as emigrants from America. Our third unit will take us back to the United States, where we’ll look at narratives of mid-century internal migrations as captured by short prose (by Langston Hughes and Richard Wright), drama (August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*), and one novel (John Okada’s *No-No Boy*). The final unit will focus on a variety of immigration narratives from the end of century, offering an excellent opportunity for us to examine both which elements of the immigrant narrative have remained stable and which have profoundly changed in order to accommodate new perspectives, new experiences. In addition to two films (*Chan is Missing* and *Mississippi Masala*), we’ll read a range of short fiction (by Sandra Cisneros, Bharati Mukherjee, and Junot Díaz) and one novel (Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*).

As we read, discuss, and think about these texts, our task will be to consider not only how diverse immigrant groups have negotiated their relationship to American identity, but also the concept of an “immigrant narrative” itself. What formal tendencies do immigrant narratives have in common? How do differences in narrative form determine what’s at stake—politically and ethically—in how we understand immigration? What kind of changes can we observe when we move from, say, realist narratives of European immigration in the early 1900s to a neo-noir film about cabdrivers unraveling a mystery in San Francisco’s Chinatown?

Grades will be based on participation in class discussions, short weekly responses, a midterm essay, and a final paper.

Below, you’ll find a course calendar with films and texts for the semester; below that, the assignments and policies for the course. **Texts in bold must be purchased or taken out from the library in physical form.** All other films/readings will be provided on our course site.

Please read this carefully before our first day of class and make sure to order the required books well in advance.

COURSE CALENDAR
(subject to change)

Arrival

Class 1

- Syllabus, introductions, definitions
- In class: “What Is an American?” Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur (1782)

Unit 1: Early 20th-century Immigration

Our first unit tackles immigration narratives from the first half of the century across a variety of forms (short fiction, film, poetry, semi-autobiographical writing).

Class 2

- Abraham Cahan, “A Providential Match” (1895)

Class 3

- Film: Charlie Chaplin’s *The Immigrant* (1917)

Class 4

- Willa Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky” (1930)

Class 5

- Claude McKay, selected poems from *Harlem Shadows* (1922)

Class 6

- Carlos Bulosan, selected chapters from *America Is in the Heart* (1946)

Class 7:

- Toshio Mori, “Tomorrow Is Coming, Children” (1949)

Unit 2: Expats and Émigrés

For this unit, we’ll break chronology a bit to look at a radically different kind of immigrant narrative: that of the American living abroad. We’ll want to pay special attention here to the differences between the narratives we covered in Unit 1 and how these narratives imagine the link between home and identity.

Class 8

- Ernest Hemingway, stories from *In Our Time* (1925)

Class 9

- Gertrude Stein, selections from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933)
- F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Babylon Revisited” (1931)

Class 10

- Film: Anthony Minghella’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999)

Class 11

- Richard Wright, “Man, God Ain’t Like That” (1961)

- --, “I Choose Exile” (1951)

Class 12

- James Baldwin, “Equal in Paris” (1955)
- --, “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon” (1960)

Class 13: Mid-term paper workshop

Unit 3: Mid-Century Migrations and Displacements

This unit focuses not, strictly speaking, on immigration, but instead on mid-century displacements within the United States. We'll turn to the short stories, drama, reporting, and a novel as we look at the Great Migration, the Dust Bowl, and forced displacements in the wake of World War II.

Class 14

- Langston Hughes, “One Way Ticket” (1949)
- Richard Wright, “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1938)

Class 15

- August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (1987) Act I

Class 16

- August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (1987) Act II

Class 17

- John Steinbeck, selected articles from *The Harvest Gypsies* (1936)
- Caroline Henderson, “Letters from the Dust Bowl” (1935)

Class 18:

- John Okada, *No-No Boy* (1957) Ch. 1-5

Class 19:

- John Okada, *No-No Boy* (1957) Ch. 6-end

Unit 4: Global Diasporas and US Immigration

We'll wrap up by looking at a selection of immigration narratives from the end of the 20th century. Though the works we'll cover here are wide-ranging in their style and perspective, it should be noted that they represent only a small sliver of the diversity of late 20th-century immigration stories.

Class 20:

- Bharati Mukherjee, “The Middleman” (1988)
- --, “A Wife's Story” (1988)

Class 21:

- Sandra Cisneros, “Woman Hollering Creek” (1991)

Class 22:

- Film: Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing* (1982)

Class 23:

- Short stories from Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996)

Class 24:

- Film: Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991)

Class 25:

- Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (1995) Ch. 1-12

Class 26:

- Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (1995) Ch. 13-end

Last Class

- Final Paper Consultations

TECHNOLOGY POLICY

This is a discussion-heavy course in which you'll spend most of class time speaking, asking questions, and listening to other students' comments. All of this only works when students are fully present, which is why laptop, tablet, phone, etc. use is not permitted in class.

If you have a special reason or accommodation for technology use, please email me or speak to me.

ASSIGNMENTS

Response posts: This is a writing-based course, and so you'll have a short weekly writing assignment, due [TIME/DAY OF WEEK].

These response papers should be between 250 and 400 words (so, a double-spaced page or so), and should be in response to the material for the week. These are designed to help you organize your thoughts ahead of class, as well as to give other students (and me) some insight into how you're thinking about the material. These are quite flexible, and you can do anything including:

- Making some observation about anything you found interesting or relevant in the texts as they pertain to our class. You can follow up points made in previous classes, connect the readings to your other interests, or build on others' observations.
- Close reading a scene from our book, story, or film. If you find something interesting going on with *how* a scene is written/shot, you might want to use your weekly paper to dig into how the text is working to create a particular effect, convey some theme or idea, or raise certain key questions.
- Comparing different texts, whether from class or not. Is there something about the story we're reading that week that calls to mind something else you'd read or watched? Feel free to explore it, thinking about what these similarities/differences mean.

- Writing a more personal response to the text. Is there something about the text that struck you, made you feel bad/good/disgusted/etc.? You can write a post interrogating what it is about the work that had that effect on you. Note: you can't just say that what you read was good/bad, you've really got to explore *how* and *why* it had that effect on you.

These are designed to help your grade: you get full credit for any post that is submitted on time and shows that you put in care and effort.

Over the course of the semester, you must submit a total of **ten posts**. How/when you do these is up to you, but submission of fewer than ten posts will negatively impact your grade.

Mid-term paper: This assignment will be 4-6 double-spaced pages in length and will ask you to close read one or more of our texts. You will get a formal assignment with prompts and guidelines later. **Due at noon of the day stated.**

Final paper: This assignment will ask you to craft an 8-10-page research essay that incorporates close readings of our texts with additional primary and secondary sources. You will get a formal assignment with prompts and guidelines later. **Note: you will have the opportunity to submit a rough draft to me for comments and guidance before the deadline.**

GRADING

Participation: 20%
 Discussion Posts: 20%
 Mid-term paper: 20%
 Final paper: 40%

ATTENDANCE AND ABSENCES

You're expected to come to—and participate in—every class. After one unexcused absence, your overall grade will be lowered by one-third of a letter grade for each subsequent unexcused absence (an A becomes an A-, an A- becomes a B+, etc.).

That being said: if you are feeling sick or something comes up that requires you to miss a class, just let me know ahead of time, and it won't be a problem.

If you have athletic, religious, or other commitments that will cause you to miss multiple classes, speak to me at the start of the semester.

These classes can only work if everyone reads/watches the assigned material before class. If it becomes evident during class that you didn't do the reading, it will affect your participation grade significantly—you cannot meaningfully participate in the discussion or the work without doing the reading.

OFFICE HOURS POLICY

I of course encourage you to meet with me for office hours as often as you like. Even if you just want to talk briefly about a text, ask questions about an assignment, or talk about writing in general, I'm always happy to meet.

In the interest of helping students over the initial hurdle of actually coming to office hours, I ask that you come to office hours at least once before [DATE]. This is a mandatory component of the class. Beyond that, whether you come to OH or not is up to you.

LATE WORK

One third of a letter grade off for each day a paper is late. In other words, what would have been an A becomes an A-, what would have been an A- becomes a B+, etc.

If you realize in advance you're going to struggle to turn in the midterm or final on time, please reach out 24 hours before the deadline so that we can arrange an extension.

Because posts are designed to structure our class discussion, they must be completed before class; no credit for late posts.