FWIS Proposal Spring 2015
Course Title: The Immigrant Experience in 20th and 21st c. American Fiction
Instructor: Dr. Elizabeth A. Festa, Assoc. Director, Ctr. for Written, Oral, and Visual
Communication
Time Preference: MWF 11:00

Title/Abstract of Course Description

Immigrant Experience in Fiction

150 word summary
In a recent interview, author Jhumpa Lahiri suggests that viewing "immigrant fiction" as a discrete
genre marginalizes works that are engaged with more expansive and timeless literary themes. "From
the beginnings of literature poets and writers have based their narratives on crossing borders, on
wandering, on exile, on encounters beyond the familiar," she asserts, "Given the history of the
United States all American fiction could be classified as immigrant fiction." Limning the literary
history from early narratives of alienation and assimilation to contemporary fiction's negotiations of
identity within a global context, we will examine not only how works by and about American
immigrants resemble one another, but how they reflect and reshape the broader American literary
tradition. This course develops skills in analyzing a primary source work of literature; considering the
relationship between texts and images; synthesizing scholarship; conducting basic research; and
entering academic debates through discussion and writing.

50 word summary
This course considers 20th/21st century American literature on the experiences of immigrant
populations. Limning this literary history from early narratives of alienation and assimilation to
contemporary fiction's negotiations of identity within a global context, we will examine not only
how these texts resemble and depart from one another, but how they have shaped the broader
literary tradition.

Course Description:

Recent debates on the value of literary genres have brought the category of "immigrant fiction" into
question. Many contemporary critics agree that viewing literature by or about immigrant
populations as a discrete category of fiction is reductive; it risks misunderstanding and marginalizing
narratives that are engaging with more expansive and timeless literary themes. As Jhumpa Lahiri
reflects, "from the beginnings of literature poets and writers have based their narratives on crossing
borders, on wandering, on exile, on encounters beyond the familiar. The stranger is an
archetype…[t]he tension between alienation and assimilation has always been a basic theme."
"Given the history of the United States," she concludes, "all American fiction could be classified as
immigrant fiction." Yet while Lahiri articulates the prevailing critical view, other scholars and critics
have acknowledged that many of the themes, tropes, modes of characterization, moments of
intertextuality, and experiments with form that resonate throughout narratives of the immigrant
experience exhibit commonalities that invite—and are illuminated through—thoughtful comparison.

 Against the backdrop of this debate, this course considers works that showcase the experiences of
diverse immigrant populations across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries examining not only
how they resemble and echo one another, but how they respond to--and reshape--the American

literary tradition. The course does not aim to survey fiction on the immigrant experience in the U.S. or to provide coverage of genres, literary movements, or particular immigrant writers. However, it will limn the literary history from early narratives of alienation and assimilation to contemporary fiction's complex negotiations of identity within a global context.

This course is directed towards strengthening students' academic writing in the humanities in preparation for more advanced work. In addition to developing skills in analyzing a primary source work of literature, students will build confidence in comprehending critical and theoretical texts and entering intellectual debates through writing. The course will center on seminar discussions of the literature and scholarship with occasional lectures to provide historical and cultural background on the novels and stories. **Students will produce three formal papers and two formal oral presentations. Major writing assignments will include** 1) a close reading of a primary source 2) an analytical paper developed through inductive thinking in which the central argument is developed in relation to a secondary source argument 3) a multi-source short research paper (8-10 pp) in which students will locate multiple scholarly sources and use them to support an argument. This assignment will include an annotated works cited. **Students will also write shorter, more informal papers that will provide scaffolding for the larger assignments. Selected assignment include:** responses to a guiding reading assignment on a journal article; a succinct summary of a journal article; a "genre-switching" exercise in which students must explain a scholarly source in very simple and clear terms to a lay audience; an analysis of a film sequence; and self-evaluations of oral presentations. **Oral presentations will include** 1) A brief presentation without slides or notes on their argument in relationship to a critic (essay 2) and 2) a formal research presentation on essay #3 using slides (slide design will be taught and evaluated.) **Student presentations will be filmed.** Students will also give informal presentations during class throughout the term. Some of these presentations may be assigned participation points.

Tentative Reading List* +

[Primary Sources]
- Sui Sin Far, "Mrs. Spring Fragrance"; "The Wisdom of the New"; "The Story of One Woman who Married a Chinese"; "Her Chinese Husband" in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* [2011; Orig. Pub. Date 1912]
- Abraham Cahan, "A Sweatshop Romance," and "A Ghetto Wedding" in *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York* (1970; Orig. Pub. Date 1898]
- "Hester Street," (90 min.; 1975; Based on Abraham Cahan's novella *Yekl* [1898])
- Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl* [1989] ISBN: 978-0-679-72926-6
- John Okada, *No-No Boy* [1957] ISBN: 978-0-295-99404-8
- Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* [1995] ISBN: 978-1-573-22531-1
- Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* [1984] ISBN: 978-0-679-73477-2
- Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* [1999] ISBN 978-0-395-92720-5
- Dinaw Mengestu, *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* [2007] ISBN 978-1-594-48285-4

[Selected Secondary Sources/Resources]*

- Tina Chen, "Impersonation and Other Disappearing Acts: The Double(d) Agent of Chang-

rae Lee's *Native Speaker*" in *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* [2005]

- Felicia J. Cruz, "On the 'Simplicity' of Sandra Cisneros's House on Mango Street" in *Modern Fiction Studies,* 47.4. [2001]
- Susan Koshy, "Minority Cosmopolitanism" in *PMLA* 126.3 [2011].
- Aliki Varvogli, "Dinaw Mengestu, *How to Read the Air;* Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake."* In *Travel and Dislocation in Contemporary American Fiction."* [2012].
- Lower East Side Tenement Museum website: https://www.tenement.org/Virtual-Tour/index_virtual.html
- Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, "'Yes/No/Okay, But': Three Ways to Respond" and " 'And Yet': Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say," in *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing, 2d. ed.* [2010].

+ While works have been chosen with the goal of representing a range of publication dates/eras, a variety of styles, and diverse ethnicities and nationalities of authors/characters in mind, these goals have *not* determined the list. Rather, the list reflects the types of assignments or lines of inquiry that a particular text invites; the availability of high-quality scholarly responses to a given text; and the likelihood that students will be able to negotiate the text with some measure of independence (i.e. without extensive lecturing to provide context).

* Students will also be asked to compose a research paper supported by a minimum of FIVE high-quality journal articles and/or book sources. They will use academic databases and the Fondren catalog to locate these sources and will produce an annotated bibliography. Engagement will *not* be superficial.