

# American Literary Foundations

Spring 2024

Course Website: <https://kevinmodestino-huamlit.hcommons.org/>

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Tuesday and Thursday 9:40-11:00 Douglass 205/207

Office Hours: Locke 234 Tuesday and Thursday 11:00-12:30 or by Appt.

## Course Pre-Requisites

ENGL 112, American Literary Foundations (3 credits). Introduces the major texts, genres, periods, authors, and ideas that make up the literature of the United States from its origins to the present. Successful students will leave this course with an appreciation of the continuities and discontinuities of the multicultural literary traditions in American writing and an ability to write about them in a clear and informed way. Required for English majors. Prereq. ENGL 104 or concurrent enrollment in ENGL 104.

## Required Texts (Available in Bookstore)

Robert Levine, ed. *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Shorter 10th Edition, Volume 1

Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntley*, Broadview Press Editions

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*, Penguin Classics

Zitkala-Sa, *American Indian Stories*, Penguin Classics

A small notebook to use as a reading journal

## Course Description

“Our nation was born in genocide... We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or feel remorse for this shameful episode” — Martin Luther King Jr.

In one contemporary liberal narrative of the United States—its history, culture and literature—the nation was founded on a declaration of basic universal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. While this principle was not enacted at the founding, and the nation experienced painful struggles to achieve rights for women, Black people, Native Americans, immigrant groups and most recently, LGBTQ people, the principles were foundational to the nation’s values, expressed in its literature, and eventually achieved, more or less, through struggle over time as the country worked out its contradictions. In this narrative, American Literature is an expression of this foundational striving through years of turmoil. And as more people are included in that vision, we build wider and deeper literary anthologies adding more diverse voices to represent that widening circle of freedom.

This is a fascinating, compelling, myth. It is an aspirational vision of progress that seems to promise an inevitable utopian future within the national framework that already exists. It is seductive, and countless American Literature courses have been framed in this way: as an ever expanding democracy of voices answering the question of just who “we the people” are.

It is also, it needs to be said, false: a myth, carefully produced overtime, to justify the continued authority of an imperial state as an arbitrator of global rights and freedom, even as it participates and authorizes apartheid states and genocides all over the world to protect its security and economic interests. Internally, the U.S. has regularly seen acts of white supremacist terror against its own citizens, it supplies its own police forces with military weaponry enabling the violent occupation of inner-cities, and the most basic rights (to vote, to bodily autonomy, to education, to unionization, to freedom from incarceration) are constantly under assault for minority citizens. Externally, the U.S. supplies weapons and infrastructure to some of the most brutal dictatorships all over the world to ensure those resources remain open to U.S. business interests, and, when that fails, it conducts illegal invasions and orchestrates coups in countries to allow for the establishment of military bases, fossil fuel extraction, and economic liberalization.

What are we to make then of this brutal distance of myth from reality? How can we teach American Literature without repeating the myths of progressive liberal democracy that both justify and obscure the violence of U.S. Empire?

We have to start with a key concept: the United States is a settler colony. It is a unique type of colonial nation, unlike many European empires in Africa and Asia—continents that have been largely, but often only nominally, decolonized—the U.S. (like much of the Americas, Israel, Australia, New Zealand) remains a settler state. Unlike the European empires that controlled Africa and Asia in order to exploit the labor and resources of native populations using a minimal infrastructure of governors back by military force (often called franchise colonialism), white U.S. settlers arrived en mass to settle the land and disposses and eradicate the indigenous population. And as waves of independence movements shook the world and empires collapsed, the U.S. emerged all the stronger on the world stage as the pre-eminent economic and political force globally because the indigenous population had been all but exterminated, pushed onto smaller and smaller reservation lands, or seemingly disappeared into the white population while white settlers maintained dominance over land, resources, and labor.

This economic and political might was built on generations of expansive settlement, violent dispossession, and the importation of unfree labor and marginalized and exploited labor. The countless wars conducted by white settlers against Native Americans were genocidal exterminations that targeted and terrorized non-combatant groups to open their land to settlement. And when indigenous people resisted this violence, they were portrayed as savages and even more ruthlessly exterminated. For the first 100 years of the U.S. existence most politicians had made their careers as ruthless “Indian killers” including presidents like George Washington and Andrew Jackson (on top of being land speculators and slave owners). They invented the myths and civilian targeting total warfare that the U.S. would export all over the world in the 20th century—to Korea and Vietnam, Nicaragua and Haiti, Iraq and Afghanistan, and Palestine. (The U.S. military still calls enemy territory “Indian Country”). Understanding this context, the freedom to “own property” has always meant

the freedom of white settlers and U.S. business interests to disposses, exploit, and extract while excluding its victims from access to the economic benefits or any sort of democratic say in the future of the land.

Understanding the U.S. as a settler colony requires us to understand “foundational” U.S. literature as the construction of propaganda and myths. While white settler authors have, in some instances, resisted and critiqued U.S. settler violence, this is not a “working out” of contradictions in democracy, so much as scattered attempts to question the myths of America that arise in moments of militancy like the abolitionist movement or the anti-war movements of the 60s and 70s. Similarly, the contention of Native American, Black, Chinese-American, Hispanic, etc... voices should not always simply be read as bids for inclusion into the rights of settlers to disposses and exploit. They are often attempts to radically overturn the order of world built by settler-colonialism by imaging different histories, communities, and futures than its world-destroying violence.

This class is framed by the twin questions of settler-colonialism and indigenous struggle and survival. We will center Native American voices throughout the semester because they represent a tradition of articulating and contesting the terms of the settler-colonial order. We will also look at Black voices—and while slavery while be a matter of concern since it was a major method for supplying labor to the land that had been stolen—we will particularly look at how Black authors understood the racial order of the settler colonial nation, their place in it as coerced arrivants, and imagined alternatives to it. When we read white authors, we will try to understand them as producing or interrogating settler ideologies—as building or deconstructing the authorizing myths of the U.S. claim on freedom to the land of other people and the labor of subjugated populations.

The world we inhabit today is one built by settler colonialism. The major powers of the world all participated in it and it provided the foundational raw materials for capitalist systems of production. There remain millions today subjugated by settler colonial orders, in the U.S., in Palestine, across the Americas and Asia. And indigenous people’s struggles are at the forefront of the global battle to confront climate change, over human rights, and for true universal democracy. It is vital we see the U.S. and its literature for what it is: not a struggle for inclusion in a hollow democracy of settlers, but a struggle over the terms of the modern world and the future of freedom for all through the transformation of the world.

## **Reading Schedule**

Readings found in Norton Anthology Of American Literature Vol. 1 (Shorter 10th Edition) unless otherwise noted. Page numbers listed in parentheses. Required readings due by class on the day listed. Optional readings may be discussed in lectures.

### **Week 1: Indigenous Orality- Pre-colonialism**

Tuesday, January 9th, 2024

Introductions

Thursday, January 11th, 2024

**Required:** “The Iroquois Creation Story” n.d. (1.32-35); *from* “The Winnebago Trickster Cycle” n.d. (1.36-38); “King Philip's Speech” ~1675 (1.41); William Apess “An Indian's Looking Glass for the White Man” 1833 (1. 495-500).

**Optional:** Native American Oral Poetry (1.42-44); Samson Occum *from* “A Narrative of My Life” 1768 (1.267-262).

## **Week 2: The Novel of Decolonization**

Tuesday, January 16th, 2024

**Required:** Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1-60)

Thursday, January 18th, 2024

**Required:** Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (61-100).

## **Week 3: The Novel of Decolonization (cont.)**

Tuesday, January 23rd, 2024

**Required:** Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (101-175)

Thursday, January 25th, 2024

**Required:** Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (175-End)

## **Week 4: The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism**

Tuesday, January 30th, 2024

Christopher Columbus “Letter of Discovery” 1493, and *from* “Letter to Ferdinand and Isabella Concerning the Fourth Voyage” 1503 (1.46-53); John Winthrop “A Model of Christian Charity” 1630 (1.102-113).

**Optional:** William Bradford *from* “Of Plymouth Plantation” 1620-1856 (1.81-100)

## **PAPER #1 DUE**

Thursday, February 1st, 2024

**Required:** John Smith *from* “The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles” 1624 (1.65-75); Mary Rowlandson *from* “A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson” 1682 (1.140-159).

**Optional:** Anne Bradstreet Poems 1650-1678 (1.121-134).

## **Week 5: The Development of Settler Identity**

Tuesday, February 6th, 2024

**Required:** J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur *from* *Letters from an American Farmer* 1782 “Letter III. What is an American?” (1.289-299). “Letter IX: Description of Charlestown; Thoughts on Slavery; on Physical Evil; A Melancholy Scene” (1.300-304). Start Franklin (see below)

Thursday, February 8th, 2024

**Required:** Benjamin Franklin *The Autobiography: Part One* 1771-1790 (1.201-248)

**Week 6: Arrivants and Natives in the Age of Revolution**

Tuesday, February 13th, 2024

**Required:** Phillis Wheatley “Selected Poems” (1.399-410); Olaudah Equiano from *An Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* “Chapters 1, 2, and 12” (1. 340-351; 382-384)

Thursday, February 15th, 2024

**Required:** Thomas Jefferson from *Notes on the State of Virginia* “Query 11 and Query 18” (Will be made available as a PDF); Unit on Native American Eloquence: Negotiation and Resistance (1. 425-436).

**Week 7: The Return of the Repressed: The Birth of American Gothic**

Tuesday, February 20th, 2024

**Required:** Charles Brockden Brown *Edgar Huntley* (1-60).

**Optional:** Jonathan Edwards “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” 1741 (1.174-185).

Thursday, February 22nd, 2024

**Required:** Charles Brockden Brown *Edgar Huntley* (60-100).

**Week 8: The Return of the Repressed: The Birth of American Gothic (cont)**

Tuesday, February 27th, 2024

**Required:** Charles Brockden Brown *Edgar Huntley* (101-175).

Thursday, February 29th, 2024

**Required:** Charles Brockden Brown *Edgar Huntley* (175-End).

**Optional:** Washington Irving “Rip Van Winkle” 1829 (1.465-477) Edgar Allen Poe “The Fall of the House of Usher” 1839 (1.678-691).

MARCH 2-10 SPRING BREAK

**Week 9: Romantic Appropriations**

Tuesday, March 11th, 2024

**Required:** James Fenimore Cooper from *The Last of the Mohicans* (1.480-486); Ralph Waldo Emerson “Nature: Introduction” and Chapters 1-4, 1836 (1.503-516); Henry David Thoreau *from Walden* 1854 “Ch. 2: Where I Lived and What I Lived For” (1.941-961);

**Optional:** Ralph Waldo Emerson “Self-Reliance” 1841 and “The Poet” 1844 (1.546-578).

Thursday, March 14th, 2024 NO CLASS

## PAPER #2 DUE

### Week 10: Imperialism, Romanticism, and Abolitionism

Tuesday, March 19th, 2024

**Required:** Henry David Thoreau “Resistance To Civil Government” 1849 (1.882-898); Unit on Native Americans: Removal and Resistance (1:580-599)

Thursday, March 21st, 2024

**Required:** David Walker *from* “David Walker’s Appeal” 1829 (1.770-773); William Lloyd Garrison “To The Public” 1831(1.778-779); Martin R. Delany *from* “Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent” 1854 (1.787-789); Frederick Douglass “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” 1852 (1.1040-1043).

### Week 11: The Horizon of Imperialism and Slavery on the Eve of the Civil War

Tuesday, March 26th, 2024

**Required:** Herman Melville “Benito Cereno” (1:1158-1185)

Thursday, March 28th, 2024

**Required:** Herman Melville “Benito Cereno” (1:1185-1214)

### Week 12: American Poetry and the Civil War: Settler Consciousness in Crisis

Tuesday, April 2nd, 2024

**Required:** Walt Whitman “Song of Myself” 1856, 1881 (1.1062-1106) and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” 1865-66 (1.1122-1127).

**Optional:** Abraham Lincoln “Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg” 1863 and “Second Inaugural Address” 1865 (1.725).

Thursday, April 4th, 2024

**Required:** Emily Dickinson selections (1.1224-1245)

### Week 13: Native Americans at the End of the Frontier

Tuesday, April 9th, 2024

**Required:** Zitkala-Sa *American Indian Stories* (1-60)

Thursday, April 11th, 2024

**Required:** Zitkala-Sa *American Indian Stories* (60-100)

### Week 13: Native America at the End of the Frontier (Cont)

Tuesday, April 16th 2024

**Required:** Zitkala-Sa *American Indian Stories* (100-175)

Thursday, April 18th, 2024

**Required:** Zitkala-Sa *American Indian Stories* (175-End)

### **Week 15: Conclusion**

Tuesday, April 23rd, 2024

### **GRADE MEETINGS**

Thursday, April 25th, 2024

### **GRADE MEETINGS**

### **FINAL PAPER DUE AT MEETINGS**

## **Class Policies**

*As part of my commitment to cultivating space together, I want us to develop some of our own classroom policies about what is expected of each of us every day in class as a community. Nevertheless, we are still in an institution that requires things of us, so here are some ground rules:*

#### *1: Grades*

**There will be no grades in this class.** This does not mean you automatically get an A. At the end of the semester I will meet with each of you individually and we will discuss what grade you think you deserve for your work in the class. We will take into account your attendance (which I will track), your participation in class discussions, your reading journal, writing assignments, and most importantly, what you think you got out of the semester and any ideas or topics you were able to develop and explore your curiosity about. The path to an A means showing up ready for this meeting with all your class work in hand and evidence of what you have learned.

#### *2: Class Meetings are a TECH FREE SPACE*

It is essential you attend class for this experiment with no grades to work and you are expected to attend everyday. Yet, obviously, there are unavoidable reasons why you might miss a class or two. If you do miss a class, there are no formally excused absences, but keep track of why you missed class and we can discuss it at the end of the semester in our grade meeting. Always come if you are late, but you will need to keep track of this and talk it through at the end of the semester as well if it becomes a regular problem.

**In class, there are no devices allowed.** Laptops must stay in your bag and phones in your pockets for the entirety of the class session. We are using class time to practice taking time away from the constant addictive fog of digital distraction in the hopes of building attentive habits, together. If you do take out a device, you will get one warning to put it away and after a second time you will be asked to leave and counted as absent for that day.

**You must bring a physical copy of what we are reading (the book or a print out is fine) and your journal everyday. This is central to being prepared for class.**

### *3: Assignments:*

**Writing:** We will work on a variety of writing assignments through the semester. I would like us to develop prompts and expectations together through our collective curiosity. But if we are struggling, I do have some assignments at the ready. The goal is that everyone writing about 12 pages of formal writing by the end of the semester, to be collected and reviewed in our final meeting. I will collect this writing on certain days in the semester and offer feedback on your writing as we go and you are always welcome to revise it. Your formal papers should be typed, printed and stapled, and turned in during class time.

**Journal:** You also must keep a handwritten journal responding to your reading over the course of the semester. This should be a single notebook dedicated to this class. You should be writing at least a page of reflection on your reading each week and we will review it in the meeting at the end of the semester.

**ChatGPT and Large Language Generative AI models:** My hope is that you will resist using these applications for writing your papers. They are deeply flawed at this point. They will happily regurgitate false information they have scraped from online sources and have no mechanism for telling truth from falsehood. They are collecting data on you as you use them like any social media application that their parent companies run. And most importantly, they draw all their information and ideas from actual humans who have spent time and effort developing them, without properly citing those sources and giving credit to the hard human work their massive databases represent. They mask and obscure how we develop knowledge rather than reveal them.

That said, there is no reliable way for me as a teacher to know what is generated by AI and what is written by a human. The detection software that exists is itself deeply flawed and carries its own ethical problems. So let's work on the honor system. The outcome of your papers are not that important, they will not be graded. Rather, I am looking for you to show your engagement with the material through process. Writing is a type of thinking, and if you are doing your own thinking, that should be evident in a variety of ways as we work through the semester and in our final meeting. Since you don't have to stress about grades on individual assignments, you have no reason to take these shortcuts and cheat yourself of a learning opportunity you are paying for.

## **College of Arts and Science Policies**

### **Academic Integrity**

Plagiarized papers (work copied from a written text without documentation, a classmate's work, a previous assignment you have submitted for another class, or the internet) will earn a zero for the paper and potentially an "F" for the class. Using AI paperwriting such as Chat GPT or papermill website also counts as academic dishonesty. A record of this plagiarism may become a part of your



record in the English Department and potentially in the office of the chairperson of your major department and in the office of the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences.

A second occurrence of plagiarism in the class or in the English Department will result in a failing grade for the class and a recommendation of expulsion from the university. You should familiarize yourself with the Academic Code of Conduct at this link:

<http://www.howard.edu/policy/academic/student-conduct.html>

Safe Assign will be used with all submitted papers in this class. Within Blackboard, Safe Assign automatically checks students' papers for plagiarism as students submit them online. All submitted papers are checked against (a) public webpages, (2) ProQuest's scholarly databases, (3) a database of all papers submitted by students at Howard (including your own papers), and (4) a database of papers volunteered by students at Blackboard, Inc.'s client institutions.

### **Special Accommodations**

Howard University is committed to providing equal access for individuals with disabilities to all programs and services offered by the University.

The University policy and practice is to create an inclusive and accessible learning environment in compliance with all applicable federal, state, and local disability and anti-discrimination laws. If you have already registered with the Office of Student Services, please provide your schedule.

If you have a documented disability that requires accommodations but have not established services through the Office of Student Services, please do so as soon as possible. The Office facilitates the interactive process that establishes reasonable accommodations.

The office is located in the Odd Fellows Building at 1851 9th Street NW, Second Floor. Please contact Ms. Glennis Daniels-Bacchus, Director of Student Services at [glennis.danielsbacc@howard.edu](mailto:glennis.danielsbacc@howard.edu).

### **Incomplete Grades**

Incomplete grades will be submitted only in instances where documented emergencies occur near the end of the semester. A majority (over 70%) of the course's requirements must have already been met. The written request must occur prior to the submission of final grades.

### **Statement on Sex and Gender-Based Discrimination, Harassment and Violence**

Howard University is committed to creating a learning and working environment free from discrimination and harassment based on sex, gender, gender expression, gender identity, sexual orientation or marital status. The following forms of conduct are prohibited by the University's Title IX Policy: Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment, Gender-Based Discrimination or Harassment, Sexual Exploitation, Dating and Domestic Violence, Stalking, Retaliation, and Complicity (any act that

knowingly aids, facilitates, or encourages prohibited conduct by another person). It is important that you know the various campus resources and reporting options available to you if you have experienced or have any concerns related to sex or gender-based discrimination, harassment or violence.

You can always speak with a member of University administration, faculty or staff, but be aware that with the exception of Confidential Employees, all Howard University and Howard University Hospital employees and contractors—including faculty members—are considered Responsible Employees and are required to report any information regarding known or suspected prohibited conduct to the Title IX Office (TitleIX@howard.edu or 202-806-2550), no matter how they learn of it. Confidential Employees include licensed medical, clinical, mental health professionals, or clergy when acting in their professional roles in providing health or religious/spiritual services; and employees providing administrative/ operational or related support to these employees. Campus confidential resources include the Interpersonal Violence Prevention Program (phone: 202-238-2420), University Counseling Services (phone: 202-806-7540), Student Health Center (phone: 202-806- 7540), Howard University Hospital (phone: 202-865-1131), and the Chapel (phone: 202-806-7280).

The University's Title IX Policy on Prohibited Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment and Violence and Other Forms of Interpersonal Violence is available at:  
<http://www.howard.edu/secretary/documents/Howard-University-Interim-Policy-20171113.pdf>