Dr. Alaimo

Professor of English, Core Faculty Member, Environmental Studies
salaimo@uoregon.edu; https://www.stacyalaimo.com

ENG 392: American Novel: 20th Century

Spring 2021: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:15-3:45, remote, see Canvas for class zoom link.

Course Description:
Although reading novels is generally a solitary activity, the novel as a genre has not only encompassed a multitude of voices but has promoted social visions. The diverse set of novels in this class begin with William Faulkner’s weird tale of modernist alienation and isolation, moving toward more collective and political modes, with a Harlem Renaissance (nearly lost) classic and a (recently found) political novel by a Chinese American author. The second half of the class features texts that intertwine cultures and environments, starting with Louise Erdrich’s account of environmental and cultural devastation wrought by settler colonialism, to Chicana feminist perspectives on land and culture, concluding with a SF novel that plunges the reader into a strange but vibrant rewilding. While it would be impossible to do justice to the 20th century American novel in one term, the works in this class are striking not only for their vital content but for their experimental and provocative structure, form, voice, and narrative perspective. We will discuss how the novels seek to perform “cultural work”—shifting the political realities they inhabit—and how their interpretive puzzles and offbeat humor pull readers into the process of understanding personal, social, and environmental realities and imagining alternatives. Readings will consist of the following novels, along with excerpts of theory and criticism, biographies, and short videos: William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying; Zora Neal Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God, H.T. Tsiang, Hanging in Union Square; Louise Erdrich, Tracks; Ana Castillo, So Far from God; Jeff Vandermeer, Annihilation. Participation in zoom discussions, two exams, and three short essays.
Required Texts

- Zora Neal Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, [75th anniversary version]
- H.T. Tsiang, *Hanging in Union Square*
- Ana Castillo, *So Far from God*
- Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*; 978-0060972455
- Jeff Vandermeer, *Annihilation*
- PDFs of additional readings can be found in “Modules” and some will be listed as internet links on the syllabus (download the PDF of the syllabus.) Very short videos will also be included, available on the web.

Learning Objectives

1. Enhance your ability to interpret novels, asking *what* they mean, while learning to analyze them, paying attention to structural and stylistic features, asking *how* they mean and constructing your own original positions.
2. Productively engage with the elements of narrative analysis and the social, political, and environmental contexts and theories pertaining to each novel.
3. Consider the cultural work that a novel seeks to perform, in its context, and consider that aesthetic, ethical, social, and political intervention in terms of the present moment.
4. Improve your reading, literary analysis and interpretation, argumentation, and writing skills through the written assignments.
5. Improve your ability to speak in clear, focused ways and your ability to listen to and respond to the ideas of your peers, with respect and precision and an open mind, contributing to a cohesive and productive discussion.

Course Assessment

- Short Essays and Response to 3 Peer Essays. Three essays and responses to your peers’ essays are required. Post a two-page analysis and interpretation of a specific aspect of the reading, as described in the specific assignment; respond to 3 of your classmate’s essays, 10% each, 30% total. (No zoom class the day these are due—your discussion is online.)
- Mid Term Exam: 25% each
- Final Exam: 30%
- Participation: 15%

Grading Scheme

The final grade will be weighted according to the percentages listed above. The class uses a standard, 100 point grading scale, in which, A+ is 97-100, A is 94-96, A- is 90-93, B+ is 87-89, B is 84-86, B- is 80-83; etc., with Cs as 70s, Ds, as 60s, and F as 59 and below. Grading will be done on a 100 point scale.
Incomplete Policy
Incomplete.s will be considered in emergency situations. If you find yourself in an emergency that keeps you from completing the work in the course by the deadlines, please consult with an official U of O Advisor about your situation, seek counseling and support, and then contact your instructors.

Assignments

Preparation/Participation/Attendance: The participation grade will be based on your active contribution to the synchronous portion of the class. I won’t be grading on attendance per se, but rather, the quality and quantity of your active contributions to the discussion. Instead of an attendance policy, per se, participation will be graded, holistically, at the end of the term. There is no need to inform me about when or why you will be or were absent. It is in your best interest to attend class, of course, since active participation will help you do well on assignments and exams, and much of the course content will only be available in class, through the lectures, group work, and discussions. Every student is expected to come to every class with one interpretive/analytical discussion question and one page/passage for the class to close read and discuss together. Please be prepared: You’ll often need to post your discussion questions and/or page # of passage in the chat. I will keep track of quality and quantity of participation over the term.

Recommended: Paper Books and Abundant Annotation: I highly recommend that you purchase paper copies of the books and that you mark them up or use postage notes to flag important thematic and structural/stylistic features and to pose interpretive questions. There are often used copies available of these novels and you may also be able to get copies from your local or university library (in that case, post it notes, not pens). I also recommend that you keep a paper journal, that you can jot down notes on before, during, and after class. The more active you are, in terms of engaging with the literature, the more you will make the novels interesting to yourself and the more you will learn in the class. I recommend writing down a discussion question and choosing a passage for close reading, for each class (see above).

Three (+) Short Essays and Responses: Due by midnight on Wed. April 14th, Monday April 26, and Monday, May 10th. Instead of meeting as a class in Zoom the next day, you will comment on each other’s papers, having a virtual discussion. Submit a 700-750 word essay on the Canvas site, following the specific assignment for that week, by the deadline. The essay should post the word count at the top, have an engaging title, a short introduction ending with a thesis, and then a few paragraphs that analyze and interpret the literature, supporting the arguments with specific examples, usually quotes, from the text, and close readings of the quotes. The conclusion should include one or two questions for further discussion. (NB: it is crucial that you post your essay before the midnight deadline. It is not possible to submit something late for this assignment, because of the way that the peer review function in Canvas works—you will forfeit the whole assignment.) Then write a short response (5-7 sentences) to three people’s essays by the end of our regular class meeting. The first three essays are required, but if you miss the deadline or have an emergency or want to try to raise your
grade, you can do the fourth essay, to meet the three essay requirement or replace an earlier, lower grade.)

The 3 responses to your peer’s essays should be one paragraph, 5-7 sentences. The responses to your peer’s essays should focus on substantive matters of interpretation, analysis and argument—the actual ideas—rather than correcting punctuation or grammar. Focus on specific positive aspects of what your classmate has written—what new interpretations or interesting connections or thought provoking questions does the essay put forward? What did the essay reveal to you about the novel that you hadn’t thought of? Provide your own perspectives on the discussion questions or the arguments the author raises. Then, consider how their ideas could be complicated or extended and/or pose more interpretive questions that the essay provokes. Productively engage with ideas and arguments in a respectful manner.

Style/content: Try to be as clear, concise and precise as possible, packing as much meaning as you can into the word limit. Delete any words that do not contribute to the meaning. Keep developing vague or murky ideas to make them specific, potent, and revealing. Don’t bother explaining or summarizing the novel—we’ve all already read it—instead, focus on developing and supporting your own original, arguable, and illuminating interpretations.

Two Exams: The exams may contain some definition or other short answer questions, but most of the points will be from essays that ask you to analyze and interpret the readings as you argue for your own thesis about the question.

Volatile Content of the Class

Trigger warnings? Please be aware that the content of this class has not been censored in any way. The novels include death, violence, psychological distress, racism, sexism, offensive language, and more things that readers could find triggering. Most of the novels, however, are actively trying to engage with social problems through critique, different modes of humor, and through imagining alternative social visions. That said, please use your own judgement as to whether this is the best course for you.

Offensive language: It is important that every student feel comfortable and welcome in this class. Some American literature includes derogatory terms. While we need to understand and confront the history of those terms in order to understand them, we don’t need to voice them and perpetuate the violence they continue to do. So, the policy for such terms as the “n word,” will be, if reading or discussing a passage out loud, to say “n” or “ns,” rather than voicing the actual word. This policy will be also be used in the papers and exams. When quoting, write [n] or [ns]. Also, let’s not call any group of people “trash,” or use terms that degrade people’s class, race, gender, or sexuality. If there are other terms that people in class find objectionable, please contact me or raise the issue in class. This policy is one that the faculty of the English Department have discussed and support. We want to be sure to offer a supportive environment for all.
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Content of class: While it is impossible to represent the incredibly wide range of backgrounds, cultures, identities, and perspectives in the short space of a 10 week term, especially since the each individual novel occupies a chunk of time, I have constructed the course to represent a wide range of perspectives, while choosing novels with markedly different styles and forms, that resonate with each other in striking ways. The content of the class include the social and political context of the novels, and various concepts, frameworks, and arguments from indigenous, race and ethnic studies; gender studies; environmental studies, and more.

Pronouns: If you feel comfortable posting your pronouns on your Zoom profile, that would be helpful. I don’t usually refer to students in the third person, so pronouns are rarely an issue in class, but I respect the importance of gender identity and strongly support transgender and nonbinary students. (I have a transgender and nonbinary person in my family). Feel free to contact me with any concerns.

Accessibility: Students and faculty are required to work with the AEC to help ensure equitable access to the class. Please make sure to start there, but feel free to contact me if you need additional support or assistance or want to clarify the official instructions. It is important to me that this class be open and accessible to everyone.

Contacting Instructor

Email: Feel free to email me at any time! It is best to use my regular email, emailing me directly, instead of through Canvas: salaimo@uoregon.edu. Canvas email is clunky and odd. But if you have general questions about the class, please post in Canvas, Discussions, “Questions about Procedures.”

Office Hours: Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, 4-5 and by appointment. Note: It is best to email me for an appointment during these times, in case several people arrive at the office hours at the same time, or in case I have to attend exams or meetings. Office hours are optional but I’m always happy to meet with students. Zoom: https://uoregon.zoom.us/j/92685146278?pwd=OUQzTmdpYkZaSnM3WDFNRFR2Tk g1dz09 Meeting ID: 926 8514 6278, Passcode: 831913.

Questions?

- Please feel free to raise any questions you may have at the start of any class.
- If you are confused about the procedures and format of the course: Please read the syllabus carefully and then spend some time exploring the different categories on the Canvas page. If you have a question that the rest of the class may also find helpful, please post on the ongoing “Discussion” in Canvas called “Questions about Procedures. . .” You can also post advice for other students about finding used books, etc. on that site.
- If you’d like to discuss the content of the class, continuing a discussion or offering more information or a relevant source, ask a specific question or make
an announcement, Canvas, Discussions, “Ongoing: Discussions and Questions about (or relevant to) Content.” Feel free to post here!

**Resources and Help:** Because this has been a rough year!

- Please be kind and compassionate toward yourself and try to take care of your physical and mental health, whether that means eating healthy, getting enough sleep, spending time outdoors, exercise, yoga, meditation, the support of family and friends, or professional support. Prioritize your own well being! : )
- Take advantage of the mental health resources and self-care resources that U of O offers: [https://counseling.uoregon.edu](https://counseling.uoregon.edu).
- If anyone needs help with food, transportation, finances, healthcare, and more, see: [https://blogs.uoregon.edu/basicneeds/](https://blogs.uoregon.edu/basicneeds/)
- Need help with technology? [https://service.uoregon.edu/TDClient/2030/Portal/Home/?ID=bf51cccd-fd92-4083-b8a3-b47d8a0edb6c](https://service.uoregon.edu/TDClient/2030/Portal/Home/?ID=bf51cccd-fd92-4083-b8a3-b47d8a0edb6c)
- Writing Tutoring: [https://engage.uoregon.edu/tutoring/](https://engage.uoregon.edu/tutoring/)
U of O Policies, From the Provost’s Office

Accessible Education - (see https://aec.uoregon.edu/best-practices-faculty for more information.) “The University of Oregon is working to create inclusive learning environments. Please notify me if there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in disability-related barriers to your participation. You are also encouraged to contact the Accessible Education Center in 360 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or uoaec@uoregon.edu.” “Please let me know within the first two weeks of the term if you need assistance to fully participate in the course. Participation includes access to lectures, web-based information, in-class activities, and exams. The Accessible Education Center (http://aec.uoregon.edu) works with students to provide an instructor notification letter that outlines accommodations and adjustments to class design that will enable better access. Contact the Accessible Education Center for assistance with access or disability-related questions or concerns.”

Academic Misconduct - You can find faculty resources on academic misconduct here: https://dos.uoregon.edu/faculty-resources “The University Student Conduct Code (available at conduct.uoregon.edu) defines academic misconduct. Students are prohibited from committing or attempting to commit any act that constitutes academic misconduct. By way of example, students should not give or receive (or attempt to give or receive) unauthorized help on assignments or examinations without express permission from the instructor. Students should properly acknowledge and document all sources of information (e.g. quotations, paraphrases, ideas) and use only the sources and resources authorized by the instructor. If there is any question about whether an act constitutes academic misconduct, it is the students’ obligation to clarify the question with the instructor before committing or attempting to commit the act. Additional information about a common form of academic misconduct, plagiarism, is available at https://researchguides.uoregon.edu/citing-plagiarism.”

Reporting Obligations: “I am a designated reporter. For information about my reporting obligations as an employee, please see Employee Reporting Obligations on the Office of Investigations and Civil Rights Compliance (OICRC) website. Students experiencing any form of prohibited discrimination or harassment, including sex or gender-based violence, may seek information and resources at safe.uoregon.edu, respect.uoregon.edu, or investigations.uoregon.edu or contact the non-confidential Title IX office/Office of Civil Rights Compliance (541-346-3123), or Dean of Students offices (541-346-3216), or call the 24-7 hotline 541-346-SAFE for help. I am also a mandatory reporter of child abuse. Please find more information at Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect.”

Mental Health and Wellness: “Life at college can be very complicated. Students often feel overwhelmed or stressed, experience anxiety or depression, struggle with relationships, or just need help navigating challenges in their life. If you’re facing such challenges, you don’t need to handle them on your own--there’s help and support on campus. University Health Services help students cope with difficult emotions and life stressors. If you need general resources on coping with stress or want to talk with another student who has been in the same place as you, visit the Duck Nest (located in the EMU on the ground floor) and get help from one of the specially trained Peer Wellness Advocates. Find out more at health.uoregon.edu/ducknest. University Counseling Services (UCS) has a team of dedicated staff members to support you with your concerns, many of whom can provide identity-based support. All clinical services are free and confidential. Find out more at counseling.uoregon.edu or by calling 541-346-3227 (anytime UCS is closed, the After-Hours Support and Crisis Line is available by calling this same number).”

Basic Needs: Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or who lacks a safe and stable place to live and believes this may affect their performance in the course is urged to contact the Dean of Students Office (346-3216, 164 Oregon Hall) for support. This UO webpage includes resources for food, housing, healthcare, childcare, transportation, technology, finances, and legal support: https://blogs.uoregon.edu/basicneeds/food/

Religious Accommodation: The university makes reasonable accommodations, upon request, for students who are unable to attend a class for religious obligations or observance reasons, as outlined by the university discrimination policy (Section GG). To request accommodations for this course, visit the Office of the Registrar’s website and complete and submit the “Student Religious Accommodation Request” form prior to the end of the second week of the term.
Schedule (this may be adjusted)

Please read or watch whatever is listed before class, bringing your copies of the books, as well as your ideas and questions to class.

Week One. Introductions
Tues. March 30:
• Introductions and Lecture on Modernisms

Thurs. April 1:
• First third of *As I Lay Dying*
• 4 minute video, biographical intro to Faulkner: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuQIZ7V9C7U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuQIZ7V9C7U)

Week Two
Tues. April 6:
• Second third of *As I Lay Dying*

Thurs. April 8:
• Finish *As I Lay Dying*

Week Three
Tues. April 13:
• First third of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Foreword and chapters 1-6, plus Chronology, 211-219
• “The Harlem Renaissance” 3 minute video: [https://blackhistoryintwominutes.com/harlem-renaissance/](https://blackhistoryintwominutes.com/harlem-renaissance/)

Wednesday, April 14:
• First Short Essay due by midnight.
• Second third of *Their Eyes*, through chapter 16.
Thurs. April 15:
- Respond to 3 essays online, in lieu of zoom class. [No zoom class]

Week Four
Tues. April 20:
- Finish *Their Eyes, plus Afterword*

Thurs. April 22:
- *Hanging on Union Square*, Introduction, Chronology, Act 1 p. ix-34.
  [Please avail yourselves of the notes, which can be found starting on p. 205]

Week Five
Monday, April 26:
- Short Essay due by midnight
- *Hanging*, Acts II and III, 45-131

Tues. April 27:
- Respond to 3 essays online, in lieu of zoom class. [No zoom class.]

Thurs. April 29:
- *Hanging*, Act IV and Afterword and Appendices, 132-204.

Week Six
Tues. May 4:
- **Mid-term exam, due** Tues. May 4, 2:00pm.

Thurs. May 6:
- *Tracks*, first third
- “The Dawes Act of 1887” 8 min. video
  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKQD08Zr5IU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKQD08Zr5IU)

Week Seven
Monday May 10:
- Third Essay due by midnight.
- *Tracks*, second third

Tues. May 11:
- Respond to 3 essays online, in lieu of zoom class. [No zoom class]
Thurs. May 13:
• Finish *Tracks*

**Week Eight**

Tues. May 18:
• *So Far From God*, first third
• “Ana Castillo, Today’s Revolutionary Women of Color,” 4 min. video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_YhsGdikBw

Thurs. May 20:
• *So Far From God*, second third

**Week Nine**

Tues. May 25:
• Finish *So Far From God*

Thurs. May 27:
• First Third, *Annihilation*
• Jeff Vandermeer, “Annihilation, Utopia, and Climate Change,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fr7ERELf_EU

**Week Ten.**

• Tues. June 1: Optional short essay due on either *So Far from God* or *Annihilation*, for grade replacement or in case of previous emergencies. Note: we do have class on Tuesday.

Tues. June 1
• Second Third, *Annihilation*
• Discuss *Annihilation* in class

Thurs. June 3,
• Finish *Annihilation*

**Final Exam:** Due by 2:00pm, Wednesday June 9

*Enjoy the summer!*