

“Multiethnic Nativisms”

Course description: This interdisciplinary course considers the multiple incarnations of “nativism” and grapples with its usages – and applications – in political and academic discourses. Nativism is most commonly used to describe America’s political xenophobia, responsible for the creation of political parties, such as the mid-nineteenth-century Know-Nothing Party as well as for discriminatory anti-immigration acts, such as the Immigration Act of 1924. Nativism is a relevant topic of study today, as our country continues to engage in assimilation debates and grapples with issues of “belongingness,” legitimacy, rights to land, and citizenship claims.

Throughout America’s history as a nation, and as evidenced by the nation’s literary and political products, those living within the confines of the nation have been dramatically influenced and affected by attitudes that nostalgically prefer an (imaginarily homogenous) “previous American” to the polyglot, heterogeneous America in which people actually live. What it means to “be native” in America changes over time. It does not (always) have to do with aboriginality or the accidental location of one’s birth. Similarly, then, the meaning of “nativisms” often seems abstruse. This course directly addresses this difficulty and aims to productively examine America’s many nativisms, and in doing so, the many literary conceptions of what it means to *be* native.

In this course, students will examine nativism across disciplines, in its political, anthropological, cognitive psychological, and literary instances. In many areas of study and expression, scholars and artists have examined, and attempted to construct, a space of belonging to nation, sometimes based exclusively on race and sometimes in absolute reaction to and repudiation of this kind of essentialist nation-construction. America’s most famous scholar of nativism, John Higham, productively introduces the topic and illuminates its political import. He instructs students of nativism to not simply reduce “nativism to little more than a general ethnocentric habit of mind,” as this “blurs its historical significance” (*Strangers in the Land* 3). Nativism, for Higham, is defined as an American belief that “some influence originating abroad threatened the very life” of the American nation, and therefore, nativism should be defined as intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e., “un-American”) connections (4). Importantly, these “un-American” connection can be borne, nativists accuse, by supposedly inassimilable ethnic or social Others with long ties to America—ranging from Native peoples and African Americans to women and homosexuals. These people have long suffered the impacts of nativism and, ultimately, have created textual reactions against it. We will examine these textual reactions over the course of this semester and we will outfit ourselves with theoretical and historical lenses that will help us to see literary nativism, and refusals of it, more clearly.

Course requirements: In this fifteen-week seminar, students will read foundational texts from the disciplines mentioned above, some of which use “nativism” in a far more elemental way than political theorists do (linguists, for example) and others who see an inchoate nativism in previously marginalized ethnic and racial groups who are seeking to reassert original rights and a narrative of permanence in their native land (as we see in anthropology and at times, postcolonial studies). In addition to the texts listed below that students will read and be prepared to discuss each week during seminar, students will be responsible for composing written responses of varying lengths, in varying contexts. Students will complete six two-page response papers, which students will post on WebCT, a mid-term paper of eight pages, and a final article-length paper at the end of the

course. Students will also deliver research presentations during the thirteenth and fourteenth week of the class.

Primary texts:

John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*
Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*
Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*
Randolph Bourne, *Transnational America*
James Fenimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer*
Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman*
Jean Toomer, *Cane*
Zitkala-Sa, *American Indian Stories*
Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods*
Josefina Niggli, *Mexican Village*
Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Supplementary texts (to be posted on WebCT):

Over the course of the semester, I will provide students will critical readings by the following authors (among others): Benedict Anderson, Noam Chomsky, Rey Chow, James Clifford, Jacques Derrida, Walter Benn Michaels, Jenny Sharpe, Armitijit Singh and Peter Schmidt, and Gerald Vizenor. Rather than listing these on the schedule below, I will alert you to these supplementary reading requirements with updates on our WebCT site, so do keep yourself abreast of those developments.

Course content:

Class participation and attendance	10%
Midterm essay	20%
Final essay	40%
Research presentation	10%
WebCT response postings	20%

Course calendar:

As this is a graduate-level course, we will be reading, generally, one text per week, supplemented by critical and theoretical works.

- Week One: Higham
- Week Two: Las Casas
Post response one to WebCT
- Week Three: Whitman
- Week Four: Bourne
Post response two to WebCT
- Week Five: Cooper
- Week Six: Dixon
Post response three to WebCT
- Week Seven: Toomer
- Week Eight: **Midterm papers due**
- Week Nine: Zitkala-Sa
Post response four to WebCT

Week Ten: Dunbar

Week Eleven: Niggli
Post response five to WebCT

Week Twelve: Silko

Week Thirteen: Student research presentations
Post response six to WebCT

Week Fourteen: Student research presentations

Week Fifteen: **Final papers due**