Special Field Exam
Submitted for Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Ph.D. in American Studies

COURSE PROPOSAL

ENGL 596

Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture

Purdue University

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part I: Syllabus 3
  Course Description and Requirements 3
  Syllabus 5
  Bibliography 9
Part II: Rationale and Explanation 13
Part III: Annotation of Readings 18
COURSE DESCRIPTION

“Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture” is a variable content, graduate-level course. Although the course features many of the classic texts of the ethnic/American canon, it also presents students with the historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts out of which ethnic texts have emerged in the United States. In addition to representative works of ethnic literature by authors as diverse as Maxine Hong Kingston, Jerre Mangione, Anzia Yezierska, and Richard Wright, students will be required to read material and hear lectures on a variety of ethnic/American histories that will enable them to contextualize the literary works. Students will also read and be expected to discuss a number of essays on theories of ethnicity by scholars such as Werner Sollors, Fredrik Barth, and George Devereux. The ultimate aim of this course is to provoke students to think about the role ethnicity plays not only in American literature, but, more broadly, in American culture.

Required Texts:

Helen Barolini, Umbertina (1979)
Pietro di Donato, Christ in Concrete (1939)
Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (1952)
Louise Erdrich, Tracks (1988)
Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color (1998)
Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior (1976)
Nella Larsen, Quicksand and Passing (1928, 1929)
Jerre Mangione, Mount Allegro (1942)
Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity (1986)
Ronald Takaki, A Different Mirror (1992)
Arne Tangherlini, Leo@fergarides.com (1999)
Richard Wright, Native Son (1940)
Anzia Yezierska, Bread Givers (1925)
Course packet
Course Requirements:

15%  Book Review (5-6 pages) Due during week 6. Students will select a major work of literary criticism or theory from a supplemental bibliography. They will be expected to read the work closely and provide a detailed review of its main arguments and potential shortcomings. Although the review, by nature, will contain a small amount of summary, the majority of the paper should be devoted to analyzing the effectiveness of the author’s argument. What primary works does the author use in support of his or her thesis? What secondary works does the author appear to be building upon or refuting? Commentary regarding the author’s writing style, though valid, should remain brief.

25%  Mid-term Exam  To be administered during week 8. The exam will cover material presented in the first half of the semester. The exam will focus primarily on ethnic literature and theory, but students are encouraged to incorporate their knowledge of various ethnic theories into their essays.

35%  End-of-Semester Project  (15-20 pages) Due during week 14. Students will be expected to perform independent research and write an essay of ethnic literary criticism, ethnic literary theory, or ethnic theory in general. Students will be free to select their sources from the supplementary bibliography or elsewhere, but should check with the instructor regarding their topic to make sure it is a feasible one.

25%  Final Exam  To be administered during finals week. The exam will be similar in format to the mid-term. Although it will focus primarily on material presented in the latter half of the semester, students will be required to synthesize issues, theories, and literary works from throughout the semester in order to completely fulfill the essays’ requirements.

No discussion??
Please note: * indicates that the reading is located in the course packet.

** indicates that the reading is in Werner Sollors, ed. *Theories of Ethnicity*

** Week 1 – What is Ethnicity?/Ethnic Theory **

** Werner Sollors, “Foreword: Theories of American Ethnicity,” x-xliv


** Fredrik Barth, “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries,” 294-324

** Abner Cohen, “The Lesson of Ethnicity,” 370-84

* Felix Stefanile, “The Americanization of the Immigrant”;
  * “How I Changed my Name, Felice”

** Week 2 – What is Ethnicity?/Ethnic Theory (cont’d) **

Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*

* Charles Chesnutt, “The Wife of his Youth”

** Week 3 – Ethnic History/Ethnic Literature **

Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror*

** Week 4 – Ethnic History/Ethnic Literature (cont’d) **

Jerre Mangione, *Mount Allegro*

* Justin Vitiello, “Sicilian Folk Narrative Versus Sicilian-American Literature: Mangione’s Mount Allegro”

* Franco Mulas, “A MELUS Interview: Jerre Mangione”
Week 5 – Ethnic History/Literature (cont’d)

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

* Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Exposition Address”
* W.E.B Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” and “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington”
* W. T. Andrews, “The Black Migration”
* Alain Locke, “The New Negro”
* Will Herberg, “Marxism and the American Negro”

Week 6 – Ethnic History/Literature (cont’d)

Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*

* Sidner Larson, “The Fragmentation of a Tribal People in Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*”
* Nancy J. Peterson, “History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks*”

Week 7 – Ethnicity and the Working Class

Pietro Di Donato, *Christ in Concrete*

* Dorothée von Huene-Greenberg, “A MELUS Interview: Pietro di Donato”
* Nicholas Coles, “Mantraps: Men at Work in Pietro di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* and Thomas Bell’s *Out of this Furnace*”
* Mariolina Salvatori, “Women’s Work in Novels of Immigrant Life”
Week 8 – Ethnic Literature and Genre: Naturalism

Richard Wright, *Native Son*

Week 9 -- Ethnic Generational Dynamics

Helen Barolini, *Umbertina*


* Anthony J. Tamburri, “Umbertina: The Italian/American Woman’s Experience”

Week 10 -- Ethnicity and Gender

Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers*

* Mary V. Dearborn, “Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture”

* Thomas Ferraro, “‘Working Ourselves Up’: Middle-Class Realism and the Reproduction of Patriarchy in *Bread Givers*”

Week 11 -- Ethnicity and Gender (cont’d)

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*


* Deborah Woo, “Maxine Hong Kingston: The Ethnic Writer and the Burden of Dual Authenticity”

* Sue Ann Johnston, “Empowerment Through Mythological Imaginings in *Woman Warrior*”

Week 12 – Race as Ethnicity/Ethnicity as Race

Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*
**Week 13 – Racial Passing**

Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* and *Passing*

Deborah McDowell, Introduction to *Quicksand* and *Passing*

* Martha J. Cutter, “Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen’s Fiction”

**Week 14 – Ethnic Passing**

Abraham Cahan, *Yekl* and “The Imported Bridegroom”

* Elaine Ginsberg, “Introduction: The Politics of Passing”

* Sanford Marovitz, Excerpt from *Abraham Cahan.*

**Week 15 – Postmodern Ethnicity**

Arne Tangherlini, *leo@fergusrules.com*

* Michael M. J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory”

COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY


RATIONALE AND EXPLANATION

This is a variable-content, graduate-level course on ethnicity in American literature and culture. Should the course be offered at the undergraduate level, the reading would have to be reduced by one-third or so. ENGL 596 will attempt to get students thinking about two very broad questions: 1.) What is the role of ethnicity in American literature? and 2.) What is the role of ethnicity in American culture? Throughout the various readings and lectures on ethnic literature, ethnic literary criticism, ethnic history, and ethnic theory, students will be presented with a panoply of ways of answering these questions. Whether the course is offered on a Monday/Wednesday/Friday schedule or a Tuesday/Thursday schedule, ENGL 596 will roughly amount to one-third lecture and two-thirds class discussion. The course assumes no background knowledge of the various ethnic groups discussed: the readings and lectures will provide much of the historical background necessary to discuss the works as cultural phenomena. Indeed, much of the course will be devoted to exploring the interrelationship between ethnic histories and their respective literatures.

As a means of more effectively exploring the aforementioned questions, this course is divided into a series of units that approach American ethnicity from a variety of critical angles. These units point to a number of key questions that will guide the course throughout the semester.

For introductory purposes, the course poses the question “What is ethnicity?” Is it a functional category, which, at its best, contains positive cultural content, as George
Devereux would have us believe? Or is it better defined by the divisive, artificial boundaries it creates, as Fredrik Barth argues? Furthermore, what are we to make of Werner Sollors’ model, in which forces of freely willed consent and ethnic descent continuously interact to produce the ongoing process that is ethnicity? Is this an apt method of describing ethnicity as it has existed in American society? How does Sollors’ theory play itself out in ethnic/American literature?

Much of this course will be devoted to discussing ethnic/American history. Students will be expected to ponder how the raw material of these various ethnic histories makes us rethink American history and culture. Are we, as Oscar Handlin argues, a nation whose history consists of a series of uprooted nationalities? Furthermore, what is the relationship between ethnic history and ethnic literature? Is ethnic literature a “mirror” of its corresponding ethnic history, or, rather, a creative representation of it? To use William Boelhower’s term, how faithful should the ethnic writer be expected to remain to the “facts” of his or her ethnic “encyclopedia”?

Keeping in mind the force of history in the works of ethnic/American writers, students will be expected to consider the powerful historical and literary cross-section of ethnicity and class. What troubles do poverty visit upon the lives of ethnic characters? How does ethnicity exacerbate the plight of the ethnic character? How does ethnic community alleviate the pain of working-class status? Analogously, what do we find at the literary crossroads of ethnicity and gender? How does gender contribute to the empowerment or alienation of the ethnic subject? How do traditional Old World and American gender roles figure into the lives of ethnic female protagonists?
From a more aesthetic perspective, we will examine genre in the writings of ethnic/American authors, with a particular focus on naturalism. In class, we will discuss the manner in which ethnic characters have been portrayed in realist and naturalist fiction by so-called “non-ethnic” writers, such as Henry James, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane. We will then compare these “mainstream” representations with the “ethnic naturalism” of writers like Richard Wright, Pietro di Donato, and Abraham Cahan. The ensuing discussions should provoke a number of questions. For instance, what about ethnic history lends itself toward literary naturalism? Also, is full-fledged pessimistic naturalism really an option for the ethnic writer, who actually participates in the community of which he is writing? How does the paradox of ethnic naturalism make itself apparent in the fiction of ethnic/American writers?

From a more sociological perspective, we will examine generational dynamics in ethnic history and literature. What trends do we notice as ethnic groups travel from generation to generation? How do inter-generational conflicts seem to play out in ethnic history? In ethnic literature? What are we to make of Marcus Hansen’s axiom, “What the son chooses to forget, the grandson chooses to remember?” Is his generational theory too reductive? Or does it serve metaphorical purposes when reading ethnic/American literature that deals with generational conflict and change?

Once we have examined the many possible meanings of the term “ethnicity,” we will attempt to tackle the equally precarious territory of “race.” Furthermore, we will examine the connections between the two terms. Is race merely an aspect of ethnicity as Sollors claims? Or is it a different quality altogether that should be kept wholly separate? Is there any theoretical danger in building an impassable wall between “race” and
“ethnicity”? Can we make cross-cultural comparisons between, say African Americans and Jewish Americans if we do not seek to find some theoretical connection between the two terms?

To further complicate the discussion on the relationship between ethnicity and race, we will discuss passing as a sociological and literary construct in both African Americana and ethnic Americana. Although passing as an African/American literary phenomenon has been well-documented, as Earl Lewis writes, “[t]he story of European immigrants ‘passing’ for white is one of the little-explored chapters in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century U.S. history.” This class will attempt to determine if passing is a feasible theoretical mechanism for explicating certain ethnic/American literary texts. Indeed, recent texts by Werner Sollors and Elaine Ginsberg have given favor to the idea that passing includes far more cultural transgressions than those operating along lines of “black” and “white.”

Finally, this class will examine the troubling issue of postmodern ethnicity. We will discuss writings by William Boelhower and Michael M. J. Fischer to try to determine if there is even a place for ethnicity in an increasingly teletronic and computerized world. Is ethnicity impossible in a world where postmodern cynicism and solipsism seem poised to squelch the ideal togetherness of ethnicity? What can ethnicity teach us about community in the postmodern world?

In the final analysis, this course will not promise to have definite answers to these troubling questions, but more importantly, it will get students thinking critically about them. Hopefully students will begin to reflect upon the force of ethnicity in their own lives or in the lives of others they know. If nothing else, this course will cause students to
realize that ethnicity is literally everywhere one looks in the United States, often where we least expect it. We cannot but rethink our assumptions about American culture when we consider the pervasiveness of ethnicity.

1. Why are you posing these particular questions? Why do you regard them as salient?

2. Do you plan to mention any hypotheses as to the way ethnicity distorts the more typical narrative of Amer. lifecite? Does the formulation of "ethnic" + "non-ethnic" undermine any reformulation of Amer. Can Anglo-Saxon writers be subjected to ethnic analysis?

3. Why no conclusion? As of the class discussion?
ANOTATIONS OF READINGS

Week 1 – What is Ethnicity? / Ethnic Theory

** Werner Sollors, “Foreword: Theories of American Ethnicity,” x-xliv


** Fredrik Barth, “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries,” 294-324

** Abner Cohen, “The Lesson of Ethnicity,” 370-84

* Felix Stefanile, “The Americanization of the Immigrant”;
  * “How I Changed My Name, Felice”

The semester begins with four readings written by leading ethnic theorists of the last thirty years. Before plunging headlong into the ethnic literature on the syllabus, students should have a good sense of what ethnicity is, and these readings will help students begin their critical thinking on the subject. The Devereux, Barth, and Cohen essays are classics in their field, while Sollors’s foreword to *Theories of Ethnicity* magnificently describes many of the conflicting views in this hotly contested field of ethnicity.

Sollors’s foreword delineates a number of the scholarly battlegrounds in ethnic studies. Sollors discusses the Greek origins of the word “ethnic” and underscores the paradox of ethnicity potentially meaning both the “otherness” shared by underprivileged Americans and a “sense of general peoplehood” shared by all Americans. The author then proceeds to consider a number of conflicting definitions of ethnicity before deciding upon what he has determined to be the best definition, R. A. Schermerhorn’s theory of an ethnic group as:

a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one of more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Examples of such symbolic elements are: kinship patterns, physical contiguity . . . , religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypal features, or any combination of these. A necessary accompaniment is some consciousness of kind among members of the group.
Sollors proceeds to examine a number of problems in ethnic studies, such as the conflation of ethnicity and class, the content of modern ethnic identification, the implications of the ethnic boundary, assimilation, pluralism, and the always controversial race-as-ethnicity debate. Sollors' essay will not only serve as an excellent introduction for the course, but for that week's readings as well, as he makes reference to George Devereux, Fredrik Barth, and Abner Cohen.

Fredrik Barth's famous essay "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries" (1969) will inevitably strike a strong chord with many students. His argument is that ethnic groups are not so much "culture-bearing units" as they are "organizational types" by which groups distinguish themselves in society. As a result, the most salient feature of an ethnic group is not so much the cultural "stuff" it ostensibly possesses but the boundary that separates it from other groups.

Abner Cohen finds Barth's argument to be circular. In "The Lesson of Ethnicity" (1974), Cohen argues that one cannot hold that people are of an ethnic group simply because they consider themselves to be of that ethnic group. However, Cohen believes that ethnicity has to do with more than simply the cultural "stuff"; ethnicity, for Cohen, though culturally based, varies as the "struggle for resources" among ethnic groups intensifies. Consequently, class plays a great part in how "ethnic" a group becomes.

George Devereux's essay "Ethnic Identity: Its Logical Foundations and its Dysfunctions" (1975) sheds a great deal of light on how ethnic group identity forms and plays itself out in public life. Devereux distinguishes between "ethnic personality" and "ethnic identity." While the former consists of objective data collected from the observation of an ethnic group, the latter refers to how one subjectively perceives his or her ethnicity. Ethnic dysfunctionality occurs when one's ethnicity is primarily dissociative; that is, when subject A claims to be of ethnic group X because he or she is not of group Y or group Z. The real trouble occurs once the ethnic subject begins viewing ethnicity hierarchically, and one need only conjure up images of American Indian removal or Nazi Germany to demonstrate this line of thinking carried to its logical extreme. According to Devereux, ethnicity is most functional when it is more associative than dissociative, and when the ethnic subject places his or her ethnicity alongside a number of other potential "class identities, whose unduplicable accumulation is . . . the very basis of an authentic identity." Perhaps Saul Bellow put it best when he asserted that though he is indeed Jewish, American, and a writer, he is also a hockey fan, but scholars seem far less interested in that!

This week's reading concludes with a pair of Felix Stefanić poems, which, though brief, encompass so many of the aspects of ethnicity and ethnic literature we will be discussing throughout the semester, including assimilation, ethnic memory, childhood, family, and Old World culture. Hopefully, students will be able to begin applying the ethnic theory they have absorbed to these little gems of contemporary Italian/American literature.
Week 2 – What is Ethnicity?/Ethnic Theory (cont’d)

Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity

* Charles Chesnutt, “The Wife of his Youth”

This week’s reading features a major classic of ethnic studies, Werner Sollors’s *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986). Sollors views ethnicity as an ongoing process propelled by the continual conflict between forces of consent and descent in American society. To Sollors, descent consists of those aspects of one’s ethnicity that exist simply due to the culture into which one is born. In Sollors’s view of America, everyone is ethnic with varying degrees of Old World ties of descent, ties usually associated with a foreign country. Sollors writes that “descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of ‘substance’ (by blood or nature) … Descent language emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities.” On the other hand, “consent” refers to one’s ability to act as a “free agent” in the construction of one’s identity. It is a reflection of the subject’s own conscious intervention in identity construction. Through consent, one can choose from an infinite variety of alternatives. One can adopt aspects of other cultural or ethnic groups, or even critically examine one’s own culture of descent. As Sollors writes, “the realm of descent is itself subject to consent.” According to Sollors, the ongoing dialogue of consent and descent not only describes the history of ethnic America, but of America in general. He writes that “conflicts between descent and consent in American literature … can tell us much about the creation of an American culture out of diverse pre-American pasts.”

Throughout *Beyond Ethnicity*, Sollors offers numerous readings of consent and descent at work in American literature. One story he discusses in considerable detail is “The Wife of His Youth” (1899), by Charles Chesnutt. In “The Wife of His Youth,” the protagonist Mr. Ryder has been presented with a choice between remaining within the cultural confines of his African/American past and accepting a white future in which, he hopes, cultured, light-skinned blacks will be absorbed into the white “race.” Mr. Ryder opts for the latter, as evidenced by his involvement in a racialist, elitist social organization, the Groveland Blue Vein Society. During the story, however, the appearance of Ryder’s impoverished and uneducated former slave wife forces him to reconsider his options. In the end, he accepts the “wife of his youth” despite his potential fall from grace with the Blue Veins. Sollors presents Mr. Ryder’s dilemma as a decision between the protagonist’s “old world” culture of descent and a modernized, urban-American culture of consent. Although Sollors argues that the story ends with a clearcut, if unrealistic, acceptance of the former, there is evidence to indicate that Ryder might, in fact, be attempting a compromise between his cultures of consent and descent. Nevertheless, the story provides an excellent example of, as Sollors states, “how the tension between consent and descent could be fictionalized by American writers who had a sense of the American as well as the pre-American side of their existence.”
Week 3 – Ethnic History/Ethnic Literature


Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (1993) is an ambitious attempt at a comprehensive history of multicultural America. Rather than "fragment American society, studying each group separately, in isolation from the other groups and the whole," as many ethnic monographs do, Takaki’s work acts as a synthesis that not only includes many groups, but shows them in relationship to each other and the American whole.

Throughout the book, William Shakespeare’s aboriginal American character Caliban, from *The Tempest*, serves as a metaphor for American "otherness" and Anglo/American responses to "otherness." Takaki places the beginnings of a British ideology of racial superiority in the seventeenth century with England’s attempts to justify her treatment of the Irish and the Native Americans, both of whom are comparable to Caliban in their supposed racial inferiority. Takaki argues, then, that Americanization is a process by which ethnic and racial groups attempt to elevate themselves out of a Caliban-like status.

Relying heavily, but not exclusively, upon secondary ethnic monographs, articles, and works of literature, Takaki presents, according to the above model of American "otherness" and assimilation, concise colonial, antebellum, postbellum, and twentieth-century histories of Native Americans, African Americans, Irish Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Jewish Americans. In each example, the ethnic Caliban encounters American brutality, violence, harsh laboring and living conditions, and general feelings of difference in an effort to become acceptable to the dominant American culture. To support this thesis, Takaki convincingly provides examples such as the harsh treatment of Native Americans in colonial American history and their "justified" extermination due to cultural, religious, and racial inferiority. Takaki also gives examples of negative African/American stereotypes ("childlike and mentally deficient, . . . criminals") and the resultant disfranchisement of blacks in late-nineteenth-century America. Also, the author powerfully describes the brutal agricultural work performed by Japanese/American laborers in California that led to no greater acceptance in American society than the Japanese had experienced as new immigrants.

Takaki’s tale of American "otherness" is especially effective when it distinguishes between the experiences of white ethnics and Americans of non-white racial groups. For instance, Irish Americans, though long treated as "other" within American society, were eventually able to use their visible "whiteness" to attain political and socioeconomic power, often at the expense of those from less assimilated racial and ethnic groups. In general, Takaki gives rather short shrift to white ethnics in *A Different Mirror*. To compensate for this, much of this week's lecture will be devoted to providing brief histories of Italian/American and Jewish/American immigration and life in early twentieth-century urban America.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to be too critical of a book that actually attempts that which so many other historians have been merely calling for—a comprehensive history of
America in all of its ethnic and racial difference. *A Different Mirror* actually does reflect reality in America quite well – as defined more by its diversity than anything else.

**Week 4 – Ethnic History/Ethnic Literature (cont’d)**

Jerre Mangione, *Mount Allegro*

* Justin Vitiello, “Sicilian Folk Narrative versus Sicilian-American Literature: Mangione’s *Mount Allegro*”

* Franco Mulas, “A MELUS Interview: Jerre Mangione”

This week’s reading features an undisputed classic of ethnic/American literature, Jerre Mangione’s *Mount Allegro* (1943), the story of a young Sicilian/American man’s life in and departure from the rich surroundings of multi-ethnic Rochester. In this autobiography, thinly veiled as fiction, Mangione depicts himself as a man who, only after spending a considerable amount of time out of “Little Italy,” including a brief trip to his ancestral Sicily, could make sense of his identity as an Italian American, or more specifically, as a Sicilian American. In *Mount Allegro*, Mangione cleverly weaves the Sicilian folklore of his ancestors into the framework of an American autobiography, thereby establishing himself as a sort of authority on the Sicilian/American milieu in which he was raised. This underscores an important issue regarding the ethnic autobiography – the so-called “authenticity” of the author vis-à-vis his or her ancestral culture.

In “A MELUS Interview,” Jerre Mangione declares that *Mount Allegro* and the remainder of his autobiographical works were “all written with the intention of being social history.” He feels he was particularly qualified to undertake the project of ethnic autobiography because of his deep familiarity with “the humor and the subtleties and the earthiness of the [Sicilian] dialect.”

Justin Vitiello, however, would take issue with Mangione’s self-proclaimed ethnic authority. In “Sicilian Folk Narrative versus Sicilian-American Literature: Mangione’s *Mount Allegro*,” Vitiello argues that “Mangione does not artistically substantiate his own claim that he embodies the ethnic soul of the Sicilian Way.” Vitiello finds that Mangione is too steeped in a Western epistemology that dichotomizes history and fiction to properly represent the archetypal, mythic consciousness of the Sicilian folktales. Vitiello also faults Mangione for errors related to Sicilian geography and language. As a result, Mangione “fails to capture the substance or spirit of ethnic narrative.”

The interview and the essay, read together, should stimulate a great deal of thought on the issue of an author’s responsibility to remain true to the “facts” of his or her ethnic history. Ensuing discussions should touch upon a number of controversial questions. Can we fault Mangione for the epistemological distance between himself and his Sicilian ancestors? Is Vitiello’s criticism of Mangione’s historical, cultural, and geographical discrepancies a valid approach to ethnic literary criticism? Is the ethnic/American author especially burdened given that he or she must remain true to both the American tradition, as well as the tradition of his or her ancestral group?
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**Week 4 – Ethnic History/Ethnic Literature (cont’d)**

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Week 5 – Ethnic History/Literature (cont’d)

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

* Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Exposition Address”
* W. T. Andrews, “The Black Migration”
* Alain Locke, “The New Negro”
* Will Herberg, “Marxism and the American Negro”

*Invisible Man* (1952), by Ralph Ellison, tells the story of a young African American male who is forced to continually revise his social and political strategies in response to the situations he encounters as a Southern industrial college student, a Northern factory laborer, and a “race leader” for a leftist political group—all told against the backdrop of early-twentieth-century African/American history and culture. This novel is an excellent choice for the unit on the ethnic writer’s engagement with history not only because of its firm canonization and universally acknowledged excellence, but also because of Ellison’s encyclopedic representation of African/American history and culture through the story of his unnamed protagonist. Eric J. Sundquist writes that “*Invisible Man* can, in fact, be read and appreciated without detailed references to African American history, but to do so is to miss the true and lasting importance of the book” and concludes that the novel is nothing short of “a reconstruction of African American history.” Therefore, the additional readings for this week are selected from Sundquist’s excellent *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (1995), a collection of primary and secondary writings that both describe and critically evaluate the historical and cultural contexts of Ellison’s work.

According to Sundquist, Booker T. Washington’s “Atlanta Exposition Address” of 1895, since nicknamed “The Atlanta Compromise,” “exemplified Washington’s view that African Americans should follow a program of family and community uplift, making themselves economically valuable to the South as a first step in defeating racial prejudice.” Washington’s approach was a level-headed gradualism, which eventually brought him into direct conflict with W. E. B. DuBois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who demanded immediate sociopolitical equality for blacks. The speech features the oft-quoted line “Cast down your bucket where you are,” in which Washington encourages African Americans to help themselves improve their status in America. “Cast it down in agriculture,” Washington insists, “[in] mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions.” Washington characteristically advises against demanding immediate equality with whites: “The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to
us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing.”

This reading will provide students with the invisible man’s rationale for his political
(in)action early in the novel.

W. E. B. Du Bois’s writings contrast starkly with Washington’s “Atlanta
Exposition Address,” as, according to Sundquist, “[DuBois’s] cosmopolitan interests and
his advocacy of advanced higher education helped make him a natural antagonist to
Booker T. Washington.” DuBois’s position was that “black Americans must disavow
accommodation and instead struggle for absolute political, economic, and educational
equality.” These writings will provide an example of the political ideology the invisible
man eschewed during his tenure as a student at an industrial college modeled after
Washington’s Tuskegee University, which Ellison himself had attended. In “Of Our
Spiritual Strivings,” an excerpt from his classic work of African/American sociology, The
Souls of Black Folk (1903), DuBois discusses the “double-consciousness” of black
America, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of
measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.
One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro.” This classic writing aptly describes
the invisible man’s psychological state throughout most of the novel – a state that proves
both crippling and potentially liberating. In “On Mr. Booker T. Washington,” DuBois
directly addresses his ideological disagreements with Washington. DuBois places
Washington in the context of a post-bellum black America that was desperately,
cautiously, and simultaneously trying to earn sustenance and avoid white Southern
violence. Therefore, according to DuBois, while Washington’s accommodationism was
understandable, from the standpoint of turn-of-the-century America, it was profoundly
outdated. DuBois writes that “Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old
attitude of adjustment and submission,” that his “programme practically accepts the
alleged inferiority of the Negro races,” and that he would have African Americans
renounce their “political power,” their “insistence on civil rights,” and the “higher
education of Negro youth.” Instead, DuBois argues for agitation for social, political, and
economic equality for African Americans.

In “The Black Migration,” W. T. Andrews writes of the mass migration of African
Americans seeking better occupational and educational opportunities from the rural,
agricultural South to the urban, industrial North between the two world wars. Andrews
writes that “the chief causes of negro unrest and disturbance are as follows: the
destruction of his political privileges and curtailment of his civil rights: no protection
of life, liberty, and property under the law; Jim Crow law; residential and labor segregation
laws; no educational facilities worthy of the name in most of the Southern states.” Since
both Ralph Ellison and his protagonist undertook this exact journey, it is important that
students understand the basic motivations for such a drastic act of geographical and
cultural uprooting.

Alain Locke’s famous essay “The New Negro” describes the intellectual impetus
for the African/American cultural ferment that surfaced in the major destination cities of
the great migration. The essay should provide students with a means to read the invisible
man’s intellectual awakening upon his arrival in New York. Locke’s essay, an
introduction for an anthology of the best writers of the Harlem Renaissance, describes the
“new negro” as a confident African American who will use the once-dormant powers of
his intellect to transform the political and artistic landscape of urban America. According to Locke, the “old negro” was more of a white-conceived myth than a reality: “He has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction, partly an innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism.” In actuality, the mind of the “new negro” “seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority.” A direct result of the phenomenon of African/American migration, the new negro is destined to overcome the hindrances of his ancestors and excel “in his poetry, his art, his education, and his new outlook.” Locke locates the epicenter of “new negro” activity in Harlem, where, in the 1920s, African/American “group expression and self-determination” resulted in Harlem, or New Negro, Renaissance—a flourishing of African/American cultural, intellectual, and artistic production. Much of the invisible man’s experience in Harlem can be fruitfully read with this important movement in mind.

Will Herberg’s “Marxism and the American Negro” serves to explain the invisible man’s experience in the Brotherhood, a leftist group he encounters that was probably based upon Ellison’s encounter with, and subsequent alienation from, the American Communist Party. In Invisible Man, the Brotherhood routinely reduces racial concerns to matters of class, much to the consternation of the protagonist and many fellow blacks associated with the Brotherhood. Herberg’s essay, hardline Marxist in ideology, should allow students an insight into the rationale that would allow for such an oversight. In “Marxism and the American Negro,” Herberg reduces the plight of early-twentieth-century African Americans to a matter of class, even as he refers to them specifically as “the modern Negro proletariat.” For though Herberg acknowledges the impact of racism in the lives of African Americans, he believes that, through “class struggle,” blacks will be united with their fellow white proletarians and defeat race prejudice. This naïve idealism is exactly the sort exhibited by the Brotherhood, and the Brotherhood’s blindness to issues of race becomes an increasingly serious source of conflict between its members and the invisible man.

Week 6 – Ethnic History/Literature (cont’d)

Louise Erdrich, Tracks


* Sidner Larson, “The Fragmentation of a Tribal People in Louise Erdrich’s Tracks”

* Nancy J. Peterson, “History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich’s Tracks”

Tracks (1988), by Louise Erdrich, tells a story of hardship, poverty, and cultural loss in the wake of the United States government’s division of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa reservation of North Dakota into privately owned tracts. The novel stands as a poignant creative representation of the effects of the General Allotment Act of 1887 on a small group of Chippewa Indians. Like, Mount Allegro and Invisible Man, Tracks will
allow for a great deal of discussion on the role of the ethnic author in representing ethnic history—in this case, the history of early-twentieth-century American Indians coping with the mostly well-meaning, but disastrous policy of forced adjustment to private land ownership. Therefore, the first secondary reading is a brief historical account of the experience of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa with land allotment in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In “Working Out Their Own Salvation: The Allotment of Land in Severalty and the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Band, 1870-1920,” Gregory S. Camp writes that “[d]uring this era of Indian policy reform, this northern Plains tribe experienced a familiar pattern of land loss, poverty, and despair.” The experience of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa was unique in that while most American Indian tribes were expected to make do with smaller parcels of reservation land, the continually decreasing size of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa reservation forced many of its inhabitants to take their allotments on public domain land. According to Camp, “[t]his resulted in a de facto removal of a considerable portion of the tribe to areas as distant as Montana and South Dakota.” The resultant hardships of severalty forced many American Indians to sell their land, often for a pittance, which cruelly defeated the purpose of Indians independently owning and using their land allotments—a “wholesale loss of land,” according to Camp. Nanapush, one of the protagonists of Tracks, states that “Starvation makes a fool of anyone. In the past, some had sold their allotment of land for one hundred poundweights of flour.”

Tracks concerns itself not only with the land loss itself, but with the psychological and cultural loss it brought the Turtle Mountain Chippewa. Sidner Larson, in “The Fragmentation of a Tribal People in Louise Erdrich’s Tracks,” evaluates this very facet of the novel. Larson reports that “allotment had the immediate effect of reducing the total acres of Indian land by 65 percent” and that “Tracks is in part an autopsy of this process, whereby place becomes property, and an analysis of how the process affects innocent bystanders.” By implication, Tracks does what so much ethnic/American fiction does, and what history, even social history, is often incapable of doing—vividly describing the effects of history on the lives of individual American ethnicities. The novel spans the years from 1912 to 1919 and shows that the continual loss of land and dispersal of tribal peoples had stripped the Turtle Mountain Chippewa of much of their tradition. Nanapush, “representing the traditional Anishinabe” (the Chippewas’ name for themselves), as Larson writes, refuses to surrender the tribe’s ancestral heritage and attempts to teach it through storytelling to Lulu, “his adopted daughter.” Larson concludes that Nanapush’s power lies in his ability to use language to combat the forces of history.

In “History, Postmodernity, and Louise Erdrich’s Tracks,” Nancy J. Peterson argues that this is the same power the writer of ethnic literature or history wields in giving voice to marginalized and previously silenced ethnic voices. Peterson prefaced her article with the postmodern assumption that history, though having existed empirically, is expressed linguistically, and is therefore primarily textual in nature. Hence, Peterson presents Erdrich as a writer attempting to textualize the experience of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa, an act undertaken by many ethnic writers who “write their own stories of the past only to discover that they must find a new way of making history, a way of forging a new historicity.” Erdrich thereby “lays tracks . . . for a revisionist
history and a new historicity” in opposition to the traditional history of white, male-dominated American progress. Peterson aptly points out that Erdrich’s creative representation of Turtle Mountain Chippewa history transcends the documentary as only ethnic literature can do, asserting that “historical ‘facts’ do not fully acknowledge the horror of depopulation and genocide.” In its reliance upon storytelling and Chippewa oral tradition, “Tracks renders a history of Anishinabe dispossession that moves within and against an academic [and textual] account of its history.” Not content to merely reference historical facts – something she only does indirectly, anyway – Erdrich “refocuses attention on the emotional and cultural repercussions that the loss of land entails.” Peterson concludes that Tracks is nothing short of a new kind of historical fiction, even history:

The new historicity that Tracks inscribes is neither a simple return to historical realism nor a passive acceptance of postmodern historical fictionality. Tracks takes up the crucial issue of the referentiality of historical narrative in a postmodern epoch and creates the possibility for a new historicity by and for Native Americans to emerge.

Week 7 – Ethnicity and the Working Class

Pietro di Donato, Christ in Concrete

Fred L. Gardaphé, Introduction to Christ in Concrete.

* Dorothee von Huene-Greenberg, “A MELUS Interview: Pietro di Donato”

* Nicholas Coles, “Mantraps: Men at Work in Pietro di Donato’s Christ in Concrete and Thomas Bell’s Out of this Furnace”

* Mariolina Salvatori, “Women’s Work in Novels of Immigrant Life”

Set in an unnamed city of the Northeast, Pietro di Donato’s Christ in Concrete is the semi-autobiographical tale of a young second-generation Italian American named Paul who must prematurely assume the role of his family’s breadwinner as a bricklayer once his father Geremio dies in a tragic work accident. This conceptually mythic, yet decidedly realistic, story is di Donato’s representation of the gritty details of his own life. Born in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1911, di Donato was himself forced to become a bricklayer after his father died in a construction accident on Good Friday in 1923. The author is especially proud of his first novel because of its relevance to his own life and the lives of other Italian/American immigrant families. In Dorothee von Huene-Greenberg’s 1985 interview, di Donato asserted that “If you touch Christ in Concrete you are touching my mortality, my vital mean... [Christ in Concrete] is my fate, my identity, my soul, and my conscious evaluation of myself.” Published in 1939, the novel met with nearly
unanimous critical acclaim and was chosen over Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* for the 1939 Book-of-the-Month Club. In his later works, di Donato never duplicated *Christ in Concrete*’s dazzling mix of realism, naturalism, impressionism, expressionism, and ethno-linguistic play, and so the novel was sadly forgotten, relegated to what Fred L. Gardaphe refers to as “minor classic” status. Yet it still stands as a superb literary representation of the ethnic American’s struggle for existence in early-twentieth-century urban America. Hence, it will be the centerpiece of the unit on ethnicity and the working class.

Indeed, much of the critical work on *Christ in Concrete* focuses on the novel’s depiction of immigrant labor. In “Women’s Work in Novels of Immigrant Life,” Mariolina Salvatori examines the treatment of labor in four novels of American immigrant fiction, *Christ in Concrete* among them. Salvatori concludes that “[w]hen it comes to describing women’s struggles in the domestic sphere, some writers offer only indirect and fragmentary accounts.” Although certain male immigrant writers are no doubt sympathetic to the plight of the immigrant woman toiling in her domestic duties, they tend to hold women’s work in the private sphere in sharp contrast to men’s work in the public sphere, thereby implying that a “man’s work” is the only real work. According to Salvatori, di Donato is guilty of such compartmentalization: “In his description of the brutal world of the construction workers, [di Donato] sets up an opposition between the public sphere (the bricklayer’s work) and the private sphere (the woman’s domestic work) which seems to force him into a conventional treatment of this opposition.”

Nicholas Coles’s article “Mantraps: Men at Work in Pietro di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* and Thomas Bell’s *Out of this Furnace,*” is intended to serve as a “compliment to [Salvatori’s] study by examining men’s relationships to their ‘public sphere’ work.” Coles finds that in both these novels, work serves as both a source of pride and a cause of self-destruction for men whose male identities revolve around the idea of being able to provide for family through hard, honest labor. Coles writes that:

> [b]oth novels demonstrate a profound and often destructive ambivalence in these men’s relation to the work they spend most of their time doing: on the one hand, labor power . . . is something to have and to be proud of; on the other hand, when labor power is all they possess that the economy of the dominant culture values, they are relatively powerless over the forces controlling their lives. The source of their male pride is also the source of their humiliation.

Finally, Fred L. Gardaphe’s introduction to the 1993 reprint of *Christ in Concrete* provides an excellent and concise account of the novel’s central themes and publication history, as well as an account of di Donato’s career as both a writer and a member of the ethnic laboring class he so loved.
Week 8 – Ethnic Literature and Genre: Naturalism

Richard Wright, *Native Son*

*Native Son* (1940) will allow for fruitful discussion of the tenuous intersection of ethnic literature and genre. This week’s lecture will feature discussions of late-nineteenth-century American literary realism and its “transition” into naturalism, a genre whose insistence on close sociological detail, sordid realism, and philosophical determinism was attractive to many ethnic/American writers who wished to depict their ethnic characters in relation to American society.

*Native Son* is the story of a young, physically imposing black Chicagooan who attempts to escape miserable living conditions and poverty only to find himself hunted by the police and virtually the entire city of Chicago for the murder of two women. Aesthetically, the novel follows the logic of naturalism, in which a character finds him or herself subject to forces, both psychological and societal, which plunge the character headlong into a destructive downward spiral. Bigger Thomas is literally forced from “Fear,” to “Flight,” and, eventually, “Fate,” as the novel’s three book titles indicate. Unlike the free-willing and morally capable characters found in realism, naturalist characters, who are optimally represented in the novels of Frank Norris and Stephen Crane, exercise little or no will in their deterministic decline. I, however, would submit that in ethnic/American fiction, naturalism presents the author with a troubling paradox. Given that ethnic writers will have almost certain empathy for the ethnic characters they create, they are less likely to depict their characters as wholly inhuman and lost as more “mainstream” naturalist writers. For, although Norris and Crane undoubtedly sympathized with McTeague or Maggie, their journalistic, and, to be sure, sociocultural, distance from these characters allowed the writers to depict the characters as nearly soulless puppets on the strings of a cruel, urban American environment. On the other hand, ethnic writers such as Pietro di Donato, Abraham Cahan, and Richard Wright were less likely to simply declare their ethnic counterparts as lost, for this was simply too much for them to lose. Consequently, their brand of soft, “ethnic naturalism” allows them the sordid, sociological detail and the characteristic plot declines of mainstream naturalism, but also allows their characters to preserve a precious core of humanity, even agency, in a harsh urban world.

Throughout *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas is often astutely aware of the social and racial disadvantages under which he labors daily. As he himself states, “We live here and they there. We black and they white. It’s just like being in jail. Half the time I feel like I’m on the outside.” Mainstream naturalists were far less likely to allow their protagonists even such a crudely stated sense of awareness. As he is chased throughout the mean streets of early-twentieth-century Chicago, he is often guided by an almost sixth sense of awareness of the ongoings around him. And in the novel’s closing scene, Bigger, doomed to die by execution, admits to his defense attorney Mux that talking with him had finally made him feel “like a man,” to which Mux replies with a powerful affirmation of Bigger’s humanity: “You’re human, Bigger.”

Hopefully, the ensuing discussion will tie in other works in the course that make use of a paradoxical ethnic naturalism, such as di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* and
Cahan’s *Yekl* — both of which strive ardently and successfully to humanize their ethnic protagonists, though poor and disadvantaged they may be.

**Week 9 – Ethnic Generational Dynamics**

Helen Barolini, *Umbertina*


* Anthony J. Tamburri, “*Umbertina*: The Italian/American Woman’s Experience”

*Umbertina* (1979), by Helen Barolini, tells the story of the psychological, ethical, and intellectual development of four generations of Italian/American women. First-generation Umbertina, a poor contadina with her husband in Castagna, becomes a successful business owner in Upstate New York. Still, she is too conservatively fixed in the ways of the Old World to seek New World fulfillment beyond the earning of money for her family. Her rigid devotion to marriage and family as “a woman’s duty” is evidence of this. Second-generation Clara, however, succumbs to the pressures of her American culture of consent. Though initially suspicious of her mother’s conservatism, Clara eventually becomes a “staunch defender of the Old World concept of marriage,” to use Anthony J. Tamburri’s words. Marguerite, Clara’s daughter, seeks to liberate herself in ways of which her mother and grandmother would never have dreamed. But Marguerite’s conceptions of ethnicity and gender are too rigid — evidence of her mother’s and grandmother’s influence; and try, as she might, she can never really “do as [she] feels,” but instead spends her life acting as “another man’s woman” (Barolini; Tamburri). Just before she dies in a tragic car wreck of an unknown cause, she comes to the conclusion that she does her self-identity no good by defining it so rigidly. By her life’s end, she learns the value of a free, dynamic identity:

> life is flux; . . . nothing can be promised; . . . Absolutes are a mirage for desperate beings; . . . truth cannot be caught and redelivered, still living at a future date. For each moment is a different truth, sliding into the next as in a kaleidoscope . . . Circumstances change . . . like the different forces of the earth . . . [and] persons act upon persons in a perpetual chain of being. Not because, no longer childlike, we want to be inconstant, changing, mobile; but because we are.

Although she dies before she is able to reap the social and psychological benefits of this epiphany, her daughter Tina picks up where Marguerite left off in the creation of an evolving Italian/American female identity. As Tina says, “I think it is important for us as women to cultivate our strengths, to grow, and to move on with purpose whatever our goals.”

Clearly classifiable as a women’s novel, more specifically an Italian/American women’s novel, *Umbertina* aptly relates cultural and attitudinal changes that occur over a series of generations in a typical ethnic/American family. Marcus Lee Hansen’s classic
essay, “The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant” (1938) features the aphorism that has since become a mantra of ethnic studies: “What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember.” The theory is that while the first generation is too bound by-necessity to his or her ethnicity, the second generation is troubled by conflicting cultural pressures from his family and American society. As a result, Hansen reports, “[w]ho will deny that the second generation wanted to forget, and even when the ties of family affection were strong, wanted to lose as many of the evidences of foreign origin as they could shuffle off?” The third generation, then, with the same social, economic, political, and intellectual resources as any mainstream American, feels less shame in acknowledging, evaluating, and even writing about his ancestral heritage.

Although “first-generation,” “second-generation,” and “third-generation” do not always play themselves out so categorically in real life, as Werner Sollors points out in Beyond Ethnicity, these descriptives do serve as powerful metaphors for attitudes vis-à-vis one’s ethnicity. Anthony J. Tamburri’s “Umbertina: The Italian-American Woman’s Experience” (1991) uses Joseph Lopreato’s schema of Italian/American generational dynamics to read the four generations of female characters in Umbertina. Umbertina and husband Serafino are typically first-generation in their unavoidable “Italian-Americanness.” Carla and Sam are typically second-generation in their less-than-subtle hatred of all things Italian: like Hansen’s second generation, they are repelled by the ancestral heritage that has caused them so much cognitive dissonance. Third-generation Marguerite, on the other hand, experiences an affinity, though troubled, for her ethnicity – an affinity that comes to its full fruition in the person of fourth-generation, but metaphorically third-generation, Tina, who both critically evaluates and draws strength from her ancestral heritage in the creation of a dynamic Italian/American female identity. Tamburri writes that though Tina encounters gender oppression as an Italian and an American, she succeeds in becoming an Italian/American “woman professional in a man’s world.” Hopefully, this week’s discussion will serve to preface later discussions on American ethnicity and gender in the course.

Week 10 – Ethnicity and Gender

Anzia Yezierska, Bread Givers

* Mary V. Dearborn, “Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture”

* Thomas Ferraro, “‘Working Ourselves Up’: Middle-Class Realism and the Reproduction of Patriarchy in Bread Givers”

Bread Givers (1925), by Anzia Yezierska, is a semi-autobiographical story of Sara Smolinsky, a Russian/Polish/American Jewish woman in Lower East Side New York who struggles against the misogynistic strictures of Old World Orthodox Judaism, as exemplified by her father Reb Smolinsky, in order to leave the Jewish ghetto and establish herself as a professional. Although Sara breaks free of certain Orthodox Jewish burdens placed upon women, particularly those involving arranged marriage and familial responsibilities, in the latter portion of the novel, she finds herself inextricably tied to her
Jewish/American past and returns to care for her father in his old age, despite their troubled relationship and Sara’s current professional and marital commitments.

Much of the criticism on *Bread Givers* focuses upon the ethnic/American female’s double burden of male-dominated ethnic and American heritages. According to Mary V. Dearborn’s introduction to her classic study *Pocahontas’ Daughters* (1986), the double marginalization of ethnicity and female gender provides the raw material for a classically American literature, given that so much of the American tradition bases itself upon the alienation and “otherness,” of the protagonist -- *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Light in August,* and *The Catcher in the Rye* being notable examples. Dearborn writes that:

> [t]he factors of gender and ethnicity bring together the concept of ‘otherness’ as it exists within our culture... Literature produced by American ethnic women presents in dramatically high relief aspects not only of the female or ethnic experience in America, but of American culture itself.

Thomas J. Ferraro’s “‘Working Ourselves Up’: Middle-Class Realism and the Reproduction of Patriarchy in *Bread Givers*” is a cogent analysis that brings together aspects of both gender and genre studies. Ferraro points out that while many critics believe *Bread Givers* to be simply a work of feminist, “other-half” fiction, the novel also exhibits characteristics of American bourgeois realism, only well after the heyday of Howells and James, as Jewish Americans had not yet begun to approach middle-class status until the early twentieth century. Ferraro argues that, in between Yezierska’s departure from Hester Street and the composition of *Bread Givers,* she had undergone a number of typically middle-class experiences, including “college, training in the public schools, marriage, and motherhood.” In *Bread Givers,* Talmudic scholar Reb Smolinsky “deploy[s] the patriarchal family and Eastern European folkways” in order to profit from both his small business and arranged marriages for each of his daughters – a fate Sara Smolinsky avoids. Despite the daughters’ unease with Smolinsky’s patriarchal practices (he puts his daughters to work in his grocery store to support his religious study, yet refuses to work himself), they, like Smolinsky, become “absorbed by American habits of acquisition and raiment,” prettifying themselves and consuming conspicuously like middle-class American women. Therefore, what was once treated as merely an immigrant women’s novel can now be viewed from the perspective of genre and ethnic middle-class formation. With this deceptively complex and rich novel, students will hopefully be able to appreciate the multiplicity of critical layers with which the student of American literature can approach the ethnic text. Ethnicity, gender, genre, American cultural and economic trends – all can be concomitant influences in ethnic semiosis, to use William Boelhower’s term.
Week 11 – Ethnicity and Gender (cont’d)

Maxine Hong Kingston, The Woman Warrior


* Deborah Woo, “Maxine Hong Kingston: The Ethnic Writer and the Burden of Dual Authenticity”

* Sue Ann Johnston, “Empowerment Through Mythological Imaginings in Woman Warrior”

The Woman Warrior (1976) is Maxine Hong Kingston’s autobiographical story of her mid-twentieth-century “girlhood among ghosts,” both Chinese and American. Kingston depicts her formative years through the mythic “talk stories” of Chinese culture and history her mother relates to her. Like many ethnic protagonists, Kingston describes herself as having been troubled by the conflicting and sometimes doubly oppressive Chinese and American cultural inheritances. Yet, like Nanapush and Lulu of Tracks, she draws personal and narrative strength from the rich and often confusing Chinese myths she learns, even going so far as to read her own experiences, as well as her female relatives’ experiences, through the “talk stories” she learned as a girl.

A great deal of the criticism on The Woman Warrior deals with the rich cultural, linguistic, and mythological interplay between Chinese and American traditions as they are perceived and related by a Chinese-American woman. The novel is an especially important part of the ever-evolving American literary canon, because it is the triumphant result of “women and minority writers [becoming] active in exploring their experiences and developing their voices in the literary scene,” as David Leiwui Li writes. In “The Naming of a Chinese American ‘I’: Cross-Cultural Significations in The Woman Warrior,” Li argues that Kingston weaves together the Chinese and American influences in her life to create a dynamic Chinese-American female identity. Although she begins as a listener of Chinese “talk stories,” The Woman Warrior is Kingston’s ethno-linguistic act of becoming a “talk story” teller herself, only her modifications of Chinese myth reveal that she is reading them from the standpoint of an undoubtedly Chinese-American experience—something that has earned her a great deal of harsh criticism regarding her Chinese “authenticity.”

In “Maxine Hong Kingston: The Ethnic Writer and the Burden of Dual Authenticity,” Deborah Woo explains that this sort of criticism of the ethnic writer is common because they “are saddled with a burden that mainstream writers rarely confront, the burden of being viewed narrowly as spokespersons for the ‘ethnic’ experience.” Kingston is writing The Woman Warrior as an individual relating a particular experience of female “Chinese Americanness.” Therefore, she becomes prone to criticism from scholars who insist upon a more “general,” “objective” account that Kingston never intended to provide in the first place. According to Woo, Kingston’s honesty regarding
her conflicted, occasionally ignorant sense of Chinese/American identity is too often read as cultural disingenuousness. Rather, it should be stated that:

where culture is problematic as a source of identity, cultural ignorance itself is part of what is authentic about the experience. For this reason, an ardent concern for recovering history, for expressing long-suppressed emotions, for fully revealing the harsh truth – to outsiders and Chinese Americans alike – directly ties the search for authenticity to the past . . . Kingston calls upon her memory to serve her. Where it fails her, The Woman Warrior takes pains to show the protagonist’s frustration with her own cultural ignorance and attempt to pin down certain facts.

Furthermore, given that Kingston is writing of the construction of Chinese/American identity in a Chinese/American novel, any mythical discrepancies do not constitute cultural transgressions so much as a refashioning of them “in a new American way.” Much like Mary V. Dearborn would argue, Sue Ann Johnston, in “Empowerment Through Mythological Imaginings in Woman Warrior,” writes that Kingston’s creative mythical revisions constitute the source of her strength as a Chinese/American woman subject and author. In the act of “invent[ing] herself as speaking subject” (in effect, as a “talk story” teller), Kingston:

synthesizes her own idiolect, an intensely personal language neither Chinese nor American, nor simply Chinese-American, but a way of seeing that draws from and challenges, all the traditions she has inherited.
Chinese myth and tradition, western literary styles and American popular culture – all are the raw material for Kingston’s alchemical imagination.

Like so many female ethnic characters, Kingston’s subject manipulates the fragmentary and often oppressive inheritances of both ethnic and American cultures to weave together an identity and vision relevant for an ethnic/American present. Emissary discussions will hopefully refer to other ethnic/American women’s novels, such as Bread Givers and Umbertina – both of which feature ethnic female protagonists who must bear the troubling and fragmentary legacies of ethnicity and “Americanness” in their daily lives.

**Week 12 – Race as Ethnicity/Ethnicity as Race**

Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*

The featured reading for this week is an encouraging new work of racial and ethnic studies. In the vein of Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* and David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness*, Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Color* is a detailed and comprehensive analysis of how European/American immigrants assimilated and transcended their racial statuses of “Celtic,” “Mediterranean,” “Hebraic,” and the like, to solidify their status as white Americans or “Caucasians” in a society
where continuing racial inequalities and civil rights agitation recast the racial map of the United States in a more dualistic light.

Although the book serves as a superb synthesis of recent scholarship on the influence of conceptual whiteness in American racial construction, it also draws heavily from primary research toward the creation of the most complete study of the subject to date. Jacobson begins his monograph with a selection from a Philip Roth novel that examines the racial ambiguity of Jewish Americans in contemporary American society. (Are they white? Or are they still racially “Semitic” as white supremacists would have us believe?) Jacobson argues that:

the vicissitude of Jewish whiteness is intimately related to the racial odysseys of myriad other groups -- the Irish, Armenians, Italians, Poles, Syrians, Greeks, Ruthenians, Sicilians, Finns, and a host of others -- who came ashore in the United States as ‘free white persons’ under the terms of the reigning naturalization law, yet whose racial credentials were not equivalent to those of the Anglo-Saxon ‘old stock’ who laid proprietary claim to the nation’s founding documents and hence to its stewardship. All of these groups became Caucasians only over time; and all of them, like Roth’s fictional Caucasian/Semite, faced certain challenges to their racial pedigrees along the way.

This book will allow for discussion of the tenuous relationship of race and ethnicity, for what were once considered to be racial groups -- Celts, Mediterraneans, Hebrews -- became “ethnic” groups -- Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and Jewish Americans -- in the wake of post-Holocaust anti-racism. Is race the same beast as ethnicity? Is it a complicating factor associated with one’s ethnic descent, as Werner Sollors would have us believe in Beyond Ethnicity? Or, should it be considered as wholly separate from ethnicity? If we conclude that race and ethnicity are entirely disparate concepts, how does this affect our ability to make cross-cultural comparisons between the experiences of “white ethnic” groups and, say, African Americans? In order to facilitate such cross-cultural inquiry, should we seek to formulate a model that theoretically joins race and ethnicity, as Sollors argues in his introduction to Theories of Ethnicity? Hopefully, class discussion will include such cross-cultural comparison of ethnic and racial experiences as depicted by the literature and history studied in the course.
Week 13 – Racial Passing

Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* and *Passing*

Deborah McDowell, Introduction to *Quicksand* and *Passing*

* Martha J. Cutter, “Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen’s Fiction”

In the late 1920s, Nella Larsen published two works that have become cornerstones of critical inquiry into the American literary phenomenon of the passing narrative. In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* (1927), Werner Sollors defines passing as “the crossing of any line that divides social groups,” an act that becomes more likely when a “sharp inequality” exists between groups that would cause a member of the subordinate group to desire access to the privileges of the dominant group through a simple change or manipulation of one’s identity. Sollors tells us that the word “‘passing’ is used most frequently . . . as if it were short for ‘passing for white,’ in the sense of ‘crossing over the color line . . . from the black side to the white side.” Although specific sociological evidence is sparse, Judah Bennett writes that between 1880 and 1925, tens of thousands of African Americans are estimated to have passed. Not surprisingly, passing is a theme upon which numerous African/American novels, particularly those of the culturally transgressive Harlem, or New Negro, Renaissance, are based. Two of the most-cited passing narratives, by Nella Larsen, one of the most-cited authors of passing fiction, are *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929).

In *Quicksand*, protagonist Helga Crane is a mulatto instructor at Naxos College, a rigid, austere southern black college that, according to Deborah E. McDowell “worship[s] . . . everything Anglo-Saxon,” as evidenced by Naxos’s obvious anagram. Throughout the novel, Crane unsuccessfully attempts to escape the confines of her socially prescribed roles – in New York, in Europe – only to end up married and overburdened with childbearing.

*Passing* centers around two African/American women in jazz-age Harlem who experience discrimination and passing firsthand. While the light-skinned Clare Kendry switches between blackness and (usually) whiteness depending on her social surroundings, her friend Irene Redfield is unable to achieve, but is also quite envious of, Clare’s chameleon-like identity. As a young woman, Clare heeds the lessons learned from her domestic, Christian white aunts, who help to morally reform her – an asset that culturally supplements her light physical appearance. Irene, though not as willing or as adept a passer as Clare, is still curious about the mystery and potential advantages of passing one’s way into the white, middle-class world. Like Helga Crane of *Quicksand*, and like most “unnatural” women of the American sentimental tradition, Clare “pays” for her social and moral transgressions. Unlike Helga Crane, who pays with an unsatisfactory marriage, Clare Kendry pays with her life – a fate that has caused some critics to question Nella Larsen’s status as a feminist writer.

Deborah E. McDowell, in her introduction to *Quicksand* and *Passing*, argues that although both novels “sacrifice these heroines to the most conventional fates of narrative
history,” they both mask undercurrents of female sexuality—something that raises the idea of literary passing to the level of the narratological. McDowell argues that both *Quicksand* and *Passing* are novels about issues of black female sexuality that *pass* as passing narratives. In *Passing*, for instance, Clare tells Irene that she “cannot help longing to be with [her] again, as I have never longed for anything before.” In return, Irene cannot help but notice Clare’s “pale gold hair,” “tempting mouth,” and “arresting eyes.” McDowell writes that, in Larsen’s narrative technique:

“safe” themes, plots, and conventions are used as the protective cover underneath which lie more dangerous subplots. Larsen envelops the subplot of Irene’s developing if unnamed and unacknowledged desire for Clare in the safe and familiar plot of racial passing. Put another way, [Larsen’s] clever strategy derives from its surface theme and central metaphor—passing. It takes the form of the act it describes.

Martha J. Cutter’s article “Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen’s Fiction” expands upon McDowell’s concept of narratological passing in *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Like McDowell, Cutter points out that passing involves elements of both cultural betrayal and self-liberation. She adds that, in Larsen’s novels, “[o]nly when ‘passing’ becomes a subversive strategy for *avoiding* the enclosures of a racist, classist, sexist society does it become truly liberating.” Therefore, Clare Kendry is a more successful passer than Helga Crane. For while Crane “attempts to use ‘passing’ as a way of finding a unitary sense of identity—a sense of identity structured around *one role,*” Clare Kendry “uses ‘passing’ as a way of avoiding the enclosures of a unitary identity.” She can be all things to everyone, and “[i]n so doing, she transcends the labeling of society, for the more she passes, the more problematic and plural her presence becomes.” Clare’s presence in *Passing* achieves nothing short of an opening of the text itself. Since Clare’s identity is indeterminate, and contingent upon the reader’s interpretation, *Passing* becomes what Roland Barthes would call a “writerly text” in which the reader becomes an equal participant in the construction of meaning.

**Week 14 – Ethnic Passing**

Abraham Cahan, *Yekl* and “The Imported Bridegroom”

* Elaine Ginsberg, “Introduction: The Politics of Passing”

* Sanford Marovitz, Excerpt from *Abraham Cahan*.

Although literary passing has almost always been treated as a “black/white issue,” the theory of Werner Sollors and Elaine Ginsberg leaves the term open to examinations of other kinds of cultural transgressions, including “ethnic passing,” something Earl Lewis considers to be “one of the little-explored chapters in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century U.S. history.” Ginsberg, in “Introduction: The Politics of Passing” prefers to define “passing” as, more broadly:
about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about specularity: the visible and invisible, the seen and the unseen.

While Ginsberg’s essay serves as an excellent preface for more firmly grounded discussions of passing, it also serves as an impetus to consider passing in different contexts and the diverse complications these contexts suggest. She writes, “as illustrated by the ease with which assimilation has so often been accomplished, class, ethnic origin, and sexual orientation are not difficult to enact or disguise. Race and gender, however, present other complications.” In “‘Self-Mutilation’ or Self-Empowerment?: Passing in the Modern African/American and Italian/American Novels,” I demonstrated that passing was a phenomenon Italian/American authors grappled with, as evidenced by the anti-assimilationist tone of works like The Grand Gennaro (1935), by Garibaldi La Polla, and Olives on the Apple Tree (1940), by Guido d’Agostino. This week’s reading will feature two passing narratives of Jewish/American immigrant fiction, Abraham Cahan’s Yekl and “The Imported Bridegroom” (1896, 1898). Both works feature characters who, for better or worse, and for good or ill motives, attempt to “pass” beyond the strictures of their Jewish/American immigrant status and adjust, sometimes benevolently, sometimes malevolently, to life in urban America.

Abraham Cahan immigrated from Russian Poland to the United States in 1882 and shortly thereafter established himself among the Jewish literary intelligentsia in New York City. Although he worked as a journalist and editor for the Jewish Daily Forward, a Yiddish-language newspaper, he is most famous today for his fictional writings in English, such as Yekl (1896) and The Rise of David Levinsky (1917), which chronicle, in a style reminiscent of social realism, the often painful and culturally denaturing adjustment of Jewish immigrants to American life.

The excerpt from Sanford E. Marovitz’s Abraham Cahan (1996) will serve as an excellent introduction to the literary career and sociohistorical context of this important ethnic author. In the excerpt, Marovitz discusses Cahan’s love of both European and American realism because of the genre’s concern with sociological accuracy and societal betterment. Marovitz also discusses Cahan’s generally productive relationship with realist literary critics of the day, such as William Dean Howells. Marovitz reports that, in an 1889 lecture entitled “Realism,” Cahan stated that literary realism could bring about “progress and happiness” in a civil society. While Cahan sincerely wished for his Jewish/American counterparts to adjust comfortably to their new American surroundings, he preferred that they did so in a manner that held true to their essential “Jewishness.” His less-than-sympathetic portrayal of artificial, Jewish-betraying “passers” like Jake Podvornik of Yekl and Flora Stroom of “The Imported Bridegroom” reveals that he showed great concern for:

the essential role of Judaism in the lives of the Eastern European
immigrants, especially the older generation for whom the Yidishkayt of the shetel had provided a pattern of cultural existence that guided their daily behavior. In America, many of them retained of it what they could; even under vastly different circumstances, Cahan observed, the strong ties of their Hebraic traditions helped them sustain their faith. He emphasized the relation of historical piety to the daily pressures of East Side poverty, writing that “their religion is to many of them the only thing which makes life worth living. In the fervor of prayer or the abandon of religious study they forget the grinding poverty of their homes.” (Marovitz; Cahan qtd. in Marovitz)

In Cahan’s fiction, those characters who adjust most cautiously to American life, and with a respectful remembrance of their Jewish past, are most successful. Yekl and “The Imported Bridegroom” will allow for discussion on exactly what constitutes passing in ethnic fiction, and how it compares with the racial passing we might encounter in novels by Nella Larsen. For example, while both ethnic and racial passing involve a certain degree of acculturation that could manifest itself in changed beliefs, religions, fashion, mores, or even surnames, racial passing possesses an added layer of complication – the burden of racial phenotype. For as Jacobson has demonstrated, while our contemporary “ethnic groups” were once perceived to be racially different, over time, the assimilation of the “white ethnics” -- in effect their “passing” for white -- allowed them to assume a new status as racially indistinct Caucasians. African Americans never had such a luxury and never will, which explains why the standard passing figure of African/American fiction tends to be a “tragic” mulatto, or at least a light-skinned black. This discussion will undoubtedly extend to the tenuous relationship of race and ethnicity addressed during week twelve. Is racial passing essentially the same act as ethnic passing? Or does it involve a different kind of boundary crossing? Was ethnic passing a phenomenon of American history? Or, more fundamentally, can we explain the history of the progress of “white ethnic” America as a history of both individual, and then group, passing? Given the performative nature of passing, to what other aspects of life could we extend the critical apparatus of passing?
Week 15 – Postmodern Ethnicity

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* Michael M. J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory”


In the so-called postmodern world, as theorized by Fredric Jameson and Jean François Lyotard, among others, the proliferation of information systems in late (global) capitalism has occasioned an epistemological indeterminacy that locates reality not in some theoretical “real world,” but rather in textuality. As Jameson writes in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, “We are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacræ of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.” As a result, much contemporary fiction, and for the purposes of this course, contemporary ethnic fiction focuses not so much upon the realities of ethnic experience but on the individual character’s perceptions of them, which can be fragmentary and incomplete, as we have seen in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Recent ethnic fiction often focuses upon the individual’s struggle to collect (often through the stories of an older relative), reassemble, and reconceive the rich fragments of ethnic existence.

According to Michael M. J. Fischer, this is the essence of postmodern ethnic autobiography. In “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory,” Fischer theorizes that:

> what the new works bring home forcefully is . . . that ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and that it is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control. Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided. It can be potent even when not consciously taught; it is something that institutionalized teaching easily makes chauvinist, sterile, and superficial, something that emerges in full—often liberating—flower only through [the] struggle . . . for a sense of ethnic identity.

In other words, contemporary ethnic characters seek to forge a useful, viable ethnic present from the fragmentary inheritances of a rich ethnic past. Characters who undergo such a project engage in what Fischer calls “dream-work,” which is “simultaneously the integration of dissonant past fragments and the daydreaming ‘trying-on’ of alternative possible identities.” This not only describes an ethnic reality confronted by the contemporary ethnic protagonist, but it also serves to explain why so much contemporary ethnic fiction is written in a fragmentary, textually grounded, “postmodern” style.
William Boelhower, in "An Irreverent Postscript: Ethnic Discourse in a Postmodern Context," writes that given a postmodern context, "ethnic discourse cannot but redefine its own possibilities." While modern ethnic writers wrote in a more strictly sociological style that resulted from a deep rooting within lived ethnic experience, contemporary writers are more historically distanced from the ancestral origins of their ethnic identity. Boelhower writes, "[a]fter all, the ancestors are dead, and in place of the real world there is now only a global strategy of possible worlds. The issue, therefore, is not ethnicity per se but the uses of ethnicity in a postindustrial society . . . In the postmodern context, ethnic discourse can only be discourse about ethnic discourse." However, Boelhower adds, "[w]hat might be perceived here as a radical weakness in the performative potential of ethnic interpretation . . . is really, at second glance, its main strength." Ethnic semiosis, in other words, is a dynamic possibility for avoiding the potential homogenization of this increasingly technological postmodern world. Therefore, it is useless to think of "authentic" and "inauthentic" ethnicities as do some critics of Maxine Hong Kingston. Likewise, "it is useless to try to distinguish between existentially lived and symbolic ethnicity, as if the first were real and the latter were a mere sportive romp. Authenticity now pertains to the pragmatics of simulation rather than to a process of literal representation." Thus, the contemporary ethnic protagonist transcends past, outdated modes of ethnic semiosis:

Far from being confined to the ethnic encyclopedia as a set of fixed cultural contents to be continually reproposed with each new generation, the ethnic subject now plays freely with the encyclopedia in order to produce an ethno-critical interpretation of the present and of his possibilities in it. This is the only way to keep ethnic semiosis fresh in the postmodern era – not by basking in the ethnic nostalgia of the past, something Anthony J. Tamburri refers to as the "pizza/nonna" problem, but by struggling to create a dynamic, relevant ethnic present.

One would be hard-pressed to find an ethnic/American novel more postmodern Leo@fergusrules.com (1999), by Arne Tangherlini, who sadly died before he was able to see the publication of his first creative work. The novel tells the story of a brilliant but socially awkward Filipino/Italian/American teenager named Leonara Cacciamamia who spends an extraordinary amount of time living out her fantasies as the warrior character Fergus in a computerized virtual reality program called Aperion. After her descent into Aperion's hell, oddly named Dion, Leonara encounters computerized versions of relatives, both Filipino and Italian/American, from her ancestral past. Throughout her heroic journey, which could be read as a postmodern version of Dante's Inferno, Leonara learns to reject virtual reality in favor of real, lived, if ethnic, community with others. The mythic tales of her Filipino grandmother Lola Fior can easily be read as "talk stories" that empower Leonara in her descent into her postmodern hell. At the novel's end Leonara leaves virtual reality, exuberantly breathes in the natural reality she had never before appreciated, and joins Filipino Carnival dancers on the streets of Manila.

The novel's ethnic signs are subtle and fragmentary, but this is to be expected in a postmodern world in which one has so many other class distinctions to choose from.
Leonara shows a remarkable knowledge and appreciation of both her Filipino and Italian pasts and manages to creatively survive the computerized hell that the postmodern world, at its most severe, can be. Discussions of Leo@fergusrules.com, will hopefully extend to the idea of ethnicity in the postmodern world. Is ethnicity possible in a postmodern context? Is it something that should be avoided as old, past-oriented, and passé? Or, can it serve a vital and creative function in contemporary society? With so much of the course devoted to the sociological realities of an ethnic/American past, this week's readings should encourage students to think about the relevance of American ethnicity in the present and of its possibilities for the future.