Ethnic American Literature (Humoring American Literature)
English 117
Kennedy House 508, TTh 10:00 am – 11:15 am
Instructor: Eli Bromberg
Email: ebromber@english.umass.edu
Office Hours: Bartlett 268; T 12:00 pm – 2:00 pm and by appointment

Course Description:

“Tragedy is when I cut my finger – comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die;” at least according to comedian Mel Brooks, who has offered numerous variations on this joke. This course investigates the fine line between humor and catastrophe by engaging texts that deal with devastating societal and familial issues through humor. Among the questions we will ask are: how does humor function as a mechanism that can illuminate, and resist, oppression and inequality? How does humor expose the hypocrisies within popular American conceptions of race, family, history and success – or, alternatively, risk trivializing catastrophic grievances? What accounts for authors’ (and readers’) ability, or compulsion, to find humor amidst horrific realities? In what ways can humor be an effective means for challenging the status quo? And, keeping Brooks’ distinction in mind, can we differentiate laughing at from laughing with?

The course will facilitate discussions about structural racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, classism, and intersectionality by reading texts that deal explicitly with state violence, assimilation, language, American colonial history, and family secrets. We will explore how these issues are mined for humor in texts authored by (among others) Paul Beatty, R. Zamora Linmark, Fran Ross, George Schuyler, and G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona.

Course Goals:

This course, which meets the AL (Literature) and U (United States diversity) requirements, will build a vocabulary for discussing issues of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, language, nationality, and other facets of identity and human experience. In approaching our course texts, we will push beyond simplistic analyses, developing critical thinking skills that facilitate our negotiating ambiguities, and necessitate our considering pluralistic perspectives, as we read American fiction across different historical, geographical, and cultural contexts. Through class discussions, Moodle and essays, students will conduct close readings and textual analyses, formulating arguments about texts and ultimately articulating them clearly in writing.

As a RAP course, one of our goals is to create a classroom environment that facilitates free, open, thoughtful conversation, even as we tackle complicated and controversial topics. Respectful participation, both as a contributor, and an active, sensitive listener, is vital to this endeavor. We will also connect certain themes in the course to your own experiences adjusting to life at UMass, and incorporate discussions about university resources available to assist you.
Feedback and Communication:

Part of the university classroom experiences involves receiving constructive feedback from an instructor regarding your writing, comprehension of ideas, and classroom involvement. However, I am also eager to hear your feedback – about the class, your experience at UMass, the syllabus (which is subject to revision), and certainly, my teaching. While I will build some time for this during class, I also encourage you to come to my email me, come to my office hours, or set up other times that we can meet and talk.

Regarding email, I will do my best to respond within 24 hours. However, I do not check my email as regularly after 5:00 pm or on weekends.

Required Texts (available for purchase via Amazon)

Ross, Fran. *Oreo*. New Directions
Schuyler, George. *Black No More*. Northeastern Library of Black Literature
Wilson, G. Willow and Adrian Alphona. *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal*, Marvel

Assignments and Grading:

This course is designed to assist your development as a writer (and thinker) in a variety of contexts. You will be asked to write one traditional, academic essay utilizing MLA format and disciplinary conventions. But by utilizing Moodle, you will also be called upon to engage in a dynamic, ongoing, collaborative writing environment that mirrors the online communities and social media networks in which many of us spend so much time. Your final project, which involves a class presentation, will ask you to bridge the gap between writing about complex ideas and orally conveying them to your peers. In order to develop these skills, class attendance, meaningful participation, and doing the reading will be vital, and so each of these components will contribute to your semester grade.

Grade Scale:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>grade pt</th>
<th>percent</th>
<th>meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>100-94</td>
<td>excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>93-90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>89-87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>86-83</td>
<td>good</td>
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<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>82-80</td>
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<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>79-77</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>76-73</td>
<td>fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>72-70</td>
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<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>69-67</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
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<td>66-60</td>
<td>poor</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>59-0</td>
<td>failure</td>
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## Grade Breakdown:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Attendance is mandatory. Attend every class, and you will get full credit here. Otherwise 10% will be docked per unexcused absence. <strong>Students who have more than five unexcused absences will not pass the class.</strong> If you do miss class, please email me to let me know why (even if you simply overslept). I don’t like to worry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>When you’re in class, participate! This means: be active during group work, volunteer to make comments during class discussion, and be attentive when your classmates speak. If you have anxiety about speaking in class, email me – we can have a conversation to figure out how to best facilitate your participating in a comfortable way that also promotes involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 page response paper</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>I will discuss the specific expectations for this assignment two weeks prior to its due date. Paper will be docked a third of a grade per day (i.e., B+ to B) if submitted late.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly Moodle posts</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Before 11 pm on Monday night, you will be required to post on Moodle about the week’s reading. You can miss one week without penalty. This will be an online space for us to spark, and continue, classroom discussions. Plan to write a minimum of 150 words (a maximum of 300) per post, and to use this space as a workshop for ideas you may explore further in class, your paper, or your final project/presentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5 page essay</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>A full-fledged academic paper utilizing MLA format and making a non-obvious argument about one of the class texts! I will distribute a rubric and clarify specific expectations for this assignment two weeks prior to its due date. Paper will be docked a third of a grade per day if submitted late.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final project / presentation</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Where do you see themes from this class emerging in the world around you? What books, television shows, movies, comedians, web-series, twitter feeds unveil artists attempting to deal with complex issues using humor? We will discuss the criteria for this assignment in more detail later in the semester, but the goal here will be to take some of the close reading and research skills you develop in this class and use them to make an argument about texts you find compelling and want to introduce to your classmates.</td>
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</tbody>
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**Academic Honesty**

The integrity of the academic enterprise of any institution of higher education requires honesty in scholarship and research. Academic honesty is required of all students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating dishonesty. Appropriate sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty. Any person who has reason to believe that a student has committed academic dishonesty should bring such information to the attention of the appropriate course instructor as soon as possible. Instances of academic dishonesty not related to a specific course should be brought to the attention of the appropriate department Head or Chair. Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and the commonly accepted standards of academic integrity, ignorance of such standards is not normally sufficient evidence of lack of intent. Further information can be found at [http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/](http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/).

**Accommodation**

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services (DS), Learning Disabilities Support Services (LDSS), or Psychological Disabilities Services (PDS), you may be eligible for reasonable academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements.

**Resources**

I encourage you to use the UMass Amherst Writing Center for all of your assignments. The Writing Center provides free one-on-one writing support from trained tutors who work with students in 45 minute sessions on their assignments. They can help with structuring your writing, developing strategies for copyediting, and even brainstorming ideas. Learn more (and schedule appointments) at [http://www.umass.edu/writingcenter](http://www.umass.edu/writingcenter).

Additional academic resources at UMass are detailed in your RAP booklet; we will go over those during class during the semester as well.

**Digital Etiquette:**

Occasionally a phone rings and interrupts a compelling class discussion. That can only mean one thing: cell phones should be off, or on silent, and in a place where you won’t be able to easily check them. Laptops are permitted only when necessary for an in-class activity or assignment. This policy will help limit in-class distraction and make it easier for us to build an attentive, respectful community over the course of the semester.
Working Reading Calendar

This schedule is subject to change, but should provide a sense for our reading schedule over the semester. I will provide specific instructions during class regarding how far you should be in your reading for subsequent classes.

Keyword essays are from *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Handler, and will available on Moodle, either linked or in PDF form

Also, please note the readings are listed next to the date by which they must be completed!

1/19: Introductions / syllabus review / expectations

1/21: Schuyler, *Black No More* (p. 13 – 35); Keywords: Race, Science

1/26: Schuyler, *Black No More* (p. 35 – 79)
1/28: Schuyler, *Black No More* (p. 80 – 120); Keyword: Citizenship

2/2: Schuyler, *Black No More* (p. 120 – 172)
2/4: Schuyler, *Black No More* (p. 173 – 222) Keywords: White

2/9: Peer Review Day
2/11: **2-3 Page Response Paper Due**; Begin Ross, *Oreo* (p. 3 – 22)

2/16: **NO CLASS** (Monday schedule) read: Ross, *Oreo*; (p. 23 – 61) Keyword: Family


3/1: Ross, *Oreo* (p. 187 – 207); Begin Linmark, *Rolling the R’s* (pages TBD)
3/3: Linmark, *Rolling the R’s* (pages TBD); Keyword: Gender

3/8: Linmark, *Rolling the R’s* (pages TBD); Peer Review Day
3/10: Linmark, *Rolling the R’s* (pages TBD ); Keyword: Queer **4-5 Page Paper Due**

Spring Break

3/22: Linmark, *Rolling the R’s* (pages TBD ); Keyword: Performance

3/29: Beatty, *White Boy Shuffle* (p. 45 – 94);
3/31: Beatty, *White Boy Shuffle* (p. 95 – 125); Keyword: Class

4/5: Beatty, *White Boy Shuffle* (p. 129 – 164); Keyword: Black

4/14: Peer Review Day

4/19: Wilson et. al., *Ms. Marvel* (Issues 1 & 2); Keyword: Orientalism Final Project Presentations
4/21: Wilson et. al., *Ms. Marvel* (Issues 3 & 4); Final Project Presentations

4/26: (Last day of classes): Class conclusion / Final Project Presentations