

Literature and Belonging

Comparative Literature 161

Summer 2025

Instructor: Professor David Palumbo-Liu

Email: palboliu@stanford.edu

Throughout time, authors have struggled to find their location and identities in often chaotic and unsettling worlds. From the 8th century classical Chinese poet Du Fu, who wrote some of his finest poems during the catastrophic An Lushan Rebellion, to the Native American novelist Louise Erdrich, who writes of her grandfather's argument for Indigenous rights before the US Congress, creative writers have tried to find company and community to guide them. We will read authors such as bell hooks, James Baldwin, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Richard Rive,, Lulu Miller, Steven Charleston, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Du Fu, and others. We will also view the remarkable films, "Mississippi Masala," and "Beasts of the Southern Wild." The pace will be deliberate and discussions conversational, with additional lectures by the professor.

Format

Each class will begin with small groups meeting to come up with two key points from the previous meeting and two questions with regard to the previous class.

Then the instructor will give a brief talk introducing the reading for the day.

There will be a brief break after the talk.

Finally, we will have a question and answer period.

In time remaining professor will be available for office hours each day.

Required papers

There will be two essays required. The first essay is due on July 14. Please write an essay on one theme that has emerged in the first part of the course—this may be a concept, a problem, or an instance of "belonging" that has caught your attention. This essay should be about 1,750 words long.

The second essay is due on the last day of class, August 13. On that day you will present a short talk explaining what you wrote about. Your paper should be about 2,000 words long and explain how your thoughts about belonging have been influenced by three different works from the syllabus. How have these works, and our discussion this summer, changed your ideas? Or, how have your initial ideas become even stronger?

Texts

Alexievich, Chernobyl Prayer

Baldwin, No Name on the Street

Charleston, We Survived the End of the World

Sandra Cisneros, House on Mango Street

Gumbs, Undrowned

hooks, Belonging (PDF)

Lahiri, The Interpreter of Maladies

Miller, Why Fish Don't Exist

Nguyen, The Refugees

Rive, Buckingham Palace

Simpson, Theory of Water

Films (we will watch these films together in class):

Mississippi Masala

<https://www.kanopy.com/en/stanford/video/13354660?frontend=kui>Links to an external site.

Beasts of the Southern Wild (Amazon Prime via professor)

Schedule

Week One

M 6/23: Introductions

W 6/25: Discussion of literature, history, tradition and invention. Literary expression as finding a place to belong. Poems by Du Fu

F: 6/27: bell hooks and James Baldwin (pages 1-56).

Week Two

M 6/30: Cisneros "House on Mango Street," "No Speak English." Close readings, themes, complexities. Continue discussion of types of belonging—individuals, families, neighborhoods, gender, ethnicity, race, nation, generations.

W 7/2: Cisneros "Geraldo No Name," Louie, His Cousin, and His Other Cousin".

F 7/4: HOLIDAY

Week Three

M 7/7: Lahiri ("A Temporary Matter," "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine," "This Blessed House," "Third and Final Continent")

W 7/9: Nguyen ("Black-Eyed Women," "War Years", "The Americans," "Fatherland")

F 7/11: "Mississippi Marsala" dir. Mira Nair, 1991

Week Four

M 7/14: Discussion of film

W 7/16: *Buckingham Palace*

F 7/18: Lunch together at **1 PM, STANFORD FACULTY CLUB**

Week Five

M 7/21: Miller, *Why Fish Don't Exist* (first half)

W 7/23: *Why Fish Don't Exist* (finish)

F 7/25: "Beasts of the Southern Wild" dir. Benh Zeitlin, 2012.

Week Six

M 7/28: Discussion of film; discussion of readings for remainder of class.

W 7/30: Erdrich, *The Night Watchman* (first third)

F 8/1: *Night Watchman* (second third)

Week Seven

M 8/4: *Night Watchman* (final third)

W 8/6: Charleston, *We Survived the End of the World* (first and final chapter, plus any others you can read)

F 8/8: Simpson, *Theory of Water* (listen to podcast and select portions of book you like)

Listen to podcast: <https://speakingoutofplace.com/2025/06/08/world-making-life-giving-and-indigenous-internationalism-leanne-betasamosake-simpson-and-the-theory-of-water/> [Links to an external site.](#)

Week Eight

M 8/11: Gumbs, *Undrowned* (select any four chapters to read and discuss)

W 8/13: Discussion of final essays and of course