The Suburbs in American Literature and Film
Summer II 2016 | July 11-August 19

Professor R. Ontiveros
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Online Office Hours via Appt.

Course Description

The Suburbs in American Literature and Film is an online, multidisciplinary course that explores the diverse and changing world of American suburbia through literature and film. When most people think of the U.S. suburbs, they have in mind the middle-class, single-family homes depicted in films and television shows like *The Graduate*, *The Truman Show*, or *The Brady Bunch*. These predominantly white "bedroom suburbs" are an important part of the story of suburbia, but historians argue that some of the first suburbanites were hired-out slaves and free Blacks living on the outskirts of New York, Atlanta, and other major cities during the 19th century. Our course is premised on two arguments: (1) that the American suburbs are far more racially, ethnically, culturally, sexually, and economically diverse than mass media suggests, and (2) that the suburbs uniquely embody many of the complexities and contradictions of American society, past and present. Together we will consider these arguments via prose, poetry, drama, and cinema. Our investigation will be helped by vocabulary and ideas drawn from sociology, women's studies, ethnic studies, history, cultural studies, psychology, anthropology, and the history of science and technology. Authors on the syllabus include Danielle Evans, Gish Jen, Caki Wilkinson, Lisa D'Amour, and Richard Blanco. Films include *Boyz N the Hood*, *The Graduate*, *Better Luck Tomorrow*, *Stepford Wives*, and *Mosquita y Mari*.

Learning Outcomes

On completion of this course, you will:

- Be able to recognize and interpret themes and formal patterns in suburban literature and film, and be able to explain how suburban literature and film relate to broader currents in American culture.
- Know foundational vocabulary in suburban studies and cultural studies.
- Demonstrate an ability to make comparisons about the suburbs and their inhabitants across time and space, and also to think intersectionally about the American suburbs and their representation in literature and film.
- Understand how the suburbs have sometimes promoted and sometimes impeded the creation of a just, productive, egalitarian, and collaborative US society, and what role literature and film has played in both.
Course Materials

Course materials can be found online at our course “Modules” menu. The only exception is the novel *Mona in the Promised Land*, which is available at the McKeldin Library or online ([digital](#) or [paper](#)).

Grading

Grades for this course will be based on:

- **Discussion Board** (300 points/30%): Students will be asked to post responses (200 words each) to two of the weekly discussion questions and replies (100 words each) to two of the responses written by your peers. With the exception of our last week, responses are due Thursday night of each week and replies are due Sunday night of each week. Further details and the grading rubric are available on ELMS.
- **Reaction papers**: (300 points/30%): Each week students will be required to submit a short reaction paper (approximately 2 pages) that interprets material on the syllabus. Further details and the grading rubric are available on ELMS.
- **Final Exam** (200 points/20%). The final exam will be administered the last week of class and include ID questions and vocabulary questions. The exam will be multiple-choice. Further details are available on ELMS.
- **Capstone Project** (200 points/20%): For this assignment, students can choose from the following options: a traditional essay; a curricular unit designed for high-school students; an annotated bibliography; a creative piece (e.g. original painting, musical composition, short story, or sculpture); or a digital presentation (e.g. interpretive blog or online photo essay). All projects are required to have at least 2000-2500 words (approximately 8-10 pages) and to make use of primary sources and 3 secondary sources. Further details, samples, and the grading rubric are available on ELMS.

Schedule

Materials for the week ahead—including video podcasts, readings, films, and assignments—will become available the Friday prior at 12:01pm. **All times below are Eastern Standard Time.**

Week 1 (7/11-7/17): **Everyday Life and the Suburbs**
- Read: *Mona in the Promised Land* (pages 1-103)
  - “Suburban” by Michael Blumenthal
- Watch: *The Graduate* (1967)
- Recommended: Selection from *Crabgrass Frontier & Building Suburbia*

**Weekly responses due Thursday, 7/14 at 11:59pm**
**Weekly replies due Sunday, 7/17 at 11:59pm**
**Reaction paper due Sunday, 7/17 at 11:59pm**
Week 2 (7/18-7/24): Race and the Suburbs
Read: Mona in the Promised Land (pages 105-215)
   “Guthrie Theater” by Gerald Vizenor
Watch: “Not an Elegy for Mike Brown” by Danez Smith (online)
Watch: Boyz N the Hood (1991)
Weekly responses due Thursday, 7/21 at 11:59pm
Weekly replies due Sunday, 7/24 at 11:59pm
Reaction paper due Sunday, 7/24 at 11:59pm

Week 3 (7/25-7/31): Gender and the Suburbs
Read: Mona in the Promised Land (pages 217-304)
   “Lares and Penates”
   “What’s Love Got to Do” by Richard Blanco
Watch: The Stepford Wives (1975)
Recommended: Selection from The Feminine Mystique
Weekly responses due Thursday, 7/28 at 11:59pm
Weekly replies due Sunday, 7/31 at 11:59pm
Reaction paper due Sunday, 7/31 at 11:59pm

Week 4 (8/1-8/7): Sex and the Suburbs
Read: “Júnior, Raggaetón Tropical”
   “First Fire” by Camille Dungy
Watch: Mosquita y Mari (2012)
Weekly responses due Thursday, 8/4 at 11:59pm
Weekly replies due Sunday, 8/7 at 11:59pm
Reaction paper due Sunday, 8/7 at 11:59pm

Week 5 (8/8-8/14): Class and the Suburbs
   “Robert E. Lee is Dead” by Danielle Evans (2010)
   “Her” by Billy Collins
Weekly responses due Thursday, 8/11 at 11:59pm
Weekly replies due Sunday, 8/14 at 11:59pm
Reaction paper due Sunday, 8/14 at 11:59pm

Week 6 (8/15-8/19): Youth and the Suburbs
Read: “O Youth and Beauty!” by John Cheever
   “Margaret” by Spencer Reece (2010)
   “My Soul” by Richard Lehner
Recommended: Excerpt from “Teenage Wasteland”
Weekly responses due Tuesday, 8/16 at 11:59pm
Weekly replies due Thursday, 8/18 at 11:59pm
Reaction paper due Friday, 8/19 at 11:59pm
Capstone project due Friday, 8/19 at 11:59pm