

Turning Points: Five American artists and writers explore the intersection of Identity, Memory, and History

This course will make use of memoir, film, and painting to explore the ways that five American writers and artists understood some of the defining moments in their lives. We will study the work of **Chiura Obata, James Baldwin, Hung Liu, Annette Gordon-Reed, and Nikole Hannah-Jones** in the context of turning points in American history including migration, emancipation, internment, and the Civil Rights movement.

Participants will reflect on these turning points and their own family stories through brief responses experimenting with the techniques of memoir during the course.

Week 1 Monday, January 23 Chiura Obata's Yosemite

Overview of course goals, resource materials, building a vibrant community of participants in class and online.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_IbPsRVhAA

“Chiura Obata, American Modern” introduction to exhibit at the Smithsonian museum, with brief biography and a few paintings (4 min)

<https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/obata-yosemite>

From a retrospective exhibit at the Smithsonian in 2008

Check out the **image gallery** in this link for our class. Click on each image for name and date.

<https://youtu.be/n7ps6HscITY?t=540>

9 minute video demonstration of Obata's painting technique by unnamed narrator in 1956.

Week 2 Monday, January 30 Japanese American Internment, 1942-45

Resources: Selections of Obata's paintings and letters from his internment in 1942-43, posted online.

From *Topaz Moon: Chiura Obata's Art of the Internment*, edited by Obata's granddaughter Kim Kodani Hill, (Heyday Books:2000).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO3TDdlkn0Y>

“Chiura Obata: American Modern,” exhibit at Smithsonian American Art Museum, December 2019. (53 minutes)

A very informative slide show and lecture by guest curator ShiPu Wang, focusing especially on Obata's letters and artwork from his internment.

Suggestion: **Begin at 17 minutes –end at 29 minutes**

Selections from *Farewell to Manzanar*, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, A memoir about her family's internment at Manzanar camp between the age of 7-11, and its aftermath as she understood it 30 years later.

Excerpts we'll discuss in class are posted online. If you don't own the book, please print out and bring to class.

Week 3 Monday, February 6 James Baldwin, Civil Rights activist

Baldwin-Buckley race debate still resonates 55 years on (9 minutes 2020)

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/baldwin-buckley>

James Baldwin debates William Buckley at the Cambridge Union

[Baldwin v Buckley](#) 1965, 60 minutes

"Is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro?"

The transcript for Baldwin's speech is also posted online.

Week 4 Monday, February 13 Artist Hung Liu

Photos drawn from *The Art of Hung Liu: Summoning Ghosts* (Oakland Museum of California: 2013), and *Hung Liu: Portraits of Promised Lands* (National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution and Yale University Press: 2022)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LV8e43K2zCI>

Hung Liu describes her archival photographic sources and her process of using drips and circles in her paintings, KQED Spark (9 minutes) 2005

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jufwfd2W8fA>

Hung Liu discusses her move from socialist realism to abstraction; she explains her painting "Avant Garde," depicting her in uniform, as "cut-out pop image" 2019 (4 minutes)

Suggested viewing

A virtual tour of Hung Liu exhibit "Portraits of Promised Lands" at National Portrait Gallery of Smithsonian American Art Museum with curator Dorothy Moss (20 min). Moss provides deeply informed comments on each of the portraits, which she and Liu chose for the exhibit that opened after Liu's death in 2021.

<https://smartify.org/tours/hung-liu-portraits-of-promised-lands>

[no class February 20: Presidents Day]

Week 5 Monday, February 27 historian Annette Gordon-Reed

Resources

Selections from *On Juneteenth*, Annette Gordon-Reed (Liveright Publishing Corporation: 2021) Winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

Excerpts posted online.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxkK28KVbwk&t=12s>

Annette Gordon-Reed discusses her book *On Juneteenth* on *Washington Post Live* June 18, 2021, the day after President Biden declares it a national holiday. (30 min)

Week 6 Monday March 6

Reflections on turning points in our time

[NikoleHannah-Jones6-24-20](#) NYT magazine article “What is Owed,” about reparations, although Hannah-Jones’ main interest is tracing the origins and persistence of the wealth gap between Blacks and whites historically, which she identifies as the ongoing effects of slavery and segregation (June 28, 2020)

interview with Nikole Hannah-Jones, Pulitzer prizewinner for her creation of the *1619 Project* with Terry Gross, June 2020 [FreshAir](#) (42 minutes)

Transcribed highlights of their interview are included.

Wrap up of course: what other turning points are we experiencing now?