

Johnston Seminar 000I

Storytelling and Ethnicity Fall 2020

Tues.-Thurs. 11:00-2:30 Hall of Letters 211

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Different cultures and their traditions of storytelling give us a wonderful variety of literary practices. Indigenous folktales, German fairy tales, Native American legends, Ovid's mythological stories, slave narratives, tall tales, eye-witness accounts in court, bedtime stories, short fiction (whether of romance or death, growing up or family conflict), stories by stand-up comics, mystery stories, science fiction and fantasy, true crime stories, stories on The Moth Radio Hour, historical vignettes, Johnston stories around the fire-pit. So much, too much to choose from.

Hearing or reading good stories takes us out of our own experience and into other lives and minds. In this seminar we'll explore lots of diverse stories, from ethnic groups as far away as ancient Mesopotamia and as close as Los Angeles.

The word ethnic comes from the Greek word ethnicos, from ethnos, meaning people or nation, and in the plural foreign nations. The Middle English word was derived from the post-classical Latin word for heathen or pagan. So we'll discuss whether the stories we study are told by people like ourselves or people we consider heathen.

I'll choose performances and texts (perhaps from an anthology) for our first several weeks of classes, and then I'll open the rest of the semester to stories we'll choose together. For our theoretical background we'll read anthropological and well as literary works, because the field of ethnography is a savvy guide to the relation between folklore and culture. And ethnography is itself a narrative art.

For your own work in the seminar, I'll ask you to write two or three short essays of critical argument. If you'd like to tell or write stories of your own, for your fellow students to hear, that would be great. If you'd enjoy creating scripted performances of stories we have studied, I'd enjoy that too. Let's have active discussions. Above all, let's reflect on how we maintain our sense of humanity with the stories we rely on.