

ENGL 2316: Literature and Culture  
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Where are you? Who are you?

How do we make sense of where we are? We tell stories, of course. But how do these stories, ones about the places in which we live, our homes and cities, our cathedrals and strip malls, work on us as we develop the larger story of who we are? And how do these stories interact with—that is, complicate and complement—those stories we think we know about our bodies, our desires, our convictions, our families, our relationships?

This course will be an attempt to deal with these questions, as well as an attempt to learn how to ask better ones, through reading and writing literature of places.

Because we live in Houston, a city notorious for refusing a single story, we have a unique opportunity to deal with these questions without the burden of an ideology we must protect—or overturn. What is Houston? No one knows. Or, at least, no one really agrees. This course, then, will begin with literature of Houston, our “ephemeral city,” as the architect Philip Johnson called it, and then move beyond to literature of other places, including the Mall of America, New Orleans, and Vietnam.

Students will be asked to design class discussions, post reading responses on a course blog, and craft the following pieces: a building review, a work of travel writing, a formal analysis of the texts, and a personal essay.

Texts:

*Literary Houston*, edited by David Theis

Selections from the “Unexpected City” series at OffCite.org

Selections from *Texas Monthly*, *Cite*, and *Houston Press*

*Imagined Communities*, by Benedict Anderson

*Variations on a Theme Park*, edited by Michael Sorkin

*Zeitoun*, by Dave Eggers

*Black Boy*, by Richard Wright

*Hunting in Harlem*, by Mat Johnson

*Belonging*, by bell hooks

*Catfish and Mandala*, by Andrew X. Pham

*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, by Joan Didion

*Notes from No Man’s Land*, Eula Biss

*Home and Exile*, Chinua Achebe