THE PHENOMENON OF OPRAH’S BOOK CLUB (PLURALISM)
ENGL 2000: TEXTS & CONTEXTS HYBRID (L11) / SUMMER 2020

Professor: D. Tyler  
E-mail: dtyler1@fordham.edu
Office: LC Martino 415; Box: Lowenstein 924  
Class Location: VT or Zoom
Office Hours: Zoom or email, R 1-2:30 p.m. & by appt.  
Class Time: T or R 9-12 p.m.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
Since its inception in September 1996, Oprah’s Book Club (OBC) has transformed the literary landscape—from ushering in a new wave of enthusiastic readers and spiking the sale of books around the globe to reshaping the advertising and marketing of literature and offering readers strategies for engaging it. This level of success has allowed Oprah to accomplish one of her ultimate goals: to make her book club “the biggest book club in the world and get people reading again.”

This course will explore the phenomenon of OBC, thinking through its formation and rise as well as its strategies and approaches to literature. What methods does the book club employ to make literature accessible to a mass televisual audience, and how does Oprah engage issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class with her readers and viewers? How does OBC serve as a litmus test for the ongoing debates between highbrow and lowbrow literary cultures? In what way does the book club figure Oprah as the arbiter of literary taste, and what kind of backlash does she receive as a Black female mogul? Why has OBC had such an enduring influence on the literary marketplace, and how does the club turn the private act of reading into something public and communal? We will tackle these matters and questions as we discuss secondary sources that map out various parts of OBC’s trajectory and as we examine closely themes of racial beauty, sexual assault, racism, imprisonment, disability, and politics in OBC-selected texts, such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Ernest Gaines’s *A Lesson before Dying*, and Michelle Obama’s *Becoming*.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:
The mission of this course is to help you develop tools to both appreciate and analyze a variety of literary, televisual, and critical texts; to improve your oral and written communication by thinking carefully about literature and popular culture; to understand and explain the formation, strategies, successes, and controversies of OBC; to value the significance of literature and popular culture and to recognize how both inform our lives; to identify the interaction between your reading practices (book selections, reading style, etc.) and the reading practices of others; and to enhance and increase your knowledge and awareness of the following forms of American diversity: disability, race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality.

REQUIRED MATERIALS:

All of the required books can be purchased at the University bookstore. Articles, chapters, and handouts that are not part of the above booklist can be downloaded from Blackboard. You are responsible for printing out secondary readings from Blackboard and bringing your materials to class in hard copy. You are required to read all materials before the scheduled class meetings listed in the course schedule.

ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION:
1. VoiceThread, Zoom, & Discussion Posts (20%): This online course will meet via Zoom and VoiceThread for Summer Session I. Since the course includes Web-based learning activities, you will be required to post comments online to VoiceThread. Your responses to the question(s) posted in our Class VoiceThread will count towards your participation grade as well as signal your class attendance. There are also five VoiceThreads that will be graded. See the syllabus for due dates for each of your graded VoiceThread post(s). Instructions or guidelines for your VoiceThread post(s) will be available no later than 24 hours before the post is due and typically will be given during the class immediately preceding the due date of the post. For those of you who are unfamiliar with VoiceThread, it is a collaborative, multimedia slide show that holds images, documents, and videos and allows people to navigate slides and leave comments in different ways by using their voice, text, audio file, or video (via a webcam). VoiceThread guidelines may include questions about the primary or secondary sources, and they are designed to promote discussion and make sure you are keeping up with the reading. You will be evaluated on the timeliness, relevancy, and sophistication of your responses. For tips on how to craft a discussion post, read this link: <http://writingcenter.ashford.edu/writing-a-discussion-board-post>. The majority of your VoiceThread posts will be audio comments, but this link should be helpful nonetheless. Given that we might be in different time zones, I think asynchronous learning tools are the best way to proceed for the summer semester, since face-to-face instruction has been cancelled due to COVID-19. Therefore, the bulk of our online class will take place on VoiceThread. However, I have scheduled several Zoom meetings (5/26, 6/4, 6/11, and 6/18), so that we can meet synchronously as well. Please mark your calendars so that you can keep up with this hybrid schedule. Next to the date for every class, I list whether we are meeting via VoiceThread or Zoom.

2. Midterm Paper (25%): You are required to write a 3-4-page midterm paper in this course. Your midterm paper is due on Tuesday, June 9, 2020, and you will receive paper guidelines no later than Thursday, May 28, 2020. This paper will help you develop your skills in critical thinking and persuasive writing, and your essay should include a persuasive thesis, appropriate textual evidence, textual analysis (or close readings), and clarity of expression—all components of good writing and thinking. A close reading involves choosing a specific moment (a phrase, sentence, or passage) from a text, citing it, and then analyzing the significance of that moment in the text. Please note that you will be expected to turn in a hard copy and an electronic copy of your paper. For additional help with writing, please make use of the Writing Center at Fordham University. I also recommend checking out the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers and the Purdue Online Writing Lab (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl>).

Grammar and Punctuation: Though we will discuss particularly problematic points of grammar and punctuation, this class is not designed to focus mainly on such issues. If I see persistent grammatical and/or punctuation problems in your work, I will mark the first instance of it. It will then be your responsibility to correct the issues and talk to me about it if you have any questions or need further assistance. The MLA Handbook is a great reference book for punctuation issues. For help with grammar, I recommend Andrea A. Lunsford’s The St. Martin’s Handbook.

A Note on Plagiarism: Plagiarism refers to a form of cheating that Alexander Lindey in Plagiarism and Originality defines as “the false assumption of authorship: the wrongful act of taking the product of another person’s mind, and presenting it as one’s own” (2). According to the seventh edition of the MLA Handbook, plagiarism “involves two kinds of wrongs”: “Using another person's ideas, information, or expressions without acknowledging that person's work constitutes intellectual theft. Passing off another person’s ideas, information, or expressions as your own to get a better grade or
gain some advantage constitutes fraud” (52). Plagiarism also carries serious repercussions, ranging from failure in a course to expulsion from the University (MLA 53). Message: Don’t do it. Come and talk to me if you are having difficulties finishing your work before you think of resorting to plagiarism. For more information about this issue, please see the following website: <http://www.fordham.edu/undergraduateacademicintegrity>.

3. Regular and Engaged Participation in Class (Participation [10%] + Group Presentations [15%] = 25%): One of the advantages and the challenges of taking a smaller-sized course is that you have more opportunities to discuss the reading material than you would in a larger lecture course. I will therefore expect you to make every effort to participate in class discussion in order to demonstrate your engagement with the material and to refine your thinking about the literature as you prepare for your midterm paper and your final creative project. Questions and comments about the readings, responses to other students, bringing assigned readings to class, and satisfactory completion of assignments all constitute valuable participation. You will be expected to participate in an 8-10-minute group presentation during the semester. Your presentation will be on an article related to material in the course, and it is intended to help you identify the important parts of an article. Your group presentation will be worth 10% of your grade.

Of course, you cannot participate in class if you do not attend it, so it is vital that you attend every class meeting on time and that you contact me beforehand via e-mail if you must miss a particular class (except with emergencies, in which cases you should contact me as soon as possible). Excessive absences and tardiness will negatively affect your grade, and only absences accompanied by authoritative documentation (usually a doctor’s note) will be excused. If you are tardy to class on two occasions, then that counts as one absence. After two unexcused absences, each absence will negatively impact your grade in the course by one-third of a letter grade (for example, an A- would drop to a B+, etc.) and will also be reported to the dean. If you must be absent from class, it is your responsibility to speak with one or more of your classmates about what you missed. In-class writing assignments, discussions, group presentations, and workshops are participatory processes and therefore cannot be made up. If you must miss a class due to a religious observance, notify me by e-mail at least a week in advance. If you are absent due to illness, please provide me with a note from your doctor. If you are absent due to a family emergency, notify your dean who will then issue a memo to all of your professors. According to University policy, the maximum number of total excused absences will not exceed four class meetings for a course that meets two days per week.

4. Final Creative Project (30%): You have two options for your final creative project. 1. Your final creative project on OBC should craft a recommendation for how to incorporate the book club into Oprah’s media empire (network, magazine, website, and/or philanthropic organizations, etc.). This project will help you improve your critical thinking skills, your problem-solving skills, your application of knowledge, your communication skills, and your ability to integrate and synthesize course materials you’ve read. Given what you’ve learned in the course about the formation, strategies, successes, and controversies of OBC, you’ll have to put together a persuasive, informed, and argumentative final project—where you provide advice on the possible ways of repackaging the book club and back up each of your main claims. While the project should include a carefully worded recommendation (or argument) supported by thoughtful reasoning and analysis, it can take a variety of forms, ranging from a proposal, an op-ed, a video presentation, a marketing pitch, a podcast, a personal letter, etc. Feel free to think creatively about this final project. 2. You can do a creative project about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected your life. To link this assignment to the class, I’d like you to connect some aspect of your experience to at least two of the readings (primary or secondary) in the class. Standard
writing projects (such as a proposal or letter) are expected to be 4-5 pages in length, while multimedia projects (such as a video or podcast) are expected to be no longer than 5-6 minutes. The format and length of your final creative project may vary. We will talk more about different ways of approaching the project later in the semester. This final project will take the place of the final exam. Submit an electronic copy of your project to Blackboard. Your final creative project will be due on Thursday, June 25, 2020.

COURSE SCHEDULE:

May 26-June 25, 2020

Module I. Waves & Methods of OBC
Week 1: 5/26-5/28

Unit 1: Waves of OBC & the Reading Revolution
T, 5/26: ZOOM CLASS MEETING: 5/26
- Introductions
- First Paragraphs Exercise
- Cecilia Konchar Farr, “Reading Oprah,” Reading Oprah, pp. 7-27
- View: “Books,” The Oprah Winfrey Show 20th Anniversary Collection
- View: The Oprah Winfrey Show, “Oprah’s Dinner Party”

Unit 2: Methods of OBC
- VoiceThread Post(s) #1

- View: The Oprah Winfrey Show, “Oprah’s Dinner Party,” Blackboard
- Midterm Paper Topics & Guidelines

Module 2: First Wave of OBC: Selected Fiction Writers
Week 2: 6/2-6/4

Unit 1: Notions of Racial Beauty & Intersectionality in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye
T 6/2: VOICETHREAD CLASS MEETING: 6/2
- Morrison, “Forward,” pp. viii-xiii
Kimberlé Crenshaw, “On Intersectionality,” WOW 2016 Keynote Address, 0:00-12:30

Unit 2: Avoiding Dehumanization in The Bluest Eye
W, 6/3: VOICETHREAD CLASS MEETING: 6/3
Morrison (cont.), Bluest, pp. 94-163
“OBC Collection: The Bluest Eye,” Oprah.com, Blackboard
VoiceThread Post(s) #2

Unit 3: Canonicity, Commercialism, and Toni Morrison
R, 6/4: ZOOM CLASS MEETING: 6/4
Morrison (cont.), Bluest, pp. 164-206
View: The Oprah Winfrey Show, “The Bluest Eye” (May 26, 2000)
Writing Workshop: “Selecting a Paper Topic” and “Developing a Thesis”
Group Presentation #1 on John Young’s “Postmodern Popular Audiences”

Module 3: First Wave of OBC: Ernest Gaines’s A Lesson before Dying
Week 3: 6/9-6/11

Unit 1: Parishes, Plantations, & Prisons in A Lesson before Dying
Ernest Gaines, A Lesson before Dying (1993), pp. 1-95
Midterm Paper due (3-4 pages)

Unit 2: Notions of Manhood & Humanity in A Lesson before Dying
W, 6/10: VOICETHREAD CLASS MEETING: 6/10
Gaines (cont.), Lesson, pp. 96-194
“OBC Collection: A Lesson before Dying,” Oprah.com, Blackboard
VoiceThread Post(s) #3

Unit 3: The Role of Literacy in A Lesson before Dying
R, 6/11: ZOOM CLASS MEETING: 6/11
Gaines (cont.), Lesson, pp. 195-256
Thadious M. Davis, “Landscape as Prisonscape,” Southscapes, pp. 291-310, Blackboard
View: The Oprah Winfrey Show, “Oprah Goes to Louisiana” (October 27, 1997), Blackboard
Group Presentation #2 on Thadious M. Davis “Landscape as Prisonscape”

Module 4: Controversies & Second and Third Waves of OBC
Week 4: 6/16-6/17

Unit 1: Jonathan Franzen, James Frey, Oprah Winfrey, and a Book Lovers’ Quarrel
T, 6/16: VOICETHREAD CLASS MEETING: 6/16
Jonathan Franzen & James Frey
Laura Miller, “Book Lovers’ Quarrel,” Salon.com, n. pag., Blackboard
Unit 2: Controversies & Second and Third Waves of OBC

W, 6/17: VOICETRACK CLASS MEETING: 6/17
J. Franzen & J. Frey
Kevin Quirk, “Correcting Oprah: Jonathan Franzen and the Uses of Literature in a Therapeutic Age,” pp. 253-296, Blackboard
Kathleen Rooney, “Everything Old Is New Again: Oprah’s Book Club Returns with the Classics,” Reading with Oprah, pp. 295-319, Blackboard (optional)


Module 5: Fourth Wave of OBC: OBC 2.0

Week 5: 6/18-6/25

Unit 1: “Becoming Me” & the Great Migration
R, 6/18: ZOOM CLASS MEETING: 6/18
Michelle Obama, Becoming (2018), pp. 1-143
Isabel Wilkerson, “Michelle Obama’s ‘Becoming’ and the Great Migration,” NY Times, Blackboard
Eli Clare, “the mountain,” Exile and Pride, pp. 1-13, Blackboard (optional)
Eli Clare, “A Note about Gender,” Exile & Pride, Blackboard (optional)
Group Presentation #4 on Kevin Quirk’s “Correcting Oprah”
Group Presentation #5 on Jaime Harker’s “Afterword”

Unit 2: “Becoming Us,” the First Family, & Stereotypes
Michelle Obama’s Becoming, pp. 144-280
Melissa Harris-Perry, “Crooked Room,” Sister Citizen, pp. 28-50, Blackboard

View: Oprah’s interview with Michelle Obama, Blackboard

Unit 3: “Becoming More” & Michelle Obama’s Initiatives as First Lady
W, 6/24: VOICETRACK CLASS MEETING: 6/24
Michelle Obama’s Becoming, pp. 281-421

View: “The First Lady Introduces Let’s Move,” “Let’s Move! Campaign Video,” and “First Lady Michelle Obama Carpool Karaoke”
Your final creative project is due on June 25, 2020 at 12 p.m. This final project will take the place of the final exam. Submit an electronic copy of your project to Blackboard.
1. Late Work: Late work (without written documentation and explanation of why the work is late prior to its due date and time) will be penalized 1/2 a grade (or 5 points out of 100) for every 24-hour period that it is late. This policy applies to all required assignments. You will be able to make up work without penalty only if you have written documentation explaining your absence and have notified me before your absence of the emergency that prevented you from attending class. Work that is more than three days late will not be accepted at all, and any late work will not receive comments that might aid you in improving your work.

2. E-mail: I may take up to 24 hours (and sometimes longer) to respond to your inquiries. You should plan your e-mails accordingly. This also means that you may not e-mail me with questions about your work as of 24 hours before your assignment is due.

3. Respect: We will often explore controversial issues that may lead to debate. It is important to bear in mind that fruitful discussion can happen only in an atmosphere of respect and attention, and I expect you to hold high standards of both.

4. Class Etiquette: It is important to treat the classroom as a sacred space. Therefore, students are expected to arrive on time for class. Reading newspapers, magazines, or non-course-related material is rude and unacceptable. Personal conversations are prohibited during class, since they are distracting to both the instructor and other students. Checking your e-mail, Facebook, or other non-course-related websites is strictly forbidden during class time.

5. Laptop Policy: I ask that you not use a laptop, phone, or tablet in class unless needed for your learning process. Studies suggest that for many people, learning (not to mention conversation) is enhanced when electronic devices are off—and when notes are taken by hand, not onscreen. If you need a laptop in order to take notes effectively, either as an accommodation or as a preference, please just let me know.

6. Students with Disabilities: The instructor should be informed in writing at the beginning of the semester (no later than the second week of classes) if a student has a disability that requires special accommodation in class for exams and writing assignments. Any student with a disability who needs accommodation should present the appropriate paperwork from the Office of Disability Services (disabilityservices@fordham.edu) and follow-up with me about logistics.

7. Chosen Name/Pronoun Policy: Some members of the Fordham community are known by a name that is different from their legal name. Students who wish to be identified by a chosen name can contact me via email to request that their chosen name and pronoun be used.

8. Changes to Syllabus: Some changes may be made in specific reading and other assignments; some minor adjustments to the schedule may also occur. Any changes will be described during class, and you will receive sufficient notice.