

***Beyond Resentment:***  
***The Literature of Life-Affirmation from Ancient Rome to the American Blues***

Prof. Jacob L. Mackey

MWF [...]

Classroom [...]

*Office Hours:* [...]

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This course explores some ways that people have historically confronted the sort of *ressentiment*—“a generalized feeling of resentment and often hostility harbored by one individual or group against another”—that pervades our cultural discourse, wracks our political life, and makes us miserable as individuals. In the first part of the course, we closely read the Roman playwright Terence, the poets Catullus, Horace, and Sulpicia, the historian Livy, and the philosophers Lucretius, Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. The second part focuses on the classically-influenced cultural critic Albert Murray (1916-2013) and his intellectual milieu, including his friend Ralph Ellison (1913-1994), and two of his literary predecessors, Frederick Douglass (1817/18-1895) and Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960). We investigate the programs that these authors, all of whom lived through times of social and personal turmoil, proposed for avoiding *ressentiment* and affirming life, thereby remaining centered in a sense of their own dignity despite the world’s insults and injuries, and cultivating a feeling of gratitude for the blessings that were intermingled with their tribulations.

We start with Nietzsche, whose stance of life-affirmation as an alternative to *ressentiment* and other life-denying emotions frames the course. We then explore, self-reflectively, the culture of the modern campus, in which we are all enmeshed. We look critically at cancel culture, safetyism, microaggressions, victimhood, and related phenomena, and the possible roles these things play in the mental health crisis that plagues young people.

Through our Roman authors, we explore the nature of the emotions and techniques for not letting negative ones dominate you, human finitude and how embracing it can deepen our appreciation of life, social interactions and how to approach them so that we feel increased kinship with and compassion for others, instead of resentment and alienation, and, through two “dramas of reconciliation,” the importance of forgiveness in personal and civic life.

The second part of the course explores Albert Murray’s theory of the African-American Blues tradition, particularly his thesis that the Blues idiom represented not “the anguished outcry of a victim” but both a “survival technique [and] esthetic equipment for living” and “an exercise in heroic action” through which Blues-oriented individuals made “an affirmative and hence exemplary and heroic response” to both the suffering particular to their historically conditioned forms of oppression as well as to the absurdity of the human condition in general. We also examine Murray’s and Frederick Douglass’s conception of American culture as “omni-American,” or inherently “composite,” Ralph Ellison’s theory of American democracy, and Zora Neale Hurston’s rejection of pity and affirmation of joy.

## SCHEDULE

**Week 1:**

**Monday 1/23:** Intro

**Fish, meet water: *Ressentiment*, microaggressions, and the three moral cultures**

**Wednesday 1/25:** Nietzsche on *ressentiment*, eternal return, and life affirmation  
—Nietzsche, *GM* 1.10-11, *GS* 276 (*amor fati*), *GS* 341 (eternal return), Z  
“Intoxicated Song,” 10 **Guest lecturer:** Prof. Moazzam-Doulat (CTSJ)

**Friday 1/27:** William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, Part 1: “Sheep”

**Week 2:**

**Monday 1/30:** Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*: Part 1: Three Bad Ideas (pp. 19-77).

**Wednesday 2/1:** Microaggressions at Oxy: the Dean’s BEST announcement  
—Derald Wing Sue, *et al.* “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life”  
—Musa al-Gharbi, “The Big Debate About Microaggressions”:  
<https://musaalgharbi.com/2017/01/30/big-debate-microaggressions/>  
—BEST announcements (Deans Flot and Thomas)

**Friday 2/3:** Honor culture, dignity culture, victimhood culture  
—Bradley Campbell & Jason Manning, “Microaggression and the Culture of Victimhood,” in *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*. (See also: <https://tinyurl.com/56b2hhtd>)  
—René Girard, “The Modern Concern for Victims,” from *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (1999)  
—J. E. Lendon, “Roman Honor,” *Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*

**Affirmative responses to adversity**

**Week 3:**

**Monday 2/6:** “We were born for cooperation”: Alternative compartments toward adversity from Marcus Aurelius and John Inazu  
—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2.1, 9.42, and 11.18  
—John Inazu, “Living Speech: Rising Above Insults and Bullying,” in *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference*.

**Wednesday 2/8:** Affirming your place in the cosmos: Seneca, *Consolation to Helvia*

**What are emotions?**

**Friday 2/10:** Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 3

**Week 4:**

**Monday 2/13:** Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 4

**Negative emotions and peace of mind**

**Wednesday 2/15:** Seneca, *De ira / On Anger* (selections)

**Friday 2/17:** Seneca, *De ira / On Anger* (selections), continued

**Embracing finitude**

**Week 5:**

**Monday 2/20:** NO CLASSES: President's Day

**Wednesday 2/22:** Seneca, *De brevitae vitae / On the Shortness of Life*

**Friday 2/24:** Lucretius, *De rerum natura / On the nature of things*, Book 4

**Week 6:**

**Monday 2/27:** Lucretius, *On the nature of things*, Book 4, continued  
—Martha Nussbaum, “Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature,” in *Therapy of Desire*

**Wednesday 3/1:** Carpe diem: Poetry of Horace: *Odes* 1.11 & 1.24

**Friday 3/3:** Living well with little: Poetry of Horace, continued: *Odes* 2.10 & 2.16

**Week 7:**

**Monday 3/6:** Let us live: Catullus 5; Bare it all: Sulpicia 1

**Dramas of reconciliation and (re)integration**

**Wednesday 3/8:** The Sabine Women: Livy, *History of Rome*

**Friday 3/10:** Hannah Arendt: “Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive,” in *The Human Condition*

**Week 8: Spring Break****Monday 3/13-Friday 3/17: SPRING BREAK****Week 9:****Monday 3/20:** Northrup Frye, "Mythos of Spring: Comedy," *Anatomy of Criticism***Wednesday 3/22:** Terence, *Brothers / Adelphoe***Friday 3/24:** Terence, *Brothers / Adelphoe***Affirmations in blue****Week 10:****Monday 3/27:** "The end of the world": Negations in black—Jesse McCarthy, "On Afropessimism," *Los Angeles Review of Books*<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-afropessimism/>**Wednesday 3/29:** The Omni-American alternative: Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, Intro and Part I: "A Natural History: *E pluribus unum*, pp. 5-23**Friday 3/31:** The original Omni-American: Frederick Douglass, "Our Composite Nationality," 1869<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/our-composite-nationality/>**Week 11:****Monday 4/3:** A complementary alternative: Ralph Ellison's democracy

—Ralph Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," 1970

<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,943970-1,00.html>**Wednesday 4/5:** Ralph Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," 1978<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41210352>**Friday 4/7:** Another alternative: Joy

—Against pity: Zora Neale Hurston, "Art and Such," 1938

—The politics of black joy: Lindsey Stewart, "Introduction: The Trouble of Black Southern Joy," in *The Politics of Black Joy*

—Asset-framing vs. deficit-framing: Trabian Shorters and Eboo Patel: "Is centering Black love and joy the key to building a better society?"

(Podcast) <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/podcast/shorters/>

**Week 12:**

**Monday 4/10:** Albert Murray against pity: *The Omni-Americans*, Part I: “White Norms for Black Deviation”; “Paleface Fables, Brownskin People”; “The Blues Idiom and the Mainstream,” pp. 23-62; Part III: “Identity, Diversity, and the Mainstream,” pp. 157-172

**Wednesday 4/12:** Albert Murray: the blues as heroic comportment toward life  
—Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, Ch. 2

**Friday 4/14:** Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, Ch. 3

**Week 13:**

**Monday 4/17:** Albert Murray: the blues as life affirmation  
—Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, Chs. 1 and 2

**Wednesday 4/19:** Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, Chs. 3 and 4

**Friday 4/21:** Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, Chs. 5 and 6

**Week 14:**

**Monday 4/24:** Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, Chs. 6 and 7

**Wednesday 4/26:** Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, Chs. 8 and 9

**Friday 4/28:** Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, Chs. 10 and 11

**Week 15:**

**Monday 5/1:** Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, Ch. 12 and *Epilogue*

## **An Inclusive Learning Environment**

You are welcome in my class! I will try, and I hope you will join me in trying, to foster a place of mutual care and inclusion—not just in terms of demographics, but in terms of background, sexuality, family circumstances, values, interests, religion, politics, and other viewpoints and commitments.

You are welcome whatever your age, race, ethnicity, or national origin.

You are welcome whatever your sex, gender, sexual orientation, relationship orientation (monogamist, polyamorous, and so on), and marital status (single, married, divorced, and so on).

You are welcome if you're a student athlete. You are welcome if you have a disability or mental health issue. You are welcome whatever your life circumstances and challenges.

You are welcome whatever your politics—conservative, liberal, centrist, socialist, Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Green, and so on. Some of your fellow students support Biden, some support Trump or DeSantis, some support other candidates, and some support none. It's especially important for us to be politically tolerant in this space, to employ the principle of charity when interpreting others' remarks, and to disagree with one another (when we do) constructively. (Note that this does *not* mean we give up our beliefs and values when we come to class!)

You are welcome whatever your religious orientation—Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Mormon, New Age, atheist, agnostic, and so on. You are welcome whatever your views on other potentially controversial topics.

My hope is that we will all (myself included!) do our best to take seriously this message of inclusivity, tolerance, and grace when interacting with one another. We will not agree on everything. Indeed, college students *shouldn't* agree with one another and with their professors about everything.

In this class, each of us may encounter views that we consider offensive, abhorrent, sinful, ridiculous, idiotic, psychopathic, or dangerous—and others might think one or more of *our own* views fit into these categories.

Regardless of these differences, we should try to treat each other the way we would want to be treated—with grace, the benefit of the doubt, consideration, and care, and with respect for everyone's freedom of conscience, freedom of association, and freedom to contribute their views to our shared conversation.