

English 3392:
African American Literature
Texas Tech University
Fall 2018

Section 01: TR 2:00-3:20pm

Note: This course fulfills the university's Multicultural Requirement.

Professor Michael Borshuk
Office: 4-25 English
Business Phone: 806.319.5741
Email: michael.borshuk@ttu.edu
Webpage: <http://www.faculty.english.ttu.edu/Borshuk>
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 2:00 pm to 5:00pm, or by appointment

This course will examine the development of African American literature from the slave narratives of the nineteenth century to postmodern fiction at the turn of the twenty-first. We will begin with a discussion of critical approaches to African American literature, and then proceed chronologically through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among our topics for interrogation and discussion will be: the influence of oral and musical traditions on the development of African American writing; the intervention(s) into traditional constructions of the American canon that black literature inaugurates; the ways that African American writers redress stereotypes and problematic representations of black Americans; and the “alternative” histories that African American literature proposes alongside America’s dominant historical records.

English 3392, which helps students develop an awareness and knowledge of cultural distinctiveness among African Americans historically, fulfills Texas Tech University’s multicultural requirement. Students graduating from Texas Tech University should be able to demonstrate awareness and knowledge of distinctive cultures or subcultures, including but not limited to ethnicity, gender, class, political systems, religions, languages, or human geography.

TTU MULTICULTURAL STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- *Students will demonstrate intercultural awareness, knowledge and skills in written, verbal, and behavioral activities (e.g., service-learning, co-curricular and similar experiences).*
- *Students will exhibit the ability to engage constructively with individuals and groups, across diverse social contexts.*
- *Students will appraise privilege relationships at different levels (interpersonal, local, regional, national, and international) and explain how these relationships affect the sociocultural status of individuals and groups.*

Assessments used:

For Outcome 1: Formal interpretive essays and in-class discussion in which students are tasked with understanding African American literature as its own distinct tradition that operates in dialogue with a broader American canon.

For Outcome 2: Ongoing in-class discussion about how African American literature narrates experiential differences between black Americans and other citizens, and between populations of black Americans themselves in line with class, gender, and sexual difference.

For Outcome 3: Formal interpretive essays and in-class discussion in which students are tasked with explaining the various ways that African American literature responds to American white supremacy in political, economic, and cultural contexts.

Course Goals, Expected Outcomes, and Methods of Assessments:

The objective of the humanities in a core curriculum is to expand the students' knowledge of the human condition and human cultures, especially in relation to behaviors, ideas, and values expressed in works of human imagination and thought. Through study in disciplines such as literature and philosophy, students will engage in critical analysis and develop an appreciation of the humanities as fundamental to the health and survival of any society.

With that in mind, our course goals are:

To study African American literature in various genres through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with attention to critical issues in the field, including: the influence of oral and musical traditions on the development of African American writing; the intervention(s) into traditional constructions of the American canon that African American literature inaugurates; the ways that African American writers redress stereotypes and problematic representations of black Americans; how African American literature voices a range of African American political concerns; and the “alternative” histories that African American literature proposes alongside America’s dominant historical records.

Students who satisfactorily complete this course should be able **to demonstrate** a thorough understanding of major figures, texts, trends and movements in African American literary history. More specifically, students should be able **to integrate** course readings with course lectures and discussions **to understand** African American literature *in context*—**to articulate** how texts relate to other texts, how works narrate and complicate American and African American history, and how, in total, course readings both define and, at times, challenge a unified canon of African American writing.

The methods of assessment for this course are various. The most weight will be given to critical writing, in three essay assignments. Students should be able **to articulate** their understanding of African American literature in straightforward prose that bears evidence of critical thinking about course issues and topics, and is always organized around **clear, distinct thesis statements and direct topic sentences**. Students should know the difference between “observation” and “interpretation,” between “reportorial” writing and “analytical” writing. While students should be able **to identify** notable stylistic characteristics in each text, they should also be able **to explain** how those stylistic qualities are meaningful: how they suggest connections to other texts from within and outside of African American literature, how they relate to historical and political context, and how they operate symbolically.

Students will also be assessed on reading quiz performance, contributions to course discussions, oral presentations, and a comprehensive final examination. For reading quizzes, students should be able **to demonstrate** a complete reading of each major work in the

course by answering, for each, ten simple questions about events that occur within that text. In classroom discussions, students should exhibit a willingness **to discuss** topics that arise out of our readings and lectures. Students are not expected to show mastery of each work, or offer fully-formed interpretations of works, but simply **to work through** ideas about readings and topics in conversation. In oral presentations, students should be able **to synthesize** research about a particular moment or figure in African American history (which the student chooses from the list below) with ongoing course readings and discussions, and then **to present** that synthesis in an informal presentation to their peers. Finally, on the final examination, students should be able **to identify** excerpted passages from texts on the reading list and **discuss** the importance of that passage in relation to the text as a whole and/or the other texts or contextual issues. Also, students should be able **to answer** a broad essay question (from a choice of three) that asks students to engage with issues related to numerous texts and choose at least two course texts that relate to the question at hand.

Required Texts:

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie A. Smith, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 3rd Edition

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* [complete text is in *Norton*]

Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*

Nella Larsen, *Passing* [complete text is in *Norton*]

Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*

Course Work and Distribution of Term Marks:

Short paper 1 (750 words)	10%	due 25 September
Short paper 2 (750 words)	10%	due 23 October
Research paper (2000 words)	20%	due 20 November
In-class leading of discussion (twice)	10%	sign up for date
Informed participation in class discussion	20%	
Quizzes on major works	10%	see reading list for dates
Midterm examination	20%	on 18 October

Extra credit assignments, see attached page.

You are required to write three formal papers for this course: **two short critical papers**, each approximately 750 words in length, and **one critical research paper** approximately 2000 words in length. In addition, you can expect to do many informal, reflective writing exercises in class for which individual grades will not be assigned. These informal writing exercises will hopefully stimulate your contributions to class discussions, though, and so might be considered as figuring into your participation grade.

Each **short paper** invites you to consider a brief section of a work from our reading list and articulate an argument about that section's thematic or contextual significance, in relation to either the rest of the work or the course reading list more broadly. **I will offer you a list of assigned passages for each of these short papers well in advance of their due dates.** Please note that though you may touch on points raised in class discussion, you are required to **go beyond** mere paraphrasing in each short paper. Instead, I expect these to be **argumentative**, centered around a distinct thesis statement that articulates your own

position on a particular issue. Do **not** focus your remarks on purely emotional responses or issues of taste. (e.g. “I did not like this text, because I found it unpleasant to read...”) Also, these are **not** research papers and I do **not** expect you to use secondary sources for these assignments. Rather, I wish to see only your own ideas and critical thinking.

The **research paper** allows you to engage in recent critical debates on a topic through sustained analysis of one or more literary texts. Your paper should focus on one of the “big” ideas that stretch across different texts and periods from our reading list. Again, though, think of the research paper as an argumentative exercise, organized around a clear thesis statement, and intended to persuade a reader to adopt your position on a critical issue in the study of African American literature. For the research paper, I expect to see a **thoughtful and considered engagement with at least three secondary sources** rather than a superficial citing of materials from your bibliography. I want you to decide on your own topic for the research paper, but I also suggest that you do so in conversation with me to ensure that the scope and subject matter of your paper are both manageable and appropriate for the course. Because this is a substantial assignment, I encourage you to begin thinking about topics early and to schedule a meeting with me to discuss your topic well in advance of the deadline.

The **midterm examination** (scheduled for **18 October**) will ask you to formulate and articulate your own conclusions about the various critical issues with which we have engaged to that point in the course. You will be expected to identify passages from course reading and discuss their significance in context, and complete one essay (from a choice of three) about major themes that our discussions followed. This examination will cover all course readings to that point.

Beginning with our consideration of David Walker’s *Appeal* on 13 September, each of you will be expected to lead a brief discussion on a class text once during the semester. (You may sign up for the texts for which you want to lead on a first-come, first-served basis.) My expectation is that on the date for which you sign up you will a) offer a five-minute, informal discussion of your own interpretation and understanding of the text; and b) present to the class 3-4 questions for discussion by your peers. **All students must sign up for discussion sessions by 6 September.**

Informed participation assumes that you will not only read all assigned texts in time for their discussion in class, but also consider that material carefully and be prepared to contribute to our collective contemplation of them. I suggest that you take notes as you read each text, and be careful to record your observations as you move through material. Pay attention to connections between texts. Take note of how works correspond to contextual issues that I introduce in class. Make a list of questions that arise when you read the material. All of these approaches will be beneficial to our discussions as a group.

There will be in-class **quizzes** for each of the five major works on the course (Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig; or Sketches in the Life of a Free Black*; Nella Larsen’s *Passing*; Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*; and Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout*). These quizzes will be fairly straightforward—10 questions about specific details from the text—and are to ensure that you have completed reading each of these works by

the first day we discuss it in class. These are easy marks to get, especially since they only ask you to do what you are supposed to be doing anyway: reading course material.

Course Policies:

Grades and Written Assignments:

1. Grades will be assigned as percentage scores (0-100) throughout the term. Ultimately, your final grade will be converted to the university's letter grade system using this scale:

A+= 97-100	A=94-96	A-=90-93
B+=87-89	B=84-86	B-=80-83
C+=77-79	C=74-76	C-=70-73
D+=67-69	D=63-66	F=62 or below

Please note that I reserve A-range marks for work of superior quality. Marks in the A-range are by no means the default grade for completing all the assignments in this course.

2. You must complete **all** of the formal writing assignments (both response papers and the research paper) as well as the **final exam** to pass this course.
3. Papers are to be handed in at the beginning of the class on which they are due.
4. Late papers will be penalized with a **10%** deduction for each day they are handed in after the due date, including weekend days. Even after deductions have guaranteed that a paper will receive a failing grade, you **must** still submit that paper to pass the course.
5. If extenuating circumstances will prevent you from handing a paper in on time, talk to me **before** the paper is due. I am not likely to make allowances after the deadline has come and gone.
6. All papers are to be typed (in a font no bigger than 12-point), double-spaced, and printed on one side of the paper. Please adhere to MLA guidelines for formatting and bibliographical citations.
7. I do **not** accept email submissions of written assignments.

Plagiarism and Cheating:

I expect you to adhere to the highest standard of honesty and academic integrity. All work that you complete in this course—from quizzes to formal papers—**must** be your own. You may not have any notes, texts, or electronic devices in open view during quizzes or the midterm examination. If you fail to comply with this request, you will **automatically** open yourself up to a charge of cheating and I will assign you a failing grade on the quiz or exam.

All written work must be organized around your own ideas and arguments. (In the interest of aiding the resolution of any potential disputes about plagiarism, I encourage you to retain all drafts of your work until the completion of the course.) When you introduce any ideas or quotations that are not your own in an essay, you must **cite explicitly** the source of that material according to MLA citation practice. To repeat, **any** material that is not your own—including verbatim quotations from outside work or paraphrases of other writers' ideas or arguments—must be referenced explicitly. If you have any questions about whether or not you have used a source properly on a given assignment, I encourage you to discuss the issue with me **before** you hand that assignment in. Because academic dishonesty constitutes a

grave breach of trust between instructor and student, and diminishes the value of honest students' work, I take all plagiarism cases very seriously. Plagiarizing materials will warrant a failure on, at least, the plagiarized assignment, and, potentially, the course overall.

Absences:

I will allow each student **four** absences without penalty. Each class that you miss after four absences will warrant a reduction of your **overall** course grade by 10%. I do not designate between excused or unexcused absences, except for those designated as excused according to university policy. **That is, if you miss a class because of illness or a car accident or a job interview or a hangover or anything else, you have used up one of your four absences. (Do not bring me documentation, as I will not remove the absence from your record.)** Because you only have four classes you can afford to miss without penalty, I encourage you to manage your attendance wisely, reserving those four absences for emergencies when you need them. For an explanation of university-approved absences, consult your student handbook. **Also, I expect you to know how many classes you have missed throughout the term. You may confer with me at various points in the term about how many absences I have recorded, but please also manage your own attendance record.**

Withdrawal Policy:

Students may drop a class online on or prior to **12 September**. The full regulation appears in OP 34.05 and can be viewed at <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/opmanual/OP34.05.pdf> and page 49-50 of the 2008-2009 Undergraduate and Graduate Catalog and can be viewed at <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/officialpublications/catalog/>

The grade of "I" is given only when a student's work is satisfactory but due to reasons beyond his or her control, cannot not be completed. It is not given in lieu of an "F" or "W". The instructor assigning the grade will stipulate in writing at the time the grade is given the conditions under which the "I" may be removed. The assigned work and a change of grade must be recorded within one calendar year from the date of the "I". Failure to do so results in an "F" for that course.

Classroom Civility and Access:

I expect each of you to assist in creating and maintaining a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. At the bottom level, this assumes that you will always be respectful to me and to your fellow classmates. Our classroom space will be open to differences of opinion and ideology, and accessible to all students without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, creed, sexual orientation, or physical limitation. I will **not tolerate** the use of any derogatory or demeaning language. Always extend the same courtesy to other members of the class that you wish to see extended to you. Listen quietly when others are speaking; raise your hand to ask questions or introduce new points; do not have side conversations apart from our main discussion. I encourage dissent in discussion, but insist that you articulate your ideas in a respectful manner. You are welcome to bring food and drink to class provided that your consumption of them is not a distraction. (Watch those crunchy foods and noisy wrappers.) If you are a cellular phone user, always **make sure** that your phone is turned off before class begins.

Any student who because of a disability may require special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact me as soon as possible to make necessary accommodations. Students should provide appropriate verification from AccessTECH.

Tentative Schedule of Readings and Lectures:

WEEK ONE:

28 August: Introduction to course

30 August: W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" (*Norton I*: 698-693)

WEEK TWO:

4 September: "Go Down, Moses" (*Norton I*: 14-15); "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" (*Norton I*: 16); "Steal Away to Jesus" (*Norton I*: 16-17);

6 September: "[We raise de wheat]" (*Norton I*: 21); "Me and My Captain" (*Norton I*: 21-22); "Run, Nigger, Run" (*Norton I*: 24)

WEEK THREE:

11 September: "Brer Rabbit Tricks Brer Fox Again" (*Norton I*: 67-68); "The Wonderful Tar Baby Story" (*Norton I*: 68-69); "How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox" (*Norton I*: 69-70)

13 September: David Walker, "from *David Walker's Appeal in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World*" (*Norton I*: 161-171)

WEEK FOUR:

18 September: **Quiz 1**; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (*Norton I*: 330-393)

20 September: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*

WEEK FIVE:

25 September: **Short Paper 1 due**; Sojourner Truth, "Ar'nt I a Woman" (*Norton I*: 178-180); Frances E. W. Harper, "The Slave Mother" (*Norton I*: 450-451)

27 September: **Quiz 2**; Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*

WEEK SIX:

2 October: Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*

4 October: Booker T. Washington, "from *Up from Slavery*" (*Norton I*: 550-579)

WEEK SEVEN:

9 October: Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine" (*Norton I*: 582-591)

11 October: Alain Locke, "The New Negro" (*Norton I*: 973-981)

WEEK EIGHT:

16 October: **Class cancelled, instructor away.**

18 October: **Midterm examination**

WEEK NINE:

23 October: **Short Paper 2 due**; Marcus Garvey, "Africa for the Africans" (*Norton I*: 986-989)
25 October: Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (*Norton I*: 1320-1324); W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art" (*Norton I*: 771-778)

WEEK TEN:

30 October: **Quiz 3**; Nella Larsen, *Passing* (*Norton I*: 1080-1141)
1 November: Nella Larsen, *Passing*;

WEEK ELEVEN:

6 November: Gwendolyn Brooks, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" (*Norton II*: 340-343)
8 November: James Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" (*Norton II*: 453-465)

WEEK TWELVE:

13 November: Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement" (*Norton II*: 784-787); Amiri Baraka, "Black Art" (*Norton II*: 703-704)
15 November: **Quiz 4**; Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

WEEK THIRTEEN:

20 November: **Final Research Paper due**; Octavia Butler, *Kindred*
22 November: **No class scheduled, Thanksgiving.**

WEEK FOURTEEN:

27 November: **Quiz 5**; Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*
29 November: Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*

WEEK FIFTEEN

4 December: Conclusions

Note: You are responsible for finding out about any changes that I make to this schedule of readings while you are away from class.

Extra Credit Assignments:

If you are interested in earning extra credit, you may view or read or listen to (on your own time) any of the following films or supplementary texts or recordings, and **write a one page, single-spaced response paper** that offers a brief summary of the film/text/recording, and two or three personal observations from you explaining how you understand the event/film/text/recording's relationship to ideas we are discussing in this course. You may complete **two** of these response papers throughout the term, for **2.5% extra credit each**.

FILMS:

(**Note:** You need to obtain/rent/stream and view these films on your own time.)

Within Our Gates, dir. Oscar Micheaux
The Spook Who Sat By the Door, dir. Ivan Dixon
Daughters of the Dust, dir. Julie Dash
Killer of Sheep, dir. Charles Burnett
13th, dir. Ava DuVernay
Pariab, dir. Dee Rees
Do The Right Thing, dir. Spike Lee
The Black Power Mixtape, 1967-75, dir. Goran Olsson

James Brown, "Say It Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud" (song)
Aretha Franklin, *Lady Soul* (entire album)
Marvin Gaye, *What's Going On* (entire album)
Lauryn Hill, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (entire album)

READINGS (**Note:** Since these are longer, and require more time, one paper on any of the following books will count as two extra credit papers and receive a 5% addition):

The Color Purple, Alice Walker (novel)
Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston (novel)
Dutchman, Amiri Baraka (play)
Rachel, Angelina Weld Grimke (play)
The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison (novel)
The Omni-Americans, Albert Murray (essays)
The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin (essays)
Citizen, Claudia Rankine (poetry)

RECORDINGS:

Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet* (entire album)
Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue* (entire album)
Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit" (song)