

English 3392:
African American Literature
Texas Tech University
Fall 2020

Section 01: TR 2:00-3:20pm
This section meets entirely online via Zoom.

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

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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 white supremacist 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 midterm examination, students should be able **to respond** to brief questions testing information from course lectures and reading list and should be able **to answer** a broad essay question that asks students to engage with broad issues raised in our class discussion.

Statements Regarding Online Modality and COVID-19:

In order to work in a fully online delivery format, students will need to have access to a webcam and microphone, a reliable Internet connection, and a current operating system.

I will expect the following from each student online:

- You will not engage in any other activities (cooking, cleaning, driving, etc.) during class meetings.
- You will participate in class discussions as if you were sitting in a face-to-face class.
- I strongly prefer that students keep their webcams on if they are able to do so, as this helps class discussion and class community.

Etiquette for Zoom meetings

- Keep your microphone muted until you want to speak.
- Please use Zoom's "raise hand" function and I will call on you. You may also use the text chat to get my attention.
- Try to be in a quiet area with no distractions
- If you would like to use a Zoom background, please choose an image that is not distracting.

Illness-Based Absence Policy

1. If at any time during this semester you feel ill, in the interest of your own health and safety as well as the health and safety of your instructors and classmates, please follow the steps outlined below to ensure that your absence for illness will be excused. These steps apply to missed participation in synchronous online class meetings if you feel too ill to do so. If you are ill and think the symptoms might be COVID-19-related:

- a. Call Student Health Services at 806.743.2848 or your health care provider. After hours and on weekends, contact TTU COVID-19 Helpline at [TBA].
- b. Self-report as soon as possible using the Dean of Students COVID-19 webpage: <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/dos/COVID-19Absence.php>. This website has specific directions about how to upload documentation from a medical provider and what will happen if your illness renders you unable to participate in classes for more than one week.
- c. If your illness is determined to be COVID-19-related, all remaining documentation and communication will be handled through the Office of the Dean of Students, including notification of your instructors of the period of time you may be absent from and may return to classes.
- d. If your illness is determined not to be COVID-19-related, please follow steps 2.a-d below.

2. If you are ill and can attribute your symptoms to something other than COVID-19:

- a. If your illness renders you unable to participate in synchronous online classes, you are encouraged to visit with either Student Health Services at 806.743.2848 or your health care provider. Note that Student Health Services and your own and other health care providers may arrange virtual visits.
- b. During the health provider visit, request a “return to school” note;
- c. E-mail the instructor a picture of that note;
- d. Return to class by the next class period after the date indicated on your note.

Following the steps outlined above helps to keep your instructors informed about your absences and ensures your absence or missing an assignment due date because of illness will be marked excused. You will still be responsible within a week of returning to class for completing any assignments, quizzes, or exams you have missed because of illness.

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 22 September
Short paper 2 (750 words)	10%	due 20 October
Research paper (2000 words)	20%	due 17 November
In-class leading of discussion	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 15 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 on Blackboard during our class time for **15 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 via email to me by 8 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.

Three different times during the semester (on **29 September, 29 October, and 24 November**) we will not meet over Zoom and instead you will work on **brief asynchronous assignments** that I will post on our course Blackboard page. These assignments may include watching a brief pre-recorded lecture or video for context and answering a short quiz, or responding to a few brief writing questions that correspond with our reading for that day. I will not assign grades specific to these asynchronous assignments but will include them as a factor in your overall participation grade for the course.

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 from our Zoom meetings 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. 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 **9 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.

Please note, that I will **not tolerate** the use of any derogatory or demeaning language. **This includes the repetition of racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, or anti-trans slurs, even in quotation while discussing course texts.** We will be reading many texts that use dehumanizing language but we need not reproduce discursive violence by saying any of that language aloud in our meetings. These words may appear in our course texts and you may quote them in your academic writing (or choose to use some other designation when quoting in your work) but we will not say them in class. In moving to this philosophy, I have adapted the argument presented in this excellent blog post by Dr. Koritha Mitchell of Ohio State University, which I encourage you to read: <http://www.korithamitchell.com/teaching-and-the-n-word/>.

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.

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 the SDS Office.

Tentative Schedule of Readings and Lectures:

WEEK ONE:

25 August: Introduction to course

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

WEEK TWO:

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

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

WEEK THREE:

8 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)

10 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:

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

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

WEEK FIVE:

22 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)

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

WEEK SIX:

29 September: **Asynchronous Blackboard Day**, Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*

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

WEEK SEVEN:

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

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

WEEK EIGHT:

13 October: Marcus Garvey, "Africa for the Africans" (Norton I: 986-989)

15 October: **Midterm examination**

WEEK NINE:

20 October: **Short Paper 2 due**; 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)

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

WEEK TEN:

27 October: Nella Larsen, *Passing*

29 October: **Asynchronous Blackboard Day**, Gwendolyn Brooks, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" (Norton II: 340-343)

WEEK ELEVEN:

3 November: James Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man" (Norton II: 453-465)

5 November: Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement" (Norton II: 784-787); Amiri Baraka, "Black Art" (Norton II: 703-704)

WEEK TWELVE:

10 November: Lucille Clifton, "homage to my hips," "blessing the boats" (Norton II: 1127, 1128), "won't you celebrate with me" (online at

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50974/wont-you-celebrate-with-me>)

12 November: **Quiz 4**; Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

WEEK THIRTEEN:

17 November: **Final Research Paper due**; Octavia Butler, *Kindred*

19 November: **Quiz 5**; Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*

WEEK FOURTEEN:

24 November: **Asynchronous Blackboard Day**, Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*

26 November: **Thanksgiving**

WEEK FIFTEEN

1 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**.

EVENT:

22 September: An online conversation with Tanisha C. Ford, author of *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion*. Register here:

https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_1hOemeKMQcW86po4d460Pg

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

Pariah, dir. Dee Rees

Do The Right Thing, dir. Spike Lee

The Black Power Mixtape, 1967-75, dir.

Goran Olsson

RECORDINGS:

Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet* (entire album)

Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue* (entire album)

Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit" (song)

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)

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison (novel)

The Omni-Americans, Albert Murray (essays)

The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin (essays)

Citizen, Claudia Rankine (poetry)

How to Be an Anti-Racist, Ibram X. Kendi (nonfiction)