

English 566C: African American Literature to 1939

“Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?”—Ralph Ellison

“What’s invisible/sings, and we bear witness” —Rita Dove

“The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. History must restore what slavery took away.” —Arturo Schomburg

Contact Information:

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Meeting Times + Location: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:15-2:40pm, Fine Arts (FA) 225

Office Location and Hours: LNG33, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3-4 or by appointment

Course Description:

This course provides an introduction to the history of African American literary expression from its beginnings in slave song and narrative to the Harlem Renaissance. The history of this literary tradition begins with the oral culture and expressive culture of slaves: musical, spiritual, narrative, and kinesthetic. The tradition’s early writers faced a dilemma of representation: how to construct and express a black self through the words and forms of an oppressive dominant culture that had historically, politically, economically, and ontologically attempted to negate them, attempting to render them, as Ellison and Dove describe, “invisible.” We will examine how African American literary voices constituted themselves, as well as the critical link many African American writers draw between “voice” and “visibility.” Through the practice Henry Louis Gates calls “Signifyin(g),” African American texts “speak” to each other across the bounds of time, space, and often genre, forming a coherent literary tradition where “talking books” speak in “double voices” and “blackness” is particular uses of literary language that are repeated, shared, criticized, and revised. In addition to issues surrounding sound, speaking and voice, we will trace the key tropes of slavery/freedom, authenticity, the color-line, aurality/literacy, double consciousness, passing, migration, and gendered expressions of “blackness.” In addition to novels, poetry, and short fiction, we will pay close attention to the critical writing that has shaped the tradition, especially the intellectual debates surrounding audience, language and the purpose of art.

Required Texts: All other readings will be available through Blackboard or elsewhere online.

- **Octavia Butler**, *Kindred*, Beacon Press, ISBN: 9780807083690
- **Phyllis Wheatley**, *Poems of Phyllis Wheatley*, Dover, ISBN: 9780486475936
- **David Walker**, *David Walker’s Appeal*, Hill and Wang, ISBN: 9780809015811
- **Fredrick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs**, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Modern Library Classics, ISBN: 9780679783288
- **Solomon Northup**, *Twelve Years a Slave*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, ISBN: 978-1493788329
- **Saidiya Hartman**, *Scenes of Subjection*, Oxford University Press, ISBN: 978-01950898
- **Pauline Hopkins**, *Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self: The Givens Collection*, Washington Square Press; ISBN: 9780743467698
- **W.E.B. Du Bois**, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Penguin, ISBN: 978014018998X
- **James Daley, ed.**, *Great Speeches by African Americans*, Dover, ISBN: 9780486447618
- **Charles Chesnutt**, *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*, Penguin Classics, ISBN: 9780141185023
- **James Weldon Johnson**, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Norton Critical Editions, ISBN:
- **Langston Hughes**, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Vintage ISBN: 978067972818X
- **Zora Neale Hurston**, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Harper Perennial, ISBN: 9780061120065
- **Jennifer Stoever**, *The Sonic Color Line*, New York University Press, ISBN: 978-1479889342 (11/15/16)

Course Objectives: *Students will. . .*

- analyze a range and variety of African American literature from slavery to the 1930s.
- develop and hone skills of literary analysis such as close reading, critical argumentation, and academic essay writing.
- recognize and analyze the themes, tropes, styles, and aesthetic concerns that unite and distinguish this body of literary work.
- explore the major intellectual concerns and political debates that shaped the development of African American literature.
- analyze the relationship between historical events and literary expression.
- develop a critical vocabulary and knowledge base for the continued analysis of African American literature.

Student Accommodations:

I am available to discuss ways to ensure your full participation in the course. If you determine that formal, disability-related accommodations are necessary, it is very important that you be registered with Services for Students with Disabilities (Phone Number: 607-777-2686; website address: <http://www2.binghamton.edu/ssd/>) and that you notify me of your eligibility for reasonable accommodations. We can then plan how best to coordinate your accommodations.

Student Resources:

Diminished mental health, including significant stress, mood changes, excessive worry, or problems with eating and/or sleeping can interfere with optimal academic performance. The source of symptoms might be largely related to your course work; if so, I invite you to speak with me (or your other professors) directly. However, problems with relationships, family worries, loss, or a personal struggle or crisis can also contribute to decreased academic performance, and may require additional professional support. Binghamton University provides a variety of support resources: the Dean of Students Office and University Counseling Center offer coaching on ways to reduce the impact to your grades. Both of these resources can help you manage personal challenges that impact your well-being or ability to thrive at Binghamton University. Accessing them, especially early on, as symptoms develop, can help support your academic success as a University student.

In the event I feel you could benefit from such support, I will express my concerns (and the reasons for them) to you and remind you of our resources. While I do not need to know the details of what is going on for you, your ability to share some of your situation with me will help me connect you with the appropriate support. Here are some direct numbers for your use:

- **University Counseling Center:** 607-777-2772
- **Interpersonal Violence Prevention:** 607-777-3062
- **Dean of Students Office:** 607-777-2804

Requirements, Procedures, and Expectations:

You will be evaluated in two broad categories—participation and written expression.

Participation: 50%

Attendance and prepared participation in seminar
Scribe duties for one seminar session
Joint presentation with a classmate for one seminar session

Written Expression: 50%

Annotated Bibliography, Due October 11th
Research Paper Abstract, Due November 8th
Seminar Paper (15-18 pp), Due December 8th

Attendance and Participation: This class will be conducted seminar-style, combining presentations and discussions led primarily by students with lectures and discussion led by the professor. It is a baseline expectation that you will attend all class sessions and be ready to share your thoughts about the readings; I anticipate your best each week. Preparation, inquisitiveness, courtesy, and critical generosity are the key ingredients of a lively discussion.

Class Scribe Duties: Part of your participation will be service as class scribe for at least one session. This office entails taking detailed public notes on the session, transcribing them if you don't use a computer in class, tracking down bibliographical information on references we make in class that are not included on the syllabus (as best as possible), and posting them on the discussion board on Blackboard by the next day.

Joint Presentation: Starting week four, groups of two students will be responsible for presenting relevant material and leading discussions of the readings for the Tuesday seminar session. Essentially, you will be team teaching the class for that hour and will guide our session based on your own interests, insights, and research about the week's reading. Although an equitable division of labor is important, remember that your presentation should be unified and coherent rather than a series of individual reports. I highly encourage—and greatly enjoy—creativity, innovation, and multimedia engagement, as long as the basics are covered.

Presentations for this course must be researched and stretch beyond the generating of discussion questions. At heart, think about your presentations as having four integrated components built around a central theme or issue of your group's choosing:

- 1) **A portion on relevant historical context that you deem essential to understanding the week's literature:** While the author's biography certainly bears great relevance to this section, I encourage you to think more broadly about this part of the presentation and utilize the library's extensive resources on the nineteenth century. Consider contemporary reviews of the literature from its period. Was it loved? Hated? Ignored? What were the concerns of contemporary audiences of the text? Consider also the important historical events that either bear directly on the literature—the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 on *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for example, or the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision on Charles Chesnut's *Stories of the Color Line*—or provide an important context for understanding the novel's concerns and impact—the Great Migration on Langston Hughes's poetry or the role of the sentimental novel for *Of One Blood*.

- 2) **A portion that examines the arguments of one or more of the critical pieces we have read for the week:** More than a general overview, this section should focus in on, develop, augment, and/or contest an argument made by at least one of the week's critics. Although it may be necessary to summarize a bit, assume the class has read the pieces at least once and has come prepared to discuss them in finer detail. Rather than attempting coverage of all the pieces, be selective. Focus in on what interests and intrigues you about them, consider how they might be placed in useful conversation, connect them with the sources in your annotated bibliography, and ultimately use them as springboards into a deeper conversation about the literature at hand.

- 3) **A deeper conversation about the literature at hand:** While the various components of your presentation will most likely be interactive, be sure to include a discussion of the historical and theoretical issues you have raised in direct connection to the week's literary selection(s). Consider working through key passages that focus in on one or two points that you and your partner have deemed essential to understanding the novel and important for our course discussion. Your literary conversation should do more than simply summarize; it should analyze, interpret, and/or evaluate.

- 4) **A handout with an annotated bibliography:** Please feel free to utilize the handout however you'd like, but at minimum, presenters should prepare an annotated bibliography of 6-8 additional sources beyond the course's reading list that are important to a study of the week's literature. You will need to perform research for this portion. The entries should be concise but thorough—state the argument, strengths and weaknesses, and the ideal use/audience for the book or article. The bibliographies will be immediately essential as you begin researching for your papers—think of these as shared labor to create a master bibliography for the class—and will be invaluable as you later compile field exam lists, prepare articles, and develop syllabi. A sample is posted on Blackboard for further guidance.

Annotated Bibliography: Due October 11th

In preparation for your seminar paper, you will be expected to perform outside critical research and show knowledge of the writing that already exists on the literary text that you have selected to work with this term. To facilitate this process, you will compile an annotated bibliography examining the arguments of 6-8 critical works that engage with your text. This exercise is not designed to overwhelm you, rather it should help you find your own place to enter the critical conversation: what are the heated debates between critics about the novel? What are your opinions on them? What scenes or issues does every critic seem to notice? What have you spotted in the text that critics have failed to notice? Good critical research can be a place where important insights are born. The guidelines are similar as to the bibliographies that you are culling for your class presentations, except that you will amend the bibliography with a 300 word (or so) overview of the critical conversation that you have observed thus far and a preliminary stab at what you'd like to write about in light of it. This exercise is designed in your best interest to help your progress through the research process. It will most likely require some planning and reading ahead of the course materials, particularly if you want to work with texts and authors we have not covered by October.

Research Paper Abstracts: Due November 8th

You will turn in a more formal summary of your paper's argument three weeks after your annotated bibliographies are due. Your abstract should be thorough but concise (300-500 words) and prepare to present them for discussion and workshopping with our class.

Seminar Papers: Due December 8th

A seminar paper of 15-18 pp will be due in class at our last meeting. It is expected that your paper will engage historical, critical, and literary analysis as modeled in the seminar discussions and class presentations.

Reading Schedule

Note: This seminar is intended to provide an overview of readings influential to critical debates in African American Literary Studies. Time will not permit us to discuss all of the assigned readings in depth. The selections we focus on will be determined by student interest the agenda set via your presentations. Also, the syllabus may be adjusted as the seminar progresses to accommodate student interest and logistical needs.

Week One:

8/25

Thursday

- Welcome and introductions; course syllabus, theme, and goals
- **Sojourner Truth**, "Aren't I a Woman" (handout)
- **Paul Lawrence Dunbar**, "We Wear the Mask" (handout)
- **Langston Hughes**, "Theme for English B" (handout)

Week Two: "Slavery," "Voice" and "Signifyin(g)"

8/30

Tuesday

- In-Class Film and discussion: *Slavery and the Making of America*, Volume 2 (PBS, 2004)
- **Ta-Nehesi Coates**: "The Case for Reparations" ([The Atlantic](#), June 2014) (Bb)

9/1

Thursday

- **Octavia Butler**, *Kindred* (1979)

Week Three: The Vernacular Voice and the Written Appeal

9/6

Tuesday

- **Phyllis Wheatley**, *Poems of Phyllis Wheatley*
- **Thomas Jefferson**, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (XIV "Laws") (Bb)
- **Henry Louis Gates**, "Mister Jefferson and the Trials of Phyllis Wheatley" (Bb)

9/8

Thursday

- Selections from **Jupiter Hammon** (TBA Bb)
- **David Walker**, "An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World" (1829)

Week Four: Representing Voices. . .Re-presenting Screams

9/13

Tuesday: Student-led Presentation and Discussion

- **Frederick Douglass**, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)
- **Solomon Northup**, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1845)
- **William Andrews**, "The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography" (Bb)
- **Jennifer Stoeber**, "The Word and the Sound:: The Sonic Color-line in Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*" (Bb)
- **Mary Caton Lingold**, "Fiddling With Freedom: Solomon Northup's Musical Trade" (Bb)

9/15

Thursday: Professor-led Discussion

Week Five: Recovering Voices, Voicing Recovery

9/20

Tuesday: Student-led Presentation and Discussion

- **Harriet Jacobs**, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)
- **Sally Goma**, "Writing to 'Virtuous' and 'Gentle' Readers: The Problem of Pain in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* and Harriet Wilson's *Sketches*" (Bb)
- **Jean Fagan Yellin**, "Texts and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Written By Herself" (Bb)

9/22

Thursday: Professor-led Discussion

Week Six: Critical Voices

- 9/27 **Tuesday: Student-led Presentation and Discussion**
- **Saidiya Hartman**, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997)
 - **Fred Moten**, “Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester’s Scream” **(Bb)**
- 9/29 **Thursday: Professor-led Discussion**

Week Seven: (Dis)Embodied Voices Part One

- 10/4 **Tuesday—No Class Meeting: Fall Break/Rosh Hashanah**
- 10/6 **Thursday—In-Class Film: *The Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory* (PBS)**

Week Eight: Voicing Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem

- 10/11 **Tuesday: Student-led Presentation and Discussion // Annotated Bibliographies Due**
- **Pauline Hopkins**, *Of One Blood* (1902-1903)
 - **Hazel Carby**, “Women’s Era” from *Reconstructing Womanhood* **(Bb)**
 - **Melissa Daniels**, “The Limits of Literary Realism: *Of One Blood*’s Post-Racial Fantasy” **(Bb)**
- 10/13 **Thursday: Professor-led Discussion**

Week Nine: Public Voices in “Tight Places”

- 10/18 **Tuesday: Student-led Presentation and Discussion**
- **W.E.B. Du Bois**—*The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)
 - from *Great Speeches by African Americans* (Wells-Barnett, Washington, and Grimke)
 - **Gavin Jones**, “‘Whose Line Is It Anyway?’ W. E. B. Du Bois and the Language of the Color-line” **(Bb)**
 - **J. Stoeber**, “Fine-Tuning the Sonic Color-line: Radio & the Acousmatic Du Bois” **(Bb)**
- 10/20 **Thursday: Professor-led Discussion**

Week Ten: The Speaking Voice and the Listening Ear

- 10/25 **Tuesday: Student-led Presentation and Discussion**
- **Charles Chesnutt**— *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line* (1899)
 - Robert Stepto, “Distrust of the Reader in Afro-American Narratives” **(Bb)**
 - “Chapter 5” from *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*—Houston Baker **(Bb)**
 - “The Civil War Imaginations of Thomas Dixon and Charles Chesnutt; Or, North Carolina, ‘This Strange World of Poisoned Air’—Judith Jackson Fossett **(Bb)**
- 10/27 **Thursday: Professor-led Discussion**

Week Eleven: (Dis)Embodied Voices Part Two

- 11/1 **Tuesday: Student-led Presentation and Discussion**
- **James Weldon Johnson**, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*—Johnson (1912/1927)
 - **Henry Louis Gates, Jr.** “The Blackness of Blackness: Part I: Signifyin(g):Definitions” **(Bb)**
 - Gayle Wald, “Home Again: Racial Negotiations in Modernist African American Passing Narratives” **(Bb)**
- 11/3 **Thursday: Professor-led Discussion**

Week Twelve: Your Voices!

- 11/8 **Tuesday:** Presentations of Abstracts for Final Paper
 11/10 **Thursday—No Class Meeting—American Studies Association Conference**

Week Thirteen: How Voices Carry: The Great Migration and The Harlem Renaissance

- 11/15 **Tuesday: Student-led Presentation and Discussion**
- **Langston Hughes**—*Selected Poems*
 - **W.E.B. Du Bois**, “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926) **(Bb)**
 - **Langston Hughes**, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) **(Bb)**
 - **George Schuyler**, “The Negro-Art Hokum” (1926) **(Bb)**
 - **Farah Jasmine Griffin**, “‘Boll Weevil in the Cotton/Devil in the White Man’: Reasons for Leaving the South” **(Bb)**
- 11/17 **Thursday: Professor-led Discussion**

Week Fourteen: No Class Meeting

- 11/22 **Tuesday—No Class Meeting: Thanksgiving Break**
 11/24 **Thursday—No Class Meeting: Thanksgiving Break**

Week Fifteen: The South Has Still Got Something to Say

- 11/29 **Tuesday: Student-led Presentation and Discussion**
- **Zora Neale Hurston**, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1939)
 - **Alice Walker**, “Looking for Zora” **(Bb)**
 - **Carla Kaplan**, “The Erotics of Talk: ‘That Oldest Human Longing’ in Their Eyes Were Watching God” **(Bb)**
 - **Daphne Brooks**, “Sister Can You Line it Out?: Zora Neale Hurston and the Sound of Angular Black Womanhood” **(Bb)**
- 12/1 **Thursday: Professor-led Discussion**

Week Sixteen: Last Words

- 12/6 **Tuesday: Jennifer Stoeber—*The Sonic Color Line* (2016)**
 12/8 **Thursday: Professor-led Discussion // FINAL PAPERS DUE**