

**ENG 660 Contemporary Black Fiction, Winter 2020**  
**5 Credits, CRN 22275**

Thursday 2-4:50pm in 448 PLC

Professor Thorsson (thorsson@uoregon.edu)

Office Hours: Thursday 11am-1pm and by appointment in 244 PLC

**Course Description**

In this course, we will study African American novels and short stories of the past forty years in their historical, political, and literary contexts. As we read these works and relevant scholarly texts, we will consider questions of periodization, genre, and literary tradition. We will observe and analyze the function of genres such as satire, contemporary narratives of slavery, science fiction, realism, and horror in our readings. We will work to identify the ways that African American literature of the post-Civil Rights Era both engages and departs from the formal strategies and thematic concerns that define earlier periods of African American literature. Authors whose works we may read include Octavia Butler, David Bradley, Toni Morrison, Mat Johnson, Colson Whitehead, Danzy Senna, and Nafissa Thompson-Spires. This course requires substantial reading and writing and vigorous participation

**Required Texts**

Books on the schedule below are at the UO Bookstore and on reserve at Knight Library. Please use the assigned edition so that we are all working with the same introductions and pagination. Items with an asterisk are in the files section of the Canvas website for this class.

**Course Requirements and Policies**

Reading, participation, and attendance are mandatory. Bring the assigned readings to class in hard copy and be prepared to discuss them. Your participation grade is based on your work in class including discussion, in-class writing, and group work.

We will discuss each assignment in detail as it approaches. Please print and consult the assignment sheet in the files section of the Canvas website for our class. Assignments must be submitted in hard copy at the beginning of class on the due dates listed below and formatted according to current MLA guidelines. Consult the *MLA Handbook* if you are uncertain of correct format. I will mark late assignments down by 1/3 of a letter grade (B becomes a B-) for each day they are late. I am always happy to meet with you in office hours to talk through your plans for any of our assignments and to recommend readings that pertain to your specific research interests.

Missing class more than once in the term will result in reduction of your final grade by 1/3 of a letter grade for each absence beyond the one permitted. If you will miss more than one class due to a university obligation (such as athletics) or due to religious observation, please see me as soon as possible in office hours with relevant documentation if applicable. If you miss class for any reason, it is your responsibility to keep up with the reading and get notes from that day's class meeting from a classmate.

If you anticipate needing accommodations in this course, please meet with me soon. If applicable, please ask the Accessible Education Center ([aec.uoregon.edu/](http://aec.uoregon.edu/)) to send me a letter outlining your approved accommodations.

The University Student Conduct Code (available at [conduct.uoregon.edu](http://conduct.uoregon.edu)) defines academic misconduct. Students are prohibited from committing or attempting to commit any act that constitutes academic misconduct. Students should acknowledge and document all sources of information. If there is any question about whether an act constitutes academic misconduct, see me.

UO is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and gender-based stalking. If you have experienced or experienced gender-based violence (intimate partner violence, attempted or completed sexual assault, harassment, coercion, stalking, etc.), know that you are not alone. UO has staff trained to support survivors in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, getting academic and housing accommodations, getting legal protective orders, and accessing other help. If you tell me about harassment or assault, I am not required to report this information to anyone unless you request that I do so. I am required to consult with a confidential UO employee (someone with legal confidentiality, such as a counseling professional or a crisis center advocate) to ensure that you are supported. If you decide to make a report, I and other UO employees will help you to do so. My goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available and that you have access to the resources you need. If you wish to speak to someone confidentially, you can call 541-346-SAFE, UO's 24-hour hotline, to be connected to a confidential counselor to discuss your options or visit the SAFE website at [safe.uoregon.edu](http://safe.uoregon.edu).

In this class, we are studying literature of the United States in its historical and political contexts. This means that we will read about and discuss racial and sexual violence. There are incidents of both in our readings, some of which include explicit language and graphic sexual acts, both consensual and not. Please consider whether the content of the course may be disturbing to a degree that interferes with your learning. We will not use the n-word in this class, even if it appears in our texts. We will not use the f-word in this class, regardless of a person's perceived sexual orientation or gender expression. When reading aloud, for example, we will simply pause for a beat or say "n" or "n's." We will work together to apply this policy to other slurs and biased language as needed over the course of the term.

### **Grading**

Participation	10%
Presentation	10%
Close Reading (4-5 pages)	20%
Paper Proposal (4-5 pages)	10%
Final Paper (15-20 pages)	50%

## Schedule

### Week One – January 9<sup>th</sup>

- Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1984)\*
- Kevin Quashie, Introduction and Chapter One, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (2012)\*
- Phillip Brian Harper, "Introduction," *Abstractionist Aesthetics* (2015)\*
- Aida Levy-Hussen, "Introduction" from *How to Read African American Literature: Post Civil-Rights Fiction and the Task of Interpretation* (2016)\*
- Syllabus\*
- Assignment Sheet\*

### Week Two – January 16<sup>th</sup>

- Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)
- Marisa Parham, "Saying 'Yes': Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*" (2009)\*
- Close Reading Handout\*

### Week Three – January 23<sup>rd</sup>

- David Bradley, *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981)
- Contemporary Narratives of Slavery, Definitions and Examples\*

### Week Four – January 30<sup>th</sup>

- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)
- Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present" (2012)\*
- **Close Reading (4-5 pages) due**

### Week Five – February 6<sup>th</sup>

- Mat Johnson, *Pym* (2011)
- Madhu Dubey, "Racecraft in American Fiction" (2017)\*

### Week Six – February 13<sup>th</sup>

- Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (2016)

### Week Seven – February 20<sup>th</sup>

- Danielle Evans, *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self* (2011)

**Week Eight – February 27<sup>th</sup>**

- **Paper proposal due (4-5 pages) - bring 2 copies to class**
- Paper proposal workshop

**Week Nine – March 5<sup>th</sup>**

- Danzy Senna, *New People* (2017)

**Week Ten – March 12<sup>th</sup>**

- Nafissa Thompson-Spires, *Heads of The Colored People* (2018)

**Exam Week – Thursday, March 19<sup>th</sup>****Final paper (15-20 pages) due to my office (244 PLC) by noon.**

Please slide your paper under the door of my office.

If you would like your paper back with comments, please attach a self-addressed, stamped envelope when you turn it in.

There are a number of events this term relevant to our study of African American Literature. A few are listed below, I will announce others as they come up, and I encourage you to announce relevant events in class.

- CSWS discussion of Karla Holloway's novel *A Death in Harlem* (2019) 10-11:30am on Friday, January 24<sup>th</sup> in the Jane Grant Room in Hendricks Hall. RSVP to [cswsevents@uoregon.edu](mailto:cswsevents@uoregon.edu) is required. Copies of the novel are at the UO Book Store as a recommended text for this class.
- Ruha Benjamin, OHC Cressman Lecture in the Humanities, "Beyond Buzzwords: Reimagining the Default Settings of Technology and Society" on Tuesday, February 4<sup>th</sup> at the First United Methodist Church at 1376 Olive St.
- Tina Campt CSWS lecture, "The New Black Gaze" 12-1:30pm on Monday, February 17<sup>th</sup> in the Ford Lecture Room in the Jordan Schnitzer Museum
- Karla Holloway, CSWS Lorwin Lecture, "From Fact to Fiction: A Colored Life in Letters," 12-1:30pm on Wednesday, March 4<sup>th</sup> in the Ford Lecture Room in the Jordan Schnitzer Museum