ENGLISH 241: INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE
Fall 2020
Tuesdays & Thursdays 2:15–3:45pm (Zoom link on Canvas)

Professor Susan Weeber (she / her / hers)
sweeber@uoregon.edu
Office hours: I am happy to meet one-on-one via Zoom or Skype. If you’re in Eugene, we could alternatively meet outside and talk from a safe distance (weather permitting).

*If you have questions that can’t be answered by first checking the syllabus or assignment sheets, or if you want to set up an appointment with me outside of my regularly scheduled office hours, please email me at least 24 hours in advance.

Course description
This course surveys African American literature from the late 1700s to the present. We will read a wide variety of genres, including poetry, fiction, and essays (and occasionally, music and visual art). While we look for thematic and formal threads running through these texts, we will also ask questions about the relationship between this literature and our cultural narratives about nationhood and national belonging. We will discuss how African American literature both reflects and revises American history, politics, and culture. And we will read and respond to debates about the purpose, audience, and scope of African American literature. What is the political or social responsibility of these texts? For whom are they written? How do we decide which texts to read and study? This class contends that the study of African American literature helps us more fully understand both our history and our present moment.

Course objectives
• Gain a deeper understanding of African American literature, including a sense of how these texts constitute a literary tradition—how they build on and revise each other
• Interrogate the relationship between African American literature and its broader historical, political, and social contexts
• Develop our reading skills so that we can recognize and analyze literary conventions, genres, and traditions
• Improve our writing and analytical thinking skills through regular writing and close reading

A note on learning during crisis
This academic year has posed several ongoing and overlapping challenges, including Covid, state-sanctioned anti-Black violence, wildfires, economic distress, and a uniquely divisive upcoming election. This means that we will be working and learning under unstable conditions. During this term, some or all of us might be affected by financial uncertainty and hardship, mental or physical health problems, increased family and childcare responsibilities, changing university policies and housing conditions, etc. I ask that we all extend each other compassion, grace, and flexibility. Please know that I want you to succeed in this class, but I also want you to stay as safe, healthy, and secure as you possibly can. I am working to make our (virtual) class space accommodating, flexible, and generous while maintaining the rigor and content coverage that you need and deserve, and/but I will modify and adjust as needed. If you find that you need additional support, please know that that is not a personal failing of yours, but a function of being a person in the world in 2020 – in that case, please reach out to me. I will never ask you to divulge more information than you are comfortable sharing, but I will do whatever I can to lead with generosity and flexibility.
A note on content and language
Some of the material in this class describes racial and sexual violence. Occasionally, the language and material may be graphic or difficult to read, and our conversations in class will cover difficult topics. If this is something you think might interfere with your learning, please talk to me.

As we start this class together, we are essentially co-signing a contract to practice care in our language. This is particularly important given the harm and violence language can enact. We should be generous with everyone—we might slip up or make mistakes, of course—while also agreeing to be held accountable for our language. While some sensitive topics and terms shift over time, there are a few basic rules we are all agreeing to abide by: First, respect is mandatory; hate speech is prohibited. Second, absolutely no one in this course will use the N-word, even if it appears in a text we are reading. You need not pretend like you don’t see it; instead, merely say “N” or express it in writing as “N*****” or “N----.” For a more thorough discussion of why I have adopted this policy in all of my classrooms, please refer to Dr. Koritha Mitchell's excellent podcast on the subject: (https://soundcloud.com/c19podcast/nword). As a class, we will discuss how to handle other terminology that is not quite as violent but still has complicated history.

Required texts:
You are expected to attend each class prepared and with the readings ready to hand. We will be using the two-volume anthology listed below, which is available for renting or purchasing and via course reserves at the library. Additional materials will be posted to Canvas.

- The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, Third Edition, Volume 1

Assignments:
Weekly Canvas response posts (10 total) 20%
Class note-taking 10%
Short essays 25%
Teaching video 25%
Final project 20%

Participation
Participation includes consistent attendance as well as attentive, active engagement in class. Please come to class each day having done the assigned reading. I recommend you arrive with at least one comment, one question, and one passage from the assigned text you would like us to discuss. If you know you are going to miss a class, please reach out to me. If you miss class for any reason, it is your responsibility to get notes for that day and otherwise catch up on any material you have missed.

During our Zoom conversations, make full use of the “raise hand” function in Zoom, and please also feel free to contribute in the chat. While I am not requiring you to turn your cameras on for Zoom classes, I ask that you do so if you feel comfortable. Cameras make the class more engaged and engaging, and it also helps me better gauge how you all are doing.

*If participation drops, I reserve the right to implement reading quizzes.*
Canvas response posts
You will submit weekly response posts to Canvas. I have split the class into three groups alphabetically by last name, and this determines if you will be posting a response to Tuesday’s or Thursday’s reading or posting a reflection on the week’s readings after Thursday’s class. These groups rotate, so pay attention to the directions in the Canvas discussion threads. The responses should be 200 words minimum.

Avoid plot summary or description in your posts. You’re writing to the rest of the class, so don’t feel the need to recap the plot. These posts should make arguments or claims about the assigned material. You can focus on a scene, moment, or image that struck (or surprised, intrigued, or perplexed) you or you can try out an argument about a topic, thread, or theme you see emerging throughout the piece. If the former, practice your close reading skills by paying attention to specific details in a section of the text. What does this moment show us? What effects does it produce? Why might it matter? If the latter, point us toward a few moments/scenes/images as evidence for your argument. Try to raise key questions and make a claim (even if the claim is speculative or half-formed at this stage). You can also use the response posts to ask questions you think the assigned material raises—questions we can take up in class discussion. I will use these responses to generate class discussion, and they will also help you practice close reading and other analytical skills you’ll hone further in your essays.

Class note-taking
Each of you will be the designated note-takers for two classes. This means taking careful notes during class discussion, then posting these notes on Canvas after class. If you want to go above and beyond, you can include references to other sources that might further contextualize or flesh out the notes. Please be as thorough as you can, and make sure you revise your notes for readability before posting.

UO remote learning resources
Free online tutoring—both synchronous and asynchronous—is available through UO's Online Writing Lab (OWL). Log in at https://owl.uoregon.edu/.
UO loaner laptop program: go to https://is.uoregon.edu/remote and click on loaner laptop request form UO's coronavirus webpage: https://www.uoregon.edu/coronavirus?utm_source=homepage&utm_medium=CTAbutton&utm_campaign=immersive&utm_content=CTAbutton
UO's FAQ page for remote learning and coronavirus information: https://www.uoregon.edu/coronavirus-faq

Accessibility
I am committed to making this class an inclusive learning environment. Please notify me if there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in disability-related barriers to your participation. You are also encouraged to contact the Accessible Education Center (AEC) in 360 Oregon Hall at 541-346-1155 or uoaec@uoregon.edu.

Academic honesty
All of your work in this class should be your own, and all sources you use in your work should be properly acknowledged and documented. If you have questions about plagiarism, please see https://researchguides.uoregon.edu/citing-plagiarism, and feel free to talk to me, too.
**COURSE SCHEDULE**

**This schedule is subject to change. I will give you advanced notice of any changes to assignments or dates.**

**Week 1**
9/29  Course introduction
Phillis Wheatley Peters, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773) (Vol 1: 143-144); Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, 1845 (excerpt)
10/1  Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) (Vol 1, preface-XXI: 224-246)
   Dr. Gabrielle Foreman, “Writing About Slavery”
   *Introduce yourself and sign up for your two class notetaking days*

**Week 2**
10/6  Jacobs, *Incidents* (Vol 1, XXIX-end: 246-261)
10/8  W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Forethought” and “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” (1903) (Vol 1: 687-693)
   Paul Laurence Dunbar, “Ode to Ethiopia,” “We Wear the Mask,” “The Haunted Oak,” & “Philosophy” (1893-1903) (Vol 1: 896-897; 906; 911-913)

**Week 3**
10/13 Claude McKay, all poems (1917-1922) (Vol 1, p 1004-1007)
   Langston Hughes, selected poems (1921-1955) (Vol 1: 1304-1316)
   Helene Johnson, all poems (1927, 1931) (Vol 1: 1371-1372)
10/15 Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929) (Vol 1: Part One, 1080-1103)

**Week 4**
**short essays due 10/23**

**Week 5**
   James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” (1957) (Vol 2: 413-435)
10/29 Gwendolyn Brooks, all poems (1945-1960) (Vol 2: 326-343)

**Week 6**
11/3  Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement” (1968) (Vol 2: 784-787)
   Selected Black Arts Movement poems (Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Audre Lorde, June Jordan)

**Week 7**
Week 8
11/17 Contemporary fiction & poetry (Claudia Rankine, Danez Smith, Jericho Brown, Nafisa Thompson Spires, N. K. Jemisin)
11/19 Contemporary fiction & poetry (Claudia Rankine, Danez Smith, Jericho Brown, Nafisa Thompson Spires)

** teaching video due 11/20

Week 9
11/24 Contemporary fiction & poetry (Claudia Rankine, Danez Smith, Jericho Brown, Nafisa Thompson Spires)
11/26 Thanksgiving break

Week 10
12/1 Contemporary fiction & poetry (Claudia Rankine, Danez Smith, Jericho Brown, Nafisa Thompson Spires)
12/3 No reading: course overview & final project workshop

**Final project due Dec 8