

AFAM 220: Presentations and Representations in African American Literature

Fall 2019

English Department
St. John Fisher College

Dr. Scott O'Neil

Office: Kearney 321

Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday 4:00pm to 5:00pm

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Class Information: Monday/Wednesday, 2:30pm to 3:50pm, Pioch Hall 121

Required Texts:

- The Norton Critical Edition of Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
- Citizen* by Claudia Rankine
- Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet* by Ta-Nehisi Coates and Brian Stelfreeze
- Several other course readings will be made available on Blackboard

Course Description: This course will explore African American literature in terms of its role in a literary and cultural tug of war regarding how a race of people is to be defined. In short, we will explore the difference between the way African American identity is *presented* by non-black authors and the way that that same identity is *represented* by authors of color. We will engage with this topic in texts both old and new, from the poetry of Phillis Wheatley and early slave narratives, through the Harlem Renaissance, and into contemporary texts including film and comic book narratives. How do these texts construct an awareness of history? How do they utilize the power of personal narrative? How do material factors, such as original publication and distribution, serve to construct or obstruct the authenticity of these texts? Finally, how are these same conflicts present in contemporary texts and culture? How have they shaped concepts of race and racism? Throughout the semester, we will consider literature as a primary site for this historical conflict over [self] definition, particularly the ways in which authors demonstrate an awareness of the power of language to define identity in social and political space.

Course Goals: Throughout the semester we will explore the ways in which African American Literature has pushed back against racist constructions of black identity, ranging from modes of production, narrative framing, and cultural appropriation.

Assignments/Grading:

- 20% -Attendance/Participation (including Blackboard Dynamic Notes)
- 10% -4 short responses
- 15% -MJP presentation
- 10% -1619 discussion
- 10% -Paper pitches
- 25% -Paper
- 10% -Creative/Service/Outreach
- Optional Final

Attendance

So much of any discussion-based class is reliant upon your presence. Please only miss class when absolutely necessary, and communicate with me when that happens.

Reading and Participation/Blackboard Dynamic Notes

The reading for each day is listed below on the syllabus next to the appropriate dates; please read, annotate, and think about the reading far enough in advance to participate on or before the participation deadlines. I would encourage you to be as specific as possible in your participation (page numbers, external links, etc). You will also keep a running “dynamic notes” thread in the discussion board throughout the semester.

Short Responses

Short responses should be about one full typed page in length. Responses might expand on a class discussion; they might branch off and consider questions we did not have time to consider in class; they might consider a key image or passage that shapes your view of the work as a whole. Each response should focus on specific passages (or in some cases, one work) read for the course.

Because these responses are fairly short, you are not expected to fully develop and defend a complex thesis. This is your chance to further explore something that confused you or intrigued you about the reading in question – in a focused way. A good short response will lead to an interesting discussion in class. You will write four of these short responses over the course of the semester. There are no set due dates for these responses, however you can only submit one short response in any given week. Over the course of the semester, you must respond to at least one primary and one secondary reading.

MJP Presentation

I will model this for you later in the semester.

1619 Project Discussion

More on this assignment as the semester progresses.

Paper Pitches

At about the mid-point of the semester, I will ask you to submit and then workshop two pitches for potential papers. More information on this assignment will be forthcoming.

Paper

Successful papers will develop an argument driven by your interests and connected to the themes of the course. Where the earlier assignments are designed to get you “thinking out loud” about your ideas and reactions to these novels, the paper should be a polished argument where you construct a claim, situate that claim within the scholarship on the topic, and support that claim with an analysis of one or more texts.

Creative/Service/Outreach

More on this during our 2nd class meeting.

SJFC ADA Policy: In compliance with St. John Fisher College policy and applicable laws, appropriate academic accommodations are available to students with disabilities. All requests for accommodations must be supported by appropriate documentation/diagnosis and determined reasonable by St. John Fisher College. Students with documented disabilities (physical, learning, psychological) who may need academic accommodations are advised to refer to the Student Accessibility Services Website (<https://www.sjfc.edu/student-life/student-accessibility-services/>). Questions should be directed to the Coordinator of Accessibility Services in the Accessibility Services Office and Test Center, Kearney 300 (585.385.5252). Late notification will delay requested accommodations.

Statement on Academic Integrity: All students, regardless of level or school, are responsible for following the St. John Fisher College Academic Integrity Policy in addition to any other individual school’s or program’s academic expectations and/or professional standards. Every student is expected to demonstrate academic integrity in all academic pursuits at all times. If a student suspects that another student has violated the Academic Integrity Policy, he or she should contact the instructor for that course and provide support for that suspicion. Any finding of responsibility and associated sanctions for a violation of the Academic Integrity Policy is retained per the College records policy. All students are expected to be familiar with the details of the Academic Integrity Policy (available via <https://www.sjfc.edu/policies/academic-integrity/>).

Policies

Contacting Your Instructor

I will be delighted to discuss your suggestions, ideas, and concerns about this course with you. You should feel free to drop by during my office hours. If those times are inconvenient, please e-mail me. I’m happy to make other arrangements. Please e-mail me in advance if you need to cancel an appointment.

The best way to contact me is via e-mail. **I will respond to all e-mails within 24 hours**, and I request that you show me the same courtesy. However, I am not permanently attached to my

computer (and I have a flip phone. Seriously). **I do not generally check my e-mail between 10 PM and 10 AM.**¹ Please plan your electronic communications accordingly.

Written Work

All writing assignments should be typed and double spaced with one-inch margins. Please use 12-point Times New Roman font. All writing will be handed in electronically via email; **All assignments must be in .doc or .docx format, or I will not be able to open them.**

Course Schedule

9/4 **W:** Night Thrasher, syllabus, and course welcome.

9/9 **M:** Read both sets of selections of poetry by Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784). They are pulled from two different anthologies. Also, please listen to Dorothy F. Washington's reading of Wheatley's poem "The Earl of Dartmouth."

9/11 **W:** Sign up for a free account at the "Freedom on the Move" website (link on Blackboard). Look through the advertisements and identify 10 that seem particularly revealing about the way African American identity is being constructed by slave-holders. Be prepared to discuss specific advertisements in class.

9/16 **M:** Read from page 9 ("Childhood") through page 70 (stopping at "Continued Persecutions") in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

9/18 **W:** Read from page 70 ("Continued Persecutions") through page 100 (stopping at "Christmas Festivities") in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Read also any 5 of the 10 texts in the "Contexts" section (between pages 173 and 193).

9/23 **M:** Read from page 100 ("Christmas Festivities") through page 151 (stopping at "A Visit to England") in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Read also any 5 of the 10 letters in the "Correspondence" section (between pages 195 and 209).

9/25 **W:** Read from page 151 ("A Visit to England") through page 169 (through the end of the narrative and the appendix) in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Read also any 2 of the 10 articles in the "Criticism" section (between pages 213 and 380—articles by Yellin, Smith, Ernest, Foster, Gunning, Rifkin, Foreman, Kanzler, Sommers, and Andrews).

9/30 **M:** Read the material on Sojourner Truth (on Blackboard) and watch/listen to the two performances of her work on the course page of my professional website (link and pw on Blackboard).

¹ This is a lie, but you shouldn't really expect a response that late at night. ☺

- 10/2 **W:** Harlem Renaissance. Read the Norton introduction (on Blackboard), W.E.B. DuBois' "Criteria of Negro Art" and Alain Locke's "The New Negro" (on Blackboard in one file). Read William Stanley Braithwaite's "The Negro in American Literature" (on Blackboard). Preview MJP and assign *Crisis* issues.
- 10/7 **M:** Read the material on Claude McKay (on Blackboard, pulled from two anthologies), with particular emphasis on his poem, "If We Must Die." Also please listen to the recitation of that poem, read by McKay himself, on the course page of my professional website (link and pw on Blackboard). Please also read the issue of *The Crisis* that you drew in our last class meeting, and be prepared to discuss the issue in terms of materiality and content. McKay's goal vs. those of his publishers. The dangers of anthologization.
- 10/9 **W:** Please select one of the writers from the Harlem Renaissance (either from the list provided on Blackboard or of your own selection). Find as much as you can about that writer and their work in the MJP and be prepared to report on what you found on this date.
- 10/14 **M:** Read the selection of poems from Langston Hughes' collection *A New Song* (1938), with particular emphasis on "Let America Be America Again" (on Blackboard). After you've read the poems, please also read the three very short newspaper articles linked on Blackboard (from the NY Times, LA Times, and Reason.com). Also, please listen to Langston Hughes's performance of his poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," on our course page at my website (link and pw on Blackboard).
- 10/16 **W:** Black Arts Movement. Read the Norton Introduction and the short collection of poems by Nikki Giovanni (on Blackboard). Also listen to Nikki Giovanni's performance of her poem, "Nikki-Rosa" (on the course page of my professional website). Finally, please read Giovanni's "Giovanni on Shakespeare" and Langston Hughes's "Letter to the Academy" (both on Blackboard).
- 10/21 **M:** BAM day two—self-directed reading. Look at the list of writers associated with the Black Arts Movement (on Blackboard). Select one and locate/read several of their works. Be prepared to discuss what you've found in class today. Also, we will take care of the paper pitches during the second half of class today.
- 10/23 **W:** Please read sections I-V (pages 5-79) of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*.
- 10/28 **M:** Please read sections VI-VII (pages 82-162) of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*.
- 10/30 **W:** *Bamboozled* (3 class meetings)—Satire on the modern echoes of the minstrel show tradition and blackface. Racism in advertising.
- 11/4 **M:** *Bamboozled* day 2

11/6 **W:** *Bamboozled* day 3

11/11 **M:** Modern appropriations—Please watch Beyonce’s *Lemonade* album (link on Blackboard) and read bell hooks’s commentary on that album (link on Blackboard). Also, select at least one of the resources listed under Janell Hobson’s curated Black Feminist Resource List (link on Blackboard). Be prepared to discuss what you’ve discovered.

11/13 **W:** Please read the Black Panther Chronology and the re-print of the first appearance of the Black Panther from *Fantastic Four* 52 (both near the end of *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet*). Please also read “The Birth of Cool” from Adilifu Nama’s 2011 book *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (scanned and on Blackboard).

11/18 **M:** Please read issues 1-4 of *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet*, including the bonus features and the interview with Brian Stelfreeze. Please also read the short article, “Embracing Afro-Futurism” (on Blackboard).

11/20 **W:** Please watch season 6, episode 13 (“Far Beyond the Stars”) of *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* (on Netflix). We will begin watching *Black Panther*.

11/25 **M:** We will continue watching *Black Panther*.

11/27 **W: No Class. Thanksgiving Break**

12/2 **M:** 1619 Project

12/4 **W:** 1619 Project

Last Day to hand in Short Responses

Exam TBD