

Syllabus

English 418: Postmodern Blackness

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"The dominant attitude in postmodernism is disbelief. The dominant strategy is deconstruction, which is disbelief put into practice. Deconstruction is an anti-system, or a system that subverts systems; it is a mechanism that exposes mechanisms. Deconstruction unscrews belief systems and uncovers their whirring cogs."

-- Ian Gregson, from *Postmodern Literature*

The fundamental question guiding this course is rather simple: how does contemporary African American literature reflect the fragmentation and deep cultural questioning of the postmodern condition? Our goal in this course is to assemble a working definition of the themes, questions, and stylistic traits of postmodern African-American fiction through selected texts from the last four decades.

In addition to introducing undergraduate students to contemporary African American literature (texts produced after 1970), this course is designed to strengthen student writing, specifically the type of analytical writing and critical thinking expected of English majors at the upper-division level. A central goal in the course, then, is to develop confidence in making clear claims and arguments about literary texts. We'll do this through essay writing, in-class exercises and discussions, reading responses, and essay writing (with peer reviews and workshops).

REQUIRED READING:

- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (C)
- Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)
- Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)
- Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (1990)
- Selected essays on postmodernism (available on Canvas)

REQUIREMENTS:

Participation and Attendance (15%): To cultivate a stimulating and energizing atmosphere, I require regular attendance and active, in-class participation. That is, students must not only be physically present in class, but mentally present as well. In determining your final participation grade, I ask myself the following questions: Did this student miss more than three sessions? Did she regularly participate in seminar discussions? Did he bring the reading material to class every day? Was he consistently late? Etc. Do not underestimate the importance of this requirement: it can make a difference when final grades are due.

In-class Assignments ("ICAs") (15%): A great deal of work done in the classroom will be collaborative, spontaneous, and creative. All assignments are designed to prompt both inquiry and critical analysis of the texts and the ideas, questions, and themes they invite.

Reading Responses (30%): Research has proven that the physical act of writing (or punching keys on a keyboard) generates thought, and not the other way around. In other words, writing facilitates thinking so you do not (cannot?) know exactly what you want to say until you start writing. Recognizing the utility of writing, this course will therefore require students to produce weekly reading responses (short, informal, but polished) and post them to Canvas. Please submit your work on time, as points will be deducted from responses that are late. The purpose of these assignments is to give you several opportunities to demonstrate learning and document your many insights, observations, and thoughts as you read these complex and exciting texts.

Final Research Paper (40%): Instead of a final exam, students will produce a 10-12 research paper on one of the required texts from the course, or an approved alternative. These papers are to include the effective and relevant use of between 5-6 secondary sources (scholarly articles, essays from scholarly collections, etc.)

- an engaging introduction that ends with a clear, recognizable thesis statement
- unified body paragraphs that have a clear topic sentence and supporting sentences
- strong, logical transitions between paragraphs
- carefully selected quotes and analysis of the quotes
- an effective conclusion that does more than merely repeat main points
- clear writing (no vagueness, no grammar and syntax problems)