What is Black Literature Now?

(Online/Blackboard)
Summer Session II
Syllabus

Topics in American Studies: 21:050:489:HQ
Topics in Black Studies: 21:014:401:HQ
Instructor: Bernie Lombardi
Instructor Email: Bernie.Lombardi@Rutgers.edu
Office Hours: by appointment (Phone/G-chat)

This course will function like a summer reading group: we will read novels and talk about them as a collective via Blackboard’s discussion board with several weekly touchpoints. Framing our discussion will be the question: “What is Black literature now?” That is, we will read novels published within the past few years to explore how writers use the imaginative space of fiction to evaluate the conditions of Black life in the twenty-first century. The novels we will read take place in the United States and Nigeria; however, they are all published in the United States. Therefore, we will examine black cultures and identities rooted in different historical experiences while paying close attention to how contemporary globalization and diasporas engender cross-cultural interactions and transformations. In addition to geographical and historical diversity, we will consider the ways gender, sexuality, and class affect racialized experience, and how these experiences impact black cultural expression. Lastly, we will pay attention to the ways popular media outlets are responding to and engaging with this body of literature, and we will attempt to determine what this says about the world we live in now.
Course Objectives:

- Interpret Black cultural production through literature in the context of the twenty-first century
- Learn how different authors use fiction to evaluate the conditions of Black life in the twenty-first century
- Learn how to historicize cultural texts
- Learn how to evaluate a cultural text’s reception amongst various and diverse audiences and to gauge the historical conditions that inform its reception
- Learn about the impact of race on trends in mainstream reading, publication and reception
- Develop a rhetoric for discussing race that manifests sensitivity and care
- Interpret the various intersections of race, gender, sexuality, space and class
- Learn to identify an author’s focus and main argument concisely
- Develop close reading and critical thinking skills
- Develop writing skills
- Develop the necessary skills for writing a research paper
- Learn about different kinds of sources
- Develop peer review skills
- Draw connections between readings across themes
- Develop time management skills and the skills necessary to be productive working independently

Note: This syllabus may be subject to change. The instructor will make students aware of changes via email.

Course Requirements

- Required Texts:

These books are available online at Amazon.com and should also be at most libraries. All other texts are posted on the course’s Blackboard site.

- Grade Breakdown:

  Participation: 50%
  - Discussion Board Reading Posts (1-3): 15%
  - Discussion Board Reading Responses (1-3): 15%
  - Reception Questions: 10%
  - Other Miscellaneous Discussion Board Assignments: 10%
Final Paper: 50%
Resource Dump: 5%
Theme/Thesis Development: 5%
Draft of Introduction and Peer Review: 10%
Final Draft: 30%

➢ Description of Assignments:

- **Discussion Board (DB) Reading Posts**: On the course schedule, you should see “DB Reading Post #1,” “DB Reading Post #2,” and “DB Reading Post #3.” While most of the course discussion revolves around contextualizing and historicizing the authors and novels we will read, these three DB Reading Posts are where you will be asked to close read the novels in order to hone your literary analysis skills. For each novel, I will pose three questions to guide your reading. I will assign each student one question to respond to (students do not get to choose their questions). Your responses are due on the day and time designated on the course schedule. Any late posts will not be given credit. These posts are not formal essays. They should be roughly 1-2 paragraphs. Please write posts in full sentences, as every class participant will be reading these posts. Students’ posts will guide the class’s discussion of each novel. When submitting a post to the discussion thread, please include “Question 1,” “Question 2,” or “Question 3” in the title. This will make it easier for students to navigate the discussion board.

- **Discussion Board (DB) Reading Responses**: For each novel we read, students are required to respond to two of their classmates’ DB Posts. These are typically due the day after DB Posts are due (See the course schedule for exact due dates and times) (Late policy is same as for DB Posts). Students must respond to a post for each of the two questions that they did not post about the previous day. For example, if a student posted in Question A, he or she should respond to one post for Question B and one post for Question C. Responses can be shorter than DB posts, but again, should be written in full sentences. For each response, students should point out something they agreed with/liked/appreciated about their classmate’s post and explain why. They should also state at least one way in which they disagreed (and why) or explain how they would have answered the question differently. Please note: The (online) classroom is a safe space. All students should be respectful while responding to each other’s posts. In addition, all students should be receptive to their classmate’s constructive criticism. This will enable students to grow as they learn from each other.

- **Reception Questions**: After completing each novel, students are assigned reviews of the novels and/or short interviews with the authors to read/watch. They are then asked to respond to a series of questions that provoke broader contextualization. These questions are listed on the course schedule. The same late policy applies as for DB Posts and Responses.
o **Miscellaneous DB Contributions:** Specifics about these short assignments can be found throughout the course schedule. The same late policy applies as for DB Posts and Responses.

o **Final Paper:** Students are required to write a final research paper due on the last day of the session (**Wednesday, August 15 at 10 AM**). All papers should be 7-8 pages long and double spaced with 1 in. margins on all sides and in 12 pt. Times New Roman font. You must submit your paper via e-mail as a Microsoft Word document (I do not accept PDFs or Google Docs).

For this paper, you will be answering the question, “What is Black Literature Now?” through a specific theme of your choosing. We will brainstorm possible themes during the first week of class, but examples include: How has mass incarceration impacted Black literary production in the past ten years? How are Black writers engaging with or responding to the Black Lives Matter Movement in their literature? How do recent African and Caribbean immigrant writers challenge and expand how we understand an African American literary canon? What roles do gender and sexuality play in defining Black literature now? What does it mean when Black writers win mainstream American literary prizes? What role has Oprah played in the advancement of Black literary production? How is Black literature circulating internationally and what effects does this have on this historical moment and for an international Black community?

You are required to use at least five sources when writing your paper. Two should be scholarly and three should be from a reputable online source such as the *New York Times* or *O Magazine*. We will develop a communal bibliography for you to draw from in the first few weeks of the class. During that time, I will be more specific about what constitutes a scholarly source and a reputable online source. Although I expect that you will mention/discuss specific literary authors and their works in your paper, you are not required to do any close readings of specific literary texts. However, you can if you so choose.

We will have several touch points throughout the course concerning the final paper, including a peer review. All requirements and due dates are listed on the course schedule, but here is a simple breakdown:

- July 12: Paper Topics Brainstorm
- July 13: Contribute 3 online articles to “Resource Dump”
- July 20: Contribute 2 scholarly articles to “Resource Dump”
- July 20: E-mail me 1-2 sentences stating your finalized paper topic/theme
- July 24: Contribute to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Black Authors”
- July 27: E-mail me a draft of a thesis statement
- August 3: E-mail me your revised thesis statement
August 3: Post first draft of your final paper’s introductory paragraph
August 9: Peer Review due to partner
August 10: E-mail me with any questions regarding the final paper
August 15: Final Paper Due at 10 AM

- Extra Credit Assignment (Optional): For this assignment you can choose a literary text that we do not discuss in this class and write a book review. You can choose a novel, short story, or poem to write about. Your literary text must have been first published between 2015 and 2018. All reviews should be 2 pages long and double spaced with 1 in. margins on all sides and in 12 pt. Times New Roman font. You must submit your review via e-mail as a Microsoft Word document (I do not accept PDFs or Google Docs). You should consider New York Times book reviews as models for writing your book review. This assignment is due Monday, August 13 at 10:00 AM. I will not accept late submissions. In addition, you must let me know if you are completing this assignment and which literary text you are using no later than Friday, July 27 at 10:00 AM. If you do not do this, you will no longer have the option to complete this assignment.

Note on Assignments: In the event that students know an assignment will be late, they should inform the instructor at least three days prior to the assignment due date. If the instructor considers a student’s reasoning legitimate, he can choose not to penalize for lateness (this is completely up to the instructor’s discretion). If students are ill or unable to complete an assignment due to a serious family matter, they should provide the instructor with appropriate documentation, such as a doctor’s note.

- Policy on Academic Integrity (Cheating and Plagiarism)

Rutgers University treats cheating and plagiarism as serious offenses. The standard minimum penalties for students who cheat or plagiarize include failure of the course, disciplinary probation, and a formal warning that further cheating will be grounds for expulsion from the University.

If I find that you have used other people’s ideas (e.g., Wikipedia, Amazon reviews, book jacket descriptions, etc.), I will not accept the assignment because I will not be able to consider it your own work. You will get a failing grade (0 points) for that assignment and will not be able to make it up.

You are expected to be familiar with and adhere to the Academic Integrity Policy, available at http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-at-rutgers/. Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Any use of the ideas or words of another person without proper acknowledgment of credit will result in penalties up to and possibly including a course grade of F. Likewise for cheating on exams and quizzes. Note that the uncited use of uncopyrighted material such as Wikipedia entries still constitutes plagiarism.

- Policy on Disabilities:

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines. If
the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus’ disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form. For more information please contact the Office of Disability Services in the Paul Robeson Campus Center, in suite 219, by phone at 973-353-5375 or by email at odsnewark@newark.rutgers.edu.

➢ **Other Course Policies:**

Students should never hesitate to contact the instructor with questions regarding the course content. This is an open and safe space for continuous dialogue, and there is no such thing as a “stupid” question. The instructor will try and get back to students within 24 hours (many times, sooner) Mondays-Fridays. However, he may not respond to emails on Saturdays and Sundays.

Students should have a plan to ensure that they will have access to the internet on a daily basis throughout the course. Technical problems, failed internet connections, and computer crashes are not excuses for not completing course work. Students should make a plan for what they will do if they have any technical problems.

Students should always keep an open mind and respect opposing views. Many of the topics this course covers are sensitive and require intellectually mature and respectful participants. Being respectful and open-minded is the best way to learn and grow. Individual and intellectual growth should always be goals while taking courses in college. If students ever feel disrespected or uncomfortable during course discussions, they should not hesitate to contact the instructor.
Course Schedule:

Week 1: July 9 – 13

Monday, July 9

1. Introduce yourself on Blackboard by **10 AM**

   Include your name, major/minor, where you’re from, an interesting fact about yourself, what interests you about the class, and any questions or concerns you may have.

2. Contribute to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Brain Dump: What is Black Literature Now?” by **10 AM**.

   Before we get started with the readings and discussions, I’d like to get a sense of what the title of the course means to you. Consider the following questions in roughly one paragraph: What is Black literature? Why talk about Black literature in the context of “now”?

Tuesday, July 10


2. Add a second contribution to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Brain Dump: What is Black Literature Now?” by **10 AM**.

   This essay is the introduction to a collection of essays attempting to define this contemporary moment of Black American literature. After reading the essay, revisit the Blackboard DB thread “Brain Dump: What is Black Literature Now?” Look at your initial post from yesterday and see if and why your thoughts have changed since reading this essay. Add a second post to this thread where you: (1) Summarize how Li answer’s the questions: What is Black literature? Why talk about Black literature in the context of “now”? and (2) Describe your thoughts about Li’s essay and how she discusses these themes/questions. Were you surprised by this reading? Enlightened? Angered? Confused? Explain why.
Thursday, July 12

1. Contribute to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Paper Topic Brainstorm” by **10 AM**

   Please list 3 possible themes for your final paper. After posting, be sure to look through your classmates’ contributions. When choosing your topic, you are not bound to the themes you, yourself, contributed.


Friday, July 13

1. Contribute 3 online articles to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Resource Dump” by **10 AM**.

   Each person is required to post 3 online articles (newspaper, blog, review articles) relevant to the final paper. **For each article you post, include a 2-3 sentence summary.** The “Resource Dump” is a communal space where you can share resources with each other. You will be able to draw from the “Resource Dump” when writing your final paper and creating your bibliography.

2. Read: Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* p. 35 – 82

3. Contribute to the Blackboard DB threat titled “The Underground Railroad: Initial Impressions” by **10 AM**

   Write one paragraph stating your initial impressions on pages 1-82 of *The Underground Railroad*. When stating your impressions, include thoughts on the novel’s relevancy for this class. That is, remember the overarching theme, “What is Black Literature Now?” How does the novel speak to this theme, especially given its setting during enslavement (why write this novel now?)?

Week 2: July 16 – 20

Tuesday, July 17

1. Read: Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* p. 83 – 228

2. DB Reading Post #1 due **10 AM**
Thursday, July 19


2. DB Reading Response #1 due 10 AM

Friday, July 20

1. Watch: “Oprah Reveals New Book Club Selection [: *The Underground Railroad*]" : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kcBr2h5zLc

2. Watch: “Colson Whitehead on Why We Need Stories About Slavery: Oprah’s Book Club” : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUjVUTpXc


4. Contribute to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Reception: *The Underground Railroad*" by 10 AM

   After watching the clips and reading the short article on *The Underground Railroad*, write 1-2 paragraphs considering the following questions: (1) What does it mean for a Black author to win a prestigious prize such as the Pulitzer? (2) Why does Oprah choose this novel for her book club? (3) Why a book about slavery and why now? (4) Do some of your own poking around the internet (reviews and social media); what is the overall reception of the novel? Consider different audiences (mainstream, national, international, Black, non-Black, etc.).

4. Contribute 2 scholarly articles to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Resource Dump” by 10 AM.

   Each person is required to post 2 scholarly articles relevant to the final paper. These articles must consider the theme of Black literature in the twenty-first century. They must be peer-reviewed articles from academic journals, and you must locate these articles using the Rutgers Library online database. **For each article you post, include a 2-3 sentence summary.** Like the three online articles posted last week, you will be able to consider all scholarly articles posted in the “Resource Dump” for use when writing your final paper.

5. E-mail me 1-2 sentences stating your finalized paper topic/theme by 10 AM
Week 3: July 23 – 27

Tuesday, July 24


2. Contribute to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Black Authors” by **10 AM**

   This assignment requires that you spend some time on the internet researching contemporary Black authors. You can browse book review and newspaper websites, interviews, YouTube, award websites, blogs, and even social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. While doing research, consider the following questions: (1) Who are some famous Black authors that have been writing and publishing recently (not authors covered in this class) and what are mainstream audiences saying about them and their writing? (2) How are these authors engaging current events in their writing? (3) How are these authors situated (and how do they situate themselves) within literary traditions and histories (for example, which earlier Black writers do they state as influences and why?). This assignment is meant to help you more broadly contextualize your final paper. Report your findings in 1-2 paragraphs (more if you deem necessary).

Thursday, July 26


2. DB Reading Post # 2 due **10 AM**

Friday, July 27


2. DB Reading Response #2 due **10 AM**

3. E-mail me a draft of a thesis statement for your final paper by **10 AM**

4. Let me know if you are submitting the Extra Credit Assignment and which literary text you are reviewing by **10 AM**. If you don’t e-mail me by today you no longer have the option to submit this assignment.
Week 4: July 30 – August 3

Tuesday, July 31

1. Read: Jones, *An American Marriage* p. 208 – end


4. Contribute to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Reception: An American Marriage” by 10 AM

   After finishing *An American Marriage*, reading the review and watching the clip, write 1-2 paragraphs considering the following questions: (1) Why does Oprah choose this novel for her book club? (2) What is the novel’s historical context; why is the novel considered relevant in today’s political climate? (3) In her interview, Jones says that she writes about people and their problems, and not about problems and their people. Why? What is the significance of this statement? (4) Do some of your own poking around the internet (reviews and social media); what is the overall reception of the novel? Consider different audiences (mainstream, national, international, Black, non-Black, etc.).

Thursday, August 2


2. Contribute to the Blackboard DB thread titled “*Speak No Evil*: Initial Impressions” by 10 AM

   Write one paragraph stating your initial impressions on pages 1-66 of *Speak No Evil*. When stating your impressions, include thoughts on the novel’s relevancy for this class. That is, remember the overarching theme, “What is Black Literature Now?” How does the novel speak to this theme? What new perspectives does it introduce to our discussion of the “Black novel”?
Friday, August 3


2. E-mail me your revised thesis statement by **10 AM**

3. Post the first draft of your final paper’s introductory paragraph to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Draft 1 of FP Introduction” by **10 AM**

You are required to peer review another student’s introduction by **Thursday, August 9 at 10 AM**. You can e-mail your comments and corrections directly to your partner, but you must cc me in the e-mail in order to receive credit. I will pair students together.

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**Week 5: August 6 – 10**

**Tuesday, August 7**

1. Read: Iweala, *Speak No Evil* p. 102 – 176

2. DB Reading Post #3

**Thursday, August 9**

1. Read: Iweala, *Speak No Evil* p. 177 – end

2. DB Reading Response #3

3. Send your peer review partner comments and corrections on their introduction by **10 AM**. Remember to cc me in the e-mail in order to receive credit for this assignment.
Friday, August 10


3. Contribute to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Reception: Speak No Evil” by 10 AM

After reading the two NYT reviews for Speak No Evil answer the following questions in 1-2 paragraphs: (1) What is each reviewer’s overall claim? Do they agree or disagree (explain); (2) Do you agree with the reviews? Why or why not? How would you review the novel differently? (3) Based on the reading and research you have done for this class, what would you say determines a novel’s success? What obstacles do Black writers face that others do not?

4. E-mail me with any questions regarding the final paper

Week 6: August 13 – 15

Monday, August 13

1. Extra Credit due by 10 AM (Optional)

Wednesday, August 15

1. Final Paper due by 10 AM