

Lina Iris Viktor, *Maternal Prima*

Description

In this graduate course, students will engage the archive of contemporary black speculative fiction, including works by Samuel Delany, Octavia E. Butler, Toni Morrison, Walter Mosley, Victor LaValle, Colson Whitehead, and N.K. Jemisin, to interrogate the possibilities and limits of the Black radical imagination as it appears in fantasy, horror, graphic fiction and other genres. Students will read narrative fiction written after the Black Arts Movement to interrogate what the speculative offers in terms of thinking about black worlds. The course argues that speculative writing—narrative fiction *and* theoretical writing—gesture to other social and political modes of thinking about and being in the world. Our study will concern texts written in the contemporary, but students will be invited to consider how contemporary manifestations of the speculative and radical necessarily speak across time and space into both past and future manifestations/imaginaries of black experiences, embodiments, and identities.

Required Texts

Samuel Delany, *The Tales of Nevèrïon*
Octavia Butler, *Dawn*
Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*
Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionists*
Victor LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom*
-----, *Destroyer*
N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*

Grade Breakdown

Response Paper 1-4 – 5% (20% total)
Presentation – 20%
Final paper – 25%
Comic Shop Site Visit – 10%
Participation – 20%

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Climate – This course does not harbor belligerent or intolerant speech or behavior toward anyone based on race, gender identity, sexuality, immigration status, ability, or any category of identity or social being. This is true of discussions, written work, and discussions about this class that extend beyond our meeting.

This is especially true of violent language we encounter in the texts we read. We will discuss ways of managing such encounters in person, but in general, I ask that you refrain from reproducing especially harmful epithets during discussion. As Koritha Mitchell writes, “The N-word won’t be used in this class by a person of any race, even if it consistently appears in our texts. The same goes for the “F” word, regardless of a person’s (perceived) sexual orientation or gender expression. And, this is simply not a space in which we call people ‘trash.’”^[1] For more about this, please listen to Prof. Mitchell’s podcast at <http://bit.ly/2TAKuU5> or read from her blog, cited below.

Course Content – For reasons I will discuss during our course meetings, I do not offer case-by-case content warnings. The unique history of enslavement and dispossession that has shaped black experiences in the Atlantic world and beyond means that we will regularly encounter violent language and themes during our discussion. My approach to these topics is to rigorously confront them to better understand and ultimately disempower them.

Land Acknowledgement – The Northwestern campus sits on the traditional homelands of the people of the Council of Three Fires, the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa as well as the Menominee, Miami and Ho-Chunk nations. It was also a site of trade, travel, gathering and healing for more than a dozen other Native tribes and is still home to over 100,000 tribal members in the state of Illinois.

Attendance – Class meetings are central to developing working knowledge in our subject matter and to developing the communication skills necessary for life in the 21st Century.

Religious Holidays –

If you celebrate a religious holiday that will conflict with any of the course requirements, please see me during the first two weeks of class to discuss. We will make sure that you can both meet the course requirements and practice your faith fully.

Preparing for class – Please bring all texts, including printouts of assigned readings posted to Canvas, with you to class. *I have purposefully designed the course to minimize potential financial burdens, but if you require further accommodations, please let me know so that I can make readings available.*

This is a reading intensive class. You should prepare to complete readings before class begins. On day one we will discuss strategies for good active reading, but it is my suggestion that you read in hard copy or with a device that will allow you to annotate whenever possible.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities – Any student requesting accommodations related to a disability or other condition is required to register with AccessibleNU (accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; 847-467-5530) and provide professors with an accommodation notification from AccessibleNU, preferably within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain confidential.

Reasonable accommodations for students who fall ill during the course will also be made, even if that student does not have a registry with ANU. Depending on the severity, I may request a consultation with ANU for help in making course material equitable and manageable.

Late work – I do not accept work after it is due. A key part of learning is maintaining a working appreciation of your calendar. Extension requests may be considered but must be requested more than twenty-four hours in advance of a due date.

Academic Integrity – Academic dishonesty and plagiarism will not be tolerated. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty and to familiarize yourself with the school's policies regarding Academic Integrity. In a graduate seminar, academic integrity also means approaching discussion in good faith. Please read AND listen closely and carefully to your peers and refer to our readings for textual evidence.

Writing Assignments – Assignments are to be completed in paragraph form using a standard font, font size, and margin size. Assignments will be turned in via Canvas. All assignments should have a title, your name, and page numbers.

Grade Review – If you wish to have your grade reviewed, you must wait 24 hours and write an explanation of the reasons for your request that incorporates and responds to the feedback you received.

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Reading Schedule:

WEEK 1: IMAGINATION

Derrick Bell, "Space Traders"

Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture"

Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory"

Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," in *Black Skin, White Masks*

Robin D. G. Kelley, Intro and Chapter 1, *Freedom Dreams*

SPECIAL NOTE: If you have not read Kyla Wazana Tompkins "We're Aren't Here to Learn What We Already Know," or Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, I recommend reading these texts over break. Both will be important for how we think about the relationship between theory and speculation and about the concerns of canon formation. Morrison will be especially important for anyone who has never taken a Black studies course. You can find Tompkins in the "Files" tab and the Morrison is on reserve alongside other course texts.

WEEK 2: PLEASURE

Samuel Delany, *The Tales of Nevèrîon*

Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Red, White, and in Color*

bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy," in *Black Looks*

Darieck Scott, "Introduction" in *Extravagant Abjection*

Samantha Pinto, "The Romance of Consent" in *Infamous Bodies*

WEEK 3: HUMAN

Octavia E. Butler, *Dawn*

Patricia Williams, "Owning the Self in a Disowned World" in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*

Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes," in *African American Literary Theory*

Kevin Quashie, "Aliveness and Relation", in *Black Aliveness*

Zakiyyah Imari Jackson, "Theorizing in a Void"

WEEK 4: EPIC

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens"

Barbara Smith, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism"

Jennifer C. Nash, "Writing Black Beauty"

WEEK 5: INFRASTRUCTURE

Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionists*

Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens"

Adrienne Brown, "The Black Skyscraper," in *The Black Skyscraper*

Nicole Fleetwood, "Posing in Prison"

WEEK 6: EMPIRE

N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*

June Jordan, "Report from the Bahamas,"

Simone Browne, "Notes on Surveillance Studies," in *Dark Matters*

Erica R. Edwards, "Perfect Grammar," in *The Other Side of Terror*

WEEK 7: VIOLENCE

Victor LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom, Destroyer*

Robin Means Coleman, "Introduction" in *Horror Noire*

Frantz Fanon, "On Violence," in *Wretched of the Earth*

Jennifer C. Nash, "Unwidowing"

WEEK 8: NOTHING/NOWHERE

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, "The Finkelstein Five," "Zimmerland," "Friday Black," in *Friday Black*

Walter Mosley, "Doctor Kismet" and "The Nig in Me," in *Futureland*

Calvin Warren, "Improper Bodies,"

Patrice Douglass, "Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying"

Christina E. Sharpe, "The Weather," in *In the Wake*

WEEK 9: SUPERHUMANS

Jules Hart, *Fast Color*

Kwanza Osajyefi and Tim Smith *Black*

Robert Morales and Kyle Baker, *Captain America: Truth*

Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther*

Daerick Scott, "" in *Keeping it Unreal*

Ramzi Fawaz, "Superheroes that 'Give a Damn,'" in *The New Mutants*

andré carrington, "The Immortal Storm," in *Speculative Blackness*

WEEK 10: LOVE

Octavia E. Butler, "Bloodchild," and "Speech Sounds," in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*
Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer*

Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," in *Sister Outsider*

LaMonda H. Stallings, "From the Freaks of Freaknik to the Freaks of Magic City," in *Funk the Erotic*

Tavia Nyong'o, "Introduction," in *Afrofabulations*

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Assignments

In-Class Presentation: The purpose of the presentation is for you to practice identifying and analyzing the principal arguments of scholarly sources, locate methods in Black studies and African American literary studies, and practice leading discussion for a group of your peers. You and your partner should spend **NO MORE** than 10-12 minutes introducing the day's material, before moving in to roughly one hour of discussion of the readings. Your presentation will thus comprise the first half of our session together, and so you should prepare questions for discussion and/or an activity that will spur conversation.

Critical Response Papers: Over the course of the semester, you will write **four (4)** short reading responses situating the readings in relationship to each other and to the course themes. Papers should be between 500-750 words. You should include direct references (either paraphrasing or quoting). All papers are due by Sunday at noon and will be returned before class Monday. **Response # 1 is due during Weeks 2-3, Response # 2 is due during Weeks 4-5, Response # 3 is due Weeks 6-7, and Response # 4 is due Weeks 8-9.** You should not write a response for the day you present.

Site Visit: Comics Shop

Comics shops remain one of the few places where reading and talking about literature happens *in public*. While some of you may be familiar with comic shops, others will have never been. For this assignment you are to go to a comics shop near you and spend some time browsing the shelves. You must purchase a paper comic created by a Black author or artist. Then you will write a short report/memo describing your visit including what you saw, who you interacted with (if anyone), how the store situated its comics, where you located your book, and the experience of reading it. This memo should be no less than 500 words but does not need to be a contiguous essay. You can and should include structuring ideas from our readings, but you need not cite extensively for this assignment. You must complete this assignment in advance of our class meeting on Superheroes in week 9.

Potential Northside Comics Stores are listed below with addresses. You may visit a store near your home over the holidays if you are away from Chicago.

Comix Revolution, 606 Davis Street, Evanston
Alley Cat Comics, 5304 N. Clark Street, Chicago
Graham Cracker Comics, 5028 N. Clark Street, Chicago
Graham Crack Comics, 3162 N. Broadway, Chicago
Chicago Comics, 3244 N. Clark Street, Chicago
Third Coast Comics, 6443 N. Sheridan Road, Chicago

Final Assessment:

For this essay, you will choose a keyword from the course to craft a **key word essay**, that delves into the treatment of the topic in Black studies. Please choose one of the keywords from the course topics. These are **imagination, pleasure, human, epic, infrastructure, empire, violence, superhuman, nothing/nowhere, and love.**

You must address at least two article-length readings not included on this course list, which you can locate on your own or with the help of me or a librarian. These may be chapters from books listed on the syllabus or else they may be articles from journals. Blog posts and other forms of writing may be appropriate, but please consult with me.

Black Speculative Fiction and the Black Radical Imagination

Your keyword essay must also include references to both primary and secondary sources assigned in class. Rather than set a minimum number, I ask that you approach this essay as one that asks you to trace an intellectual conversation across a range of sources. As such you should try to touch on as many sources as possible, but must also achieve a sense of depth in terms of how authors and theorists treat your keyword.

I ask that you do not propose an alternate keyword.

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