

## English 273: 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature—The Literature of the ‘Color Line’



Professor Justin L. Mann

Graduate Assistants

Course Description:

In the introduction to his important work *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois declared that the problem of the “color line” would characterize the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this course, we will examine an archive of key works of American literature to assess Du Bois’ portent. How and in what ways have racial divides structured American life and American letters? How do people of color—black descendants of enslavement, indigenous people dispossessed of their ancestral homes, and immigrants from the global south newly arrived—describe their experiences in relationship to American-ness? How has American-ness been imagined by white authors invested in preserving or disrupting this conflation of the two categories?

Drawing on works by a range of authors including Langston Hughes, William Faulkner, Carlos Bulosan, Lorraine Hansberry, Gloria Anzaldua, Louise Erdrich, and others, students in this will endeavor to understand how the residue of these conflicting and conflicted understandings have characterized contemporary understandings of and relationships to American identity.

Course Objectives:

By the end of the quarter, students will be able to

- Identify key texts, ideas, and concepts in the study of American literature written after the 1920s.
- Analyze and explain the relationship between “America” and notions of race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status.
- Assess the special relationship between literature/culture and social evolution and transformation
- Craft original work that expresses your learning

Because English 273 was reconceived as part of the Hewlett Diversity Initiative, we will adopt the learning goals articulated by that program, as follows: “Students will be able to investigate literature related to social inequalities and diversities within both the US and transnational contexts; distinguish differences such as race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation and recognize their historical contingencies; analyze the impact that histories, institutions, and/or social structures have on local issues and on individual and group experiences and identities; critique their individual relations with structures of power and privilege.”

*Required Texts:*

*Lorraine Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun*

*Tony Kushner, Angels in America*

*Colson Whitehead, The Nickel Boys*

*Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire (Optional)*

**Grading:**

Exam 1 - 20%

Exam 2 and 3 - 25%

Participation – 20%

Reading Quizzes – 10%

**Class Policies/Code of Conduct**

**Climate** – This course does not harbor belligerent or intolerance speech or behavior toward anyone on the basis of race, gender identity, sexuality, immigration status, or

ability. This is true of synchronous discussions, written work, and discussions about this class that extend beyond the classroom and is ESPECIALLY true of how you conduct yourself with your **Graduate Assistant**.

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.’”<sup>[1]</sup> For more about this, please listen to Prof. Mitchell’s podcast at <http://bit.ly/2TAkuU5> or read from her blog, cited below.

The relationship between blackness and policing is directly germane to our course of study. We begin our readings in the midst of Jim Crow America, in which Black Codes reinforced notions of Black criminality. As we will chart in our readings, Black letters have been directly responsive to the social, juridical, and cultural production of Black criminality. We therefore take as axiomatic the concept that black lives matter and use that premise as a position through which to read and understand the relationship between literature and society. We will also read texts from across the 20th century that position police violence, brutality, and murder as a chief force of anti-Blackness and that seek to dismantle racialized policing.

**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 21<sup>st</sup> Century. You may miss one class with no questions asked. Compounded absences will inevitably affect your participation grade.

*Addendum* – Due to social distancing requirements, our class will meet electronically. This may present difficulties due to connectivity, availability of safe streaming location,

etc. Please be sure to fill out the e-Learning survey and communicate with both me and your TA as to your ability to stream. Please see the guidelines for streaming below.

**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 print-outs of assigned readings posted to Canvas, with you to class. You may not read posted materials from your computer. 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.

**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](mailto: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.

**Late work –** Neither I nor your TAs 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.

**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 in the course of our discussion. My

approach to these topics is to rigorously confront them so as to better understand and ultimately disempower them.

**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.

**E-Learning** – Please follow the guidelines below to make for a SAFE and intellectually productive learning environment.

1. Whenever possible, it is best practice to stream with your camera on. Turn the Wi-Fi on your tablets and phones off so as to ensure they are not using bandwidth. If you are unable to stream video, that's ok. Please stream your audio and do your best to remain focused and active during the discussion.
2. Please be sure to stream in appropriate clothing. If you must stream from your bedroom, please do not lie in bed. You may sit on or in front of your bed. These requests are made not to punish you, but rather to protect the integrity of scholarly enterprise conducted from home.
3. Please use headphones and mute your microphone to avoid ambient noise disrupting your synchronous discussions.

**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. Grade reviews are submitted to me and your GA simultaneously and we will discuss your response. Please remember that grade reviews can result in a lowering of your grade.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Koritha Mitchell, "Teaching and the N-Word: Questions to Consider,"

<http://www.korithamitchell.com/teaching-and-the-n-word/>

## Reading Schedule

A note on readings: This is a reading-intensive course meant to provide a range of sources from within a given period or set of literary conversations. I have excerpted as appropriate. It is your responsibility to manage the reading.

### Week Zero (9/16)

#### Introduction

Course introduction, Syllabus Review, Expectations and Q and A  
All "lectures" will be delivered asynchronously.

## Unit 1

### Black Arts and The Black Radical Imagination

### Week One (9/21)

#### Harlem and its Poetics

Listen to Lecture 1 - The Black Radical Imagination and the New Negro Renaissance  
and Lecture 2 - Jazz Modernism in the Black North

Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing"

Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"

Langston Hughes, "Negro Speaks of Rivers," "The Weary Blues,"

Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to be a Colored Me"

Claude McKay, "The Harlem Dancer," "If We Must Die," "The Lynching"

Countee Cullen "Heritage," "Scottsboro, Too is Worth Its Song"

Week Two (9/28)

Race Writing and Civil Rights

Listen to Lecture 3 - The Literature of Civil Rights and Lecture 4 - Soul Aesthetics

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Excerpt)

James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the 100th Anniversary of Emancipation"

Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (Excerpt)

Week Three (10/5)

Black Arts After the Movement

Listen to Lecture 5 - Post-Soul Aesthetics and Black Radical Consciousness

Synchronous Review Session

Gwendolyn Brooks, "We Real Cool," "The Bean Eaters," "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," "Gettin' Down to Get Over"

Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement"

Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a Luxury"

Spike Lee, *Do the Right Thing*

Take Home Midterm 1 due Sunday 10/11 at Midnight

Unit 2:

American Fantasies

Week Four (10/12)

Midcentury Dreams, Midcentury Nightmares

Lecture 7 - From Depression to Cold War and Lecture 8 - Dreams Deferred

Michael Curtiz, *Casablanca*

Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart* (Excerpt)

Langston Hughes, "I, Too," "Harlem," "Theme for English B"

Lorraine Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun*

Frank O'Hara, "Having a Coke with You,"

Week Five (10/19)

Feminist Imaginaries

Lecture 9 - Feminism's Waves as Form and Lecture 10 - Gender, Sex, and Postmodernity

Adrienne Rich, "From a Survivor," "Power"  
Maxine Hong Kingston, "No Name Woman"  
Gloria Anzaldua, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue"  
Leslie Marmon Silko, "Lullaby"  
Alice Walker, "In Search of our Mother's Garden"

Week Six (10/26)

The Black Speculative Imagination

Lecture 11 - Black SF as Critique  
Review Session for Exam 2  
Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild"  
N.K. Jemisin, "Sinners, Saints, Dragons, and Haints in the City Beneath the Still Waters"  
Rebecca Roanhorse, "Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience™"  
Kwame Nana Adjei-Brenyah, "The Finkelstein 5"

Take Home Midterm 2 due 11/1 at Midnight

Unit 3

Literatures of Abolition

Week Seven (11/2)

No Use for Sick

Lecture 12 - Cultures at War and Lecture 13 - HIV/AIDS and the Poetics of Care  
Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* parts 1 and 2  
Tuesday, Nov 3 - Election Day

Week Eight (11/9)

Black Insecurity

Lecture 14 - The Rise of Mass Incarceration and Lecture 15 - Literature as Abolitionist Praxis  
June Jordan, "Poem About My Rights," "Poem About Police Violence"  
Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*  
Barry Jenkins, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (Watch)

Week Nine (11/16)



Lecture 16 - Abolition as Cultural Ethic

Synchronous Review Session and Conclusions

Louise Erdrich, "Holy Rage: Lessons from Standing Rock"

Nick Estes, "A Red Deal"

Natasha Trethewey, *Beyond Katrina* (excerpt)

Final Exam due during exam period

*Assignments*

*Exams— 20, 25, 25%*

Your final exam will consist of identification, short answer, quote ID, and essay questions that you will have to complete in the two hour period during our final. The exam will be open-book and will be graded in accordance with those standards. As we approach the exam, I will hold a review session to help clarify questions you have about key terms, ideas, themes, and arguments from the course.

*Participation – 20%*

Your TA will provide you with a more detailed breakdown of your participation grade, but it will be comprised of written and verbal responses to the readings.

*Reading Quizzes – 10%*