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Afrofuturism and the Black Speculative Arts
Winter 2020
English 101
M/W 9:30 – 10:50



Joshua Mays

Description

Afrofuturism and the black speculative arts have recently gained increased public attention and scholarly scrutiny. This attention has been buoyed by recent critical and commercial successes including *Black Panther*, Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, and N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* novels. But speculation has a longer history in black letters, art, and culture. Indeed, speculation has been at the core of black freedom struggle. While our we will draw our attention to works produced in the twentieth century, we will be careful to attend to how and why black speculation has figured so strongly in the story of blackness.

This course will also help prepares students for success at the university by examining the ways and means of college writing. We will develop strategies for close and careful reading, watching, and listening, all of which well better students' critical thinking and communication skills.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able

- To identify and define the aesthetic, narrative, and poetic features of black speculative works of literature and culture.
- To analyze and explain black speculative literary and cultural works and critical essays and scholarship that examine those works.

- To assess the relationship between black literary and cultural production and black freedom struggle
- To craft cogent arguments about the black speculative tradition

Required Texts

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer*

Roxane Gay and Ta-Nehisi Coates, *World of Wakanda*

Course Pack Available at Quartet Copies

Grading

In class work and participation – 20%

Paper I – 10%

Paper II – 15%

Paper III – 20%

Final Paper – 25%

Class Policies/Code of Conduct

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. You may miss one class with no questions asked. Compounded absences will inevitably affect your participation grade.

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; 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 – 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.

Course Content – For reasons we will discuss during our course meetings, I do not offer case-by-case content warnings. The unique history of enslavement and dispossession that have 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.

Electronics – Electronics are powerful tools when used properly. In this class, you will often have writing components during class meetings, which can be greatly aided by a computer or tablet. During class discussions, however, these devices often become burdensome. I encourage you to bring your course readings **PRINTED OUT** or else that you take **DETAILED** notes so that our discussions are robust. Phones are not to be used during class meetings, although you may use them during mid-session break.

Course Schedule

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION, FOUNDATION: WHOSE FUTURE?

Mon, Jan 6 - Introduction

Read in Class: Derrick Bell, "Space Traders"

Wed, Jan 8 - Critical Perspectives on Afrofuturism

Read for Class: Mark Bould, "The Ships Landed Long Ago"
Mark Dery, "Black to the Future," in *Flame Wars*
Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism* (excerpt)

WEEK 2: ELSEWHERE

Mon, Jan 13 - Breaking Chains

Read for Class: Samuel Delany, "The Tale of Gorchik," in *Tales of Nevèrÿon*
Watch for Class: Sidney Lumet, *The Wiz*

Wed, Jan 15 - Growing Up

Read for Class: Octavia Butler, "Bloodchild," and "The Evening, and the Morning, and the Night," in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*
Walter Mosley, "The Nig in Me," in *Futureland*

Paper 1 Due before Class Sunday at 5:00 on Canvas

WEEK 3: AFROFUTURIST WRITING AFTER OBAMA

Mon, Jan 22 - No Class

Wed, Jan 24 - Brutal Possibilities

Read for Class: N.K. Jemisin, "The Ones Who Stay and Fight," "The City Born Great," "Red Dirt Witch," "The Trojan Girl," "Valedictorian," "The Elevator Dance," "The Evaluators," in *How Long 'Til Black Future Month*
Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, "The Finkelstein 5" "Zimmerland" "Friday Black," in *Friday Black*

WEEK 4: SLAVERY AS BLACK FANTASIA

Mon, Jan 27- Between the Land of the Living and the Land of the Lost

Read for Class: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer* Ch. 1-7

Wed, Jan 29 - Freedom, then...

Read for Class: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer* Ch. 8-17

WEEK 5: SLAVERY AS BLACK FANTASIA (CONT'D)

Mon, Feb 3 - Conduction

Read for Class: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer* Ch. 18-27

Wed, Feb 5 - To Forget was Death

Read for Class: Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer* Ch. 28-34

WEEK 6: DRAWING TOMORROW

Mon, Feb 10 - All the Stars are Closer

View for Class: Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther*
Read for Class: Roxane Gay, *World of Wakanda*

DUE: Paper II (DATE/TIME TBA)

Wed, Feb 12- Desiring Blackness/Desiring Africa

Read for Class: andré carrington, "Desiring Blackness: A Queer Orientation to Marvel's *Black Panther* 1998-2016"

Read for Class: Nnedi Okorafor, "Africanfuturism Defined"

View for Class: Nnedi Okorafor, "Sci-fi Stories that Imagine a Future Africa"

WEEK 7: STREAMING THE BLACK SPECULATIVE ARTS

Mon, Feb 17- Bulletproof

View for Class: *Marvel's Luke Cage*, episodes 1-3

Read for Class: Tricia Rose, "'All Aboard the Night Train,'" in *Black Noise*

Wed, Feb 19 – Fits of Rage

View for Class: Issa Rae, "Insecure as F*ck"

A Black Lady Sketch Show (Selections on YouTube or HBO.com)

WEEK 8: FROM BLACK GIRL MAGIC TO BLACK FEMINIST TECHNOFUTURES

Mon, Feb 24 - "I Put a Spell on You"

Listen for Class: Nina Simone, *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*

Read for Class: Danielle Heard, "'Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood': Nina Simone's Theater of Invisibility"

Wed, Feb 26 - "The Way You Make Me Feel"

View for Class: Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer* (Emotion Picture)

Read for Class: Alexander Weheliye, "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Black Popular Music"

Week 9: Race, Technology, and the Futures of Surveillance

Mon, Mar 2 – New Spaces of Oppression

Read for Class: Ruha Benjamin, "Introduction: The New Jim Code," in *Race after Technology*
Simone Browne, "B@anding Blackness," in *Dark Matters*

Mon, Mar 4 -

Read for Class: Sufiya Umoja Unoble, "Introduction" and "Searching for Black Girls," in *Algorithms of Oppression*

DUE: Paper III

WEEK 10: MAKING BLACK LIVES MATTER

Mon, Mar 9 - Black Futures After Obama

View for Class: Kehinde Wiley, *Rumors of War*, *Barrack Obama* (portrait)

Amy Sberal, *Michelle Obama* (portrait)

Read for Class: Holland Cotter, "Obama Portraits Blend Paint and Politics, and Fact and Fiction," *The New York Times*

Jennifer Nash, "Love in a Time of Death" and "Coda"

In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in your completed paper during our exam period.

Assignments

Paper I

For this paper, you will engage in a close-reading exercise. Choose a passage from either “The Tale of Gorchik,” “Bloodchild,” “The Evening, and the Morning, and the Night,” or “The Nig in Me” and analyze following the guidelines set forth in class and on the close-reading hand-out. Your paper should be 500-750 words and should follow the rules for formatting outlined above.

Paper II

In this paper, you will rectify errors and clarify analyses from Paper I by bringing the text under review into conversation with another text, written by either Jemisin, Coates, or Adjei-Brenyah. This paper will be 1000-1250 words and should follow the same stylistic rules.

Paper III (choose one)

a) Paper III asks you to engage in a deep listening exercise by imagining that a record company has tasked you with drafting an annotated dusk jacket for the album’s vinyl rerelease. Choose an album by a black artist or group from Africa, the Caribbean, North America, or anywhere in the diaspora, and listen it track by track. Then compose a set of liner notes for the album drawing on the examples on campus.

b) Write a film review of a movie that you think “counts” as Afrofuturism. Explain what features of the make you think it counts and, more importantly, whether or not the film’s creators are effective in their use of Afrofuturist elements.

Paper IV

In the final paper related to this course, you will expand your thinking from the second paper for a third time. This time, your analysis should include reference to scholarship on Afrofuturism and the Black Speculative Arts. You are encouraged to use the material from the course but must also do your own research to discover 2-3 sources that speak to your writing.