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Black Insecurity

Spring 2020
ENG 366
M/W 11:00 – 12:20



Loyiso Mkhize

Description

What does it mean to read major works of millennial black literature from the standpoint of insecurity? How is black insecurity distinct from insecurity broadly conceived? What unique qualities does literature have that help critics understand black insecurity in ways other forms can't? This class will examine essays, poetry, and fiction to examine the ongoing struggle for black freedom and the conditions of insecurity that underwrite it. We will specifically examine the relationship between insecurity as an affect, and the periodization of post-soul writing, asking specific questions about the unfulfilled promises of Civil Rights era agitation and the ongoing insecurities that suffuse discourses of black activism, especially those related to police and vigilante violence of the last decade. We relate these forms of antiblack violence to the ongoing War on Terror to assess their interdependence. We will also interrogate how progressive calls for various kinds of security from food security to climate security reinforce the discourse of security and will examine what alternatives exist in the archive of black letters.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to

- Identify key ideas and concepts in black and security studies
- Analyze and explain the literary valences of insecurity
- Assess the relevance of literary study to understanding social institutions
- Craft original work describing the relationship between blackness, affect, and structures of human thriving

Required Texts

Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*

Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

Kiese Laymon, *Heavy*

Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped*

Saeed Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*

Grading

Participation 20%

Discussion Blog Post 10%

Paper I 20%

Paper II 20%

Final Paper 30%

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. Should you have any questions, please consult the WCAS Academic Integrity page here: <https://www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/undergraduate/courses-registration-grades/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.

When working on writing assignments for this class, I encourage you to visit the Writing Place. Located in the Main Library, the Writing Place is Northwestern's center for peer writing consultations. The juniors and seniors who staff the Writing Place can provide you with feedback and assistance at any stage in the writing process. They will not edit your work. Rather, they will work with you to brainstorm ideas, organize or outline an essay, clarify your argument, document your sources correctly, or refine grammar and style. Though walk-in consultations are possible if space is available, it's best to book a consultation in advance via the online schedule at www.writing.northwestern.edu.

Reading – You may notice that this course is reading intensive. My expectation is that you will maintain an active readership throughout the class and that your participation during discussion will reflect that commitment. This means reading "critically" and "carefully." Carefully means answering the following questions: What is the author's argument? What evidence do they use to support that argument? Critically means you can answer the following questions: What are the assumptions on which the author's argument rests? Does the text offer you new ways of thinking? What kind of world does the author seek to create, and is that world one you want to inhabit? These questions apply to both literary and scholarly readings.

Reading Schedule:

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION, FOUNDATION: ON AFFECT AND SECURITY

Tue, March 31 -

Read in Class: James Baldwin, "Letter to My Nephew on the 100th Anniversary of Emancipation"

Wed, April 1 -

Read for Class: Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness" and "On Violence"

Complete guided reading worksheet

WEEK 2: THE STATE

Mon, April 6 -

Read for Class: Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (55-97; 156-165)

Wed, April 8 -

Read for Class: Tricia Rose, "All Aboard the Night Train,"

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

Listen for Class: Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet*

WEEK 3: BLACK "HISTORIES" OF SURVEILLANCE AND INSECURITY

Mon, April 13 -

Read for Class: Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*

Wed, April 15 -

Read for Class: Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

WEEK 4: THE POETICS OF BLACK INSECURITY

Mon, April 20 -

Read for Class: Sarah Haley,
Simone Browne, "What did TSA find in Solange's Hair?"
Christina Sharpe, "The Weather," in *In the Wake*

Wed, April 27 -

Read for Class: Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, "The Finkelstein 5," and "Zimmerland," in *Friday Black*,
June Jordan, "Poem about Police Violence" and "Poem about My Rights"

View for Class: Ryan Coogler, *Fruitvale Station*

PAPER I DUE

WEEK 5: CARCERAL IMAGINARIES

Mon, May 4 -

Read for Class: Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*

Wed, May 6 -

Read for Class: Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*

WEEK 6: WITNESSES AND TESTIMONY

Mon, May 11 -

Read for Class: Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped*
Nicole Fleetwood, "Posing in Prison"

Wed, May 13 –

Read for Class: Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped*
Jennifer C. Nash, “Unwidowing”

WEEK 7: AFTER THE FLOOD

Mon, May 18 –

Read for Class: Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped*

Wed, May 20 -

View for Class: Benh Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

Read for Class: Tavia Nyong’o, “Little Monsters”
Natasha Tretheway, *Liturg* (excerpt)

WEEK 8:

Mon, May 25 -

Read for Class: Kiese Laymon, *Heavy*
Tressie McMillan-Cottom, “Dying to Be Competent”

Wed, May 27 -

Read for Class: Kiese Laymon, *Heavy*
Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight*

WEEK 9: DARK LOVE

Mon, June 1 -

Read for Class: Saeed Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*

Assignments

Paper I

This assignment asks you to do a **close reading** of **one** passage from either Shange's *for colored girls...* or Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*. In this paper, you should address the author's use of poetics, including literary devices, poetic voice, mode, etc. If you need some assistance thinking about the poetics, please make an appointment to come to office hours. To do a close reading, you need to interpret the selection and organization of the words on the page, explaining how these words connote ideas and feelings that, in keeping with connotation, *imply* (rather than state outright) the various meanings alive in the works. In particular, you may focus on how these words generate tensions: that is, how they produce a degree of conflict between the action on the page and *how* such actions are represented in language. You can also interpret a key *figure* in the passage: those particular words which generate an extra-special significance (indeed, generate a pattern, or the disruption of a pattern) in the passage. You can also pay attention to voice: who is the speaker and how are they speaking?

Some tips for writing

1. Make sure you have a clear and strong thesis statement in your introductory paragraph. Remember that a thesis statement stakes a claim and makes an argument that will frame your ENTIRE paper. A thesis must be debatable, and not a statement of fact.
2. While rereading the passage/text you have chosen to write about, it is useful to mark the text and look for any patterns you can find. You will turn in a photocopy of the annotated copy of your passage at the END of your paper.
3. Papers should adhere to MLA formatting standards. Please consult the Purdue OWL site or the Northwestern Writing Website.

Paper II

Keyword Essay

For this essay, explain the role of **one** of the following **keywords** in relation to our investigation of black insecurity: Intimacy, Incarceration, Rights, Surveillance, Violence

Your analysis should include a definition of the term derived from one scholarly source assigned on the syllabus, and one scholarly source you locate on your own. Your analysis of the utility of the term should be derived from two of the primary sources we have read in class and one additional source you locate on your own. Your paper should be no less than 4 and no more than 6 pages.

Some tips for writing.

1. Be sure to create an analytic rather than a descriptive essay. Do not merely recapitulate how a scholar defines your term. In fact, you may want to use a source that does not include a direct reference to your keyword to define and explain it.
2. Ask yourself: how do the readings cover your keyword?
3. The best analysis will be those that integrate discussions of different readings rather than discussing them separately.
4. Your title should evoke your argument rather than merely stating your keyword.
5. Papers should follow MLA guidelines.

Final Paper

In this final essay, you should choose one of the primary texts on the syllabus (preferably one read AFTER Week 5) and develop an argument about that text. Your argument should mobilize the skills of close reading you developed on Paper 1 and the skills of synthetic thinking you developed on paper 2. Y

Requirements

The paper should situate the reading of the primary source in relationship to the course themes by framing the reading with the scholarly material on the syllabus and the material you read for your second assignment. Your paper may answer any ONE of the following questions, or you may derive your own questions in consultation with me.

The State

What is the relationship between black insecurity and state institutions? How do discourses of freedom and rights orient to or away from the state formation? Is the state necessarily a source of black insecurity or is it also a site of black freedom?

Memory

Many of the sources we have encountered mobilize black memory as a way narrating black insecurity. What are the promises and pitfalls of memoir as a narrative mode in the recounting of black insecurity? How should we read and interpret black insecurity as it is mediated through a speaking subject? What are the

Life and Death

Black insecurity is often mediated by antithetical forces of life and death. How do the politics of life and death affect the readerly relationship to the texts we've examined? What are the possibilities of black life in the context of evidence of overwhelming death?

Blog Posts (5)

You are responsible for drafting five posts throughout the quarter. You may not post twice in same week and you must post at least twice before week 5. Posts are intended to be conversations. If you are the first to post, you should pose a question and then answer with evidence from the reading. Subsequent posts should take up the question and should be responsive to the evidence in the post.

Each post is graded out of 2 points on the following scale:

Contribution	Description	Points
Provocative	Poses a rich question that invites debate; mobilizes key evidence in service of responding to the question	2
Substantial	Poses an analytic question; mobilizes good evidence; may be generic or basic	1.5
Superficial	Poses a basic question; lacks evidence; question or response may not allow for debate	1
Incorrect	Poses a question unrelated to the reading; uses evidence incorrectly	.5
None	No response present	0

Participation

Active reading and participation are necessary for a robust literature seminar. Be sure to bring reading materials with you to class, to listen carefully to your classmates, and to respond to them. Participation is also monitored during small group work. There will also be opportunities to earn participation points that are not related to speaking in the general group. But remember that communication and collaboration are essential to your success, so if participation is a challenge, please see me early in the quarter so we can discuss strategies for overcoming this.

Dimensions	Exemplary	Competent	Developing
Thesis	The paper has a clearly articulated and thoughtful thesis expressed early in the paper; the thesis demonstrates a deep understanding of the assignment prompt.	The paper has a thesis that responds to the assignment prompt. It emerges early enough in the paper to be useful, although it could be sharpened.	The paper lacks a clear thesis statement, and/or the thesis statement is difficult to discern, and/or the thesis is buried in the paper.
Analysis	The paper is well structured; paragraphs follow each other logically and ideas are fully developed; the writer clearly “maps” the flow of the analysis. There is a sense of the writer’s command of analysis.	The paper is well structured, but stumbles occasionally in developing a clear analysis. Ideas are sometimes not fully developed and/or are not clearly connected. The writer has good ideas but is still working on expressing them in a cogent way.	The paper is loosely structured; paragraphs are not clearly connected; the logic of the analysis is unclear. The writer is not yet able to produce a clearly developed analysis, or to connect ideas, or these ideas are rote or derivative.
Use of textual evidence	The paper cites appropriate examples from the primary text(s) to support its argument; it is clear how these examples support or illustrate the author’s claims. The primary text(s) is cited accurately.	The paper cites examples, but their relation to the writer’s larger claims is not always clear. Primary texts are not always cited, or not cited accurately.	The examples are not well developed; quotes are “dropped in” to the text without framing or analysis. Examples don’t relate clearly to the author’s larger claims.
Communication	The paper is lucid and elegant, and the prose is grammatically sound. There are no (or not a significant number of) typos or other errors to impede understanding.	The paper is syntactically and grammatically sound. There are errors, but these do not frequently impede the reader’s understanding of the paper. There are typos or other errors that might have been fixed with better proofreading.	The paper is weakly crafted and grammatically unsteady. The student is still developing skills to communicate clearly with an audience. There are numerous typos and errors, and these sometimes or often impede understanding.