

Introduction to 20th-Century African American Literature

ENGL B247-001

T/Th 2:40 – 4:00 pm

English House Lecture Hall

Instructor: Professor Alex Alston

Email: aalston@brynmawr.edu

Office Hours: Wednesdays 11:00 am – 1:00 pm

Course Description:

Thematic: What is the story of African American literature? What are the various African American literary traditions of the 20th century and what connects them? What significance does African American literature have now? With these questions in mind, this survey course introduces some of the major authors, canonical texts, and defining critical debates of African American literature from roughly 1899 to the early 1990s. The course emphasizes placing the literary or aesthetic questions and interventions of the tradition in conversation with its socio-political elements. We will close-read and analyze a range of texts while learning to scaffold our analyses through history without reducing works of literature to their historical conditions. We will cover a range of themes in African American literature including its roots as a “peasant” literature; racial uplift ideology and the politics of class; questions of gender and sexuality; geographical (urban vs rural) divides and the profoundly ecological or eco-literary elements of the tradition. Selected authors include Angelina Grimké, Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, and Jewelle Gomez.

Structural: The course will revolve around close reading and (written as well as verbal) interpretation within (and beyond) the historical and literary context of the works in question. Texts include novels, short stories, poetry, drama, film, and essays from across the 20th century. The course is open to all and assumes no prior knowledge of African American literature.

Course Learning Goals:

1. Students will leave the course with an introductory understanding and ability to **discuss** and **write** about the **historical**, **aesthetic**, and **political** landscape of 20th-century African American literature.
2. Students will develop **close reading** and **critical interpretation** or **analysis** skills through intermittent practice (Discussion Posts, Formal & Informal Conversations) and a handful of writing assignments, including an extended close reading of a text of their choice and a final essay.
3. Students will be introduced to a few transferable **approaches** to new bodies of knowledge or fields of literature, namely, historicism and ecocriticism. They will **practice thinking** and **articulating** themselves in ways (including questions) that will help them successfully integrate new material **in and beyond** the English major or humanities seminar.

Course Questions:

1. What is African American literature? What is it about?
2. How have questions of literary form or genre functioned in Afro-American literature?
3. How do Black authors pose and answer questions about race and white supremacy, gender and sexuality, class, the environment, etc.?
4. What does or can African American literature teach us?

Attendance Policy:

Unexcused (2): Each student is allowed 2 non-consecutive, unexcused absences for the semester. For these two absences, you are welcome to communicate in advance, and I encourage it, but you do not have to. On the **third unexcused absence**, deductions from the final course grade will begin to accumulate at a rate of 1 points per absence.

Excused: Absences due to religious holidays, sporting or club events, and illness documented by a medical professional will all count as excused (**with the necessary documentation**). There is no limit to the amount of excused absences one may have; however, out of respect for the course and fairness to other students, **after the 4th absence of any kind** (and before the 5th) students **are required to meet with the instructor** in person or virtually. We will discuss a plan for make-up work and alternate assignments to compensate for the missed class time.

Course-Specific COVID Note: Students with cold and/or flu-like symptoms are strongly encouraged to take an excused absence by emailing the instructor **before** class. Students are welcome to wear masks and strongly encouraged to do so if they are sniffing, sneezing, or coughing regularly. I will also wear a mask if needed. While perhaps inconvenient, as a community, we have a responsibility to keep one another safe.

BMC Covid Policy: As of May 1, 2024, and as per CDC guidelines, students and community members are no longer mandated to isolate for 5 days if they are COVID-19 positive. They must continue to wear a mask when around others for 10 days post a positive COVID-19 test. As with all infectious illnesses, we ask that community members avoid crowded public areas until fever-free for 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medication). While symptoms may last longer than fever, it is important to monitor symptoms for improvement. If symptoms do not improve or worsen, community members are urged to seek medical advice before returning to full activities.

Lateness:

Because lateness is disruptive to seminars, students who arrive more than 7 minutes after class is underway or depart more than 15 minutes before the class session has ended will be marked as late. Scheduling issues are not an excuse to be consistently late. Three late marks will count as one unexcused absence in calculating final course grade deductions.

Late Work Policy:

Life happens and sometimes submitting assignments on time is simply not possible. This is by no means the end of the world! Unless explicitly stated otherwise, I am generally flexible with extension requests made at least 48 hours before a given deadline. The earlier you reach out, the happier I'll be to grant your extension. Whatever happens, communication is our friend and helps me help you. For late work received without notice, there is a 3-point deduction per 24 hours that the assignment is late. So, for example, if a discussion post is due on Thursday at 2:00 pm but is turned in on Monday morning, there would be a 9-point deduction (Friday, Saturday, Sunday.)

Office Hours:

My office hours from 11:00 am – 1:00 pm on Wednesdays are **for you** to drop by (announced or scheduled, appointments are taken first) and chat about how the course is going, talk more about the material, and/or ask any questions you might have. Don't feel like you have to have something

prepared; some of the best thinking is done through informal conversations. If you can't make this time, send me an email, and we'll work out a time that works for both of us.

Email:

Though not always possible, I do my best to respond to emails within 48 hours. If they are time-sensitive (deadlines, grades, presentations, etc.), I will usually respond within 24 hours. If you have not heard from me, assume there is a good reason. To be clear, negligence or lack of preparation on the part of a student does not necessarily constitute a time-sensitive emergency for me. Please check your email frequently, as I will post/send course announcements there and to Moodle.

Bryn Mawr College Sex Discrimination and Sex-Based Harassment Policy:

Bryn Mawr/Haverford College is committed to fostering a safe and inclusive living and learning environment where all can feel secure and free from harassment. All forms of sex discrimination, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, domestic violence, and dating violence, are violations of Bryn Mawr/Haverford's policies, whether they occur on or off campus. Bryn Mawr/Haverford faculty are committed to helping to create a safe learning environment for all students and for the College community as a whole. If you have experienced any form of gender or sex-based discrimination, harassment, or violence, know that help and support are available. Staff members are trained to support students in navigating campus life, accessing health and counseling services, providing academic and housing accommodations, and more.

The College strongly encourages all students to report any incidents of sex discrimination and/or sex-based harassment. Please be aware that all Bryn Mawr/Haverford employees (other than those designated as confidential resources such as counselors, clergy, and healthcare providers) are required to report information about such discrimination and harassment to the Bi-College Title IX Coordinator.

Information about the College's Sex Discrimination and Sex-Based Harassment Policy, reporting options, and a list of campus and local resources can be found on the College's website: <https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/policies-guidelines-handbooks/sex-discrimination>

Accessibility Policy:

Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first speak with Access Services. Students can email accessservices@brynmawr.edu to request an appointment to begin this confidential process. If eligible for accommodations as per Access Services, students should schedule an appointment with the professor as early in the semester as possible to share their verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website. (<http://www.brynmawr.edu/access-services/>)

Any student who has a disability-related need to record this class must first be found eligible to do so by Access Services and must share this eligibility with me, the instructor. Class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded.

Bryn Mawr College Honor Code:

The text of the honor code can be found here: <https://sga.blogs.brynmawr.edu/honor-board/honor-code/>

Course-Specific Academic Integrity Policy:

1. The submission of all assignments, written and otherwise, for this course will be taken as an explicit statement that said work is your own.

2. **You should not use LLM's or other AI programs (e.g., ChatGPT) in any capacity for this course.** Not even for summaries. Note that the material generated by these programs may be and is often inaccurate, incomplete, or far too vague to be of any significant use. Most of all, please beware that the use of AI will stifle your own independent creativity, intellectual confidence, and analytical skillset (the development of which is the entire point of this course).

3. **You may not submit any work (no matter how much it's revised) generated by an AI program as your own.**

These models are fundamentally built by and on plagiarism and the theft of intellectual property to enrich a few oligarchs while destroying the environment and public capacity for cultural memory (they literally destroy old books). This destruction is socialized, and the public must pay for it, while all profits are strictly private, threatening the savings and meager investments of working class people with a speculative bubble of historic proportions. If/when this bubble does burst, the tech-oligarchs will no doubt be bailed out with taxpayer money, while many ordinary people will be sent to the poorhouse (assuming they aren't already there). While it might seem innocent enough, at this point, to use AI for assignments is to make an alliance with the forces of capital who explicitly and at every turn announce their disdain for humanity, democracy, the environment, and the lives of people like you and I. It is to choose subjection for temporary convenience. We must collectively build an alternative cultural and personal calculus. We don't kneel.

My Teaching at a Glance:

I am a first-generation college graduate from rural North Carolina. I was a Black Studies major at Duke, after which I did an M.A. in Black Studies and a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia. I've always loved books and reading, and I think reading certain books can change you, just a little. My relationship with writing is hot and cold. I like to hike, camp, fish, and ride my bike. I am a vegetable farmer at heart and see the classroom as a space of cultivation. Learning, then, strikes me as a journey through the secret lives of plants (this is the name of an amazing album by Stevie Wonder). I want you to do well in the course, but more importantly, I want you to understand and respect the conditions that gave rise to the material and the traditions. There are people who would not want us to have this class and that's worth keeping in mind as we go through it.

Required Texts:

Jean Toomer, *Cane* (1923)
Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (1928)
Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maud Martha* (1953)
Jewelle Gomez, *The Gilda Stories* (1991)

All other texts for the course will be provided in PDF form by the instructor. **Please email me if you are having any trouble getting the books.**

There will be a range of "optional" texts, videos, songs, and films, posted to the class Moodle and they are just that, **optional**. However, you may always bring up an optional text in class discussion and/or write about

it. In some cases, you will find them helpful for writing about specific texts or themes. In other cases, they will just be something we don't have time to get for that I think is either cool, moving, smart, etc.

Assignments:

- 15% **Discussion Posts & Comments:** One Set Every 3 Weeks, Starting Week 2 -- **4**
- Total, Due by end of Week 13**, 250 words
- 20 % **Participation:** Attendance + Quality of Contribution to Large & Small Group Discussions + Writing on In-Class Assignments + Quizzes
- 20% ***Event Write Ups (2)* Attendance at 2 out of 3 talks on 9/25, 10/30, and 11/13 are required to be in the course.**
- 20 % **In-Class Midterm:**
- 25 % **Final Exam:**

There is more detailed information about each assignment on the course Moodle.

Course Schedule:

The schedule lists the readings you will be responsible for that day and will certainly change. I will email you updates accordingly and the most updated version will always be available on Moodle.

Week 1: 9/1 - Course Introduction

9/3 – Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory” (1987)
“St. Juju” by Rivers Solomon, (2019)

Week 2: 9/8 – Jennifer L. Morgan, Introduction, pp. 1-11, & “‘Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder:’ Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770,” pp.12-49, *Laboring Women: Gender, Reproduction, and New World Slavery* (2004)

9/10 – *The Gilda Stories*, Chapter 1: Louisiana 1850, pp. 9-51

Week 3:

9/15 – *The Gilda Stories*, Chapter 2: Yerba Buena, 1890 pp. 53-101
Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” (1895); “Ode to Ethiopia” (1895)

9/17 – Angelina Grimké, “Goldie,” Parts I & II

Week 4: 9/22 Paul Laurence Dunbar, “The Haunted Oak,” (1913)
Claude McKay, “If We Must Die,” (1919)
Jean Toomer, *Cane* (1923), Part I

9/24 – Toomer, *Cane* Part II

Week 5: 9/29 –

George Hutchinson, “Jean Toomer’s *Cane* and the Ambiguity of Identity,” *The New York Review*, 2018

Jessica Baldanzi, “Stillborns, Orphans, and Self-Proclaimed Virgins: Packaging and Policing the Rural Women of *Cane*,” *Genders*, 2005: <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998->

[2013/2005/08/01/stillborns-orphans-and-self-proclaimed-virgins-packaging-and-policing-rural-women-cane](#)

10/1 – Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (1928), Chapters 1-10
Deborah McDowell, Intro to *Quicksand*

Week 6: 10/6 – *Quicksand*, cont., Chapters 11-21

10/8 – *Quicksand*, cont., Chapters 22-26
Ann Hostetler, “The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*,” *African American Review*, 1997, pp. 23-39

Fall Recess 10/14/24 – 10/18/24

Week 7: 10/20 – Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” *Souls*, 2016, pp. 166 - 173

10/22 – *The Gilda Stories Chapter 3: Rosebud Missouri*, 1921, pp. 103-128
View Before Class: *Sinners*, Ryan Coogler, (2025)

Week 8: 10/27 – Countee Cullen, “Threnody for a Brown Girl” (1925)
Zora Neale Hurston, “Sweat,” (1926) & “The Characteristics of Negro Expression,” (1934)

10/29 – Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maud Martha* (1953), Chapters 1-14, pp. 1-59

Week 9: 11/3 – *Maud Martha*, cont., Chapters 15-25, pp. 60-142

11/5 – *Maud Martha*, cont., Chapters 25-31, pp. 142-180

Week 10: 11/10 – Angela Davis, “Women and Capitalism,” pp. 146-176

**11/12 – Angela Davis, “Marcuse’s Legacies,” pp. 43-50
Herbert Marcuse, “Introduction,” to *The Paralysis of Criticism: Society Without Opposition*

****Seminar with Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor on the Political Lives of Angela Davis**
2:40-5:40pm

Week 11: 11/17 – *The Gilda Stories*, Chapter 5: Off-Broadway: 1971, p. 167-194
James Baldwin, “An Open Letter to My Sister Angela Y. Davis” (1970)
Listening: Gil Scott-Heron, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (1970)
Nina Simone “Mississippi Goddamn,” (1964)

11/19 – Nikki Giovanni, “For Saundra,”
Audre Lorde, “Who Said it Was Simple,” (1973)
Lorde, “A Woman Speaks,” (1997)

Week 12: 11/24 – *The Gilda Stories*, Chapter 6: Down by the Riverside, 1981, pp.195-217

11/28 Thanksgiving: No Class

Week 13: 12/1 – *The Gilda Stories*, Chapter 7: Hampton Falls, New Hampshire, 2020, pp. 219-231

12/3 – *The Gilda Stories*, Chapter 8: Land of Enchantment 2050, pp. 233-252

Week 14: 12/8 – TBD

12/10 – Open

****Final Exam TBD****