Brandeis University
Afro-American Literature of the Twentieth Century
AAAS 79B

Professor: Melissa Berry Pearson, PhD
Email: drmelbpearson@gmail.com

Course Description:
This introductory course focuses on major works of literature by prominent African American writers of the 20th century as well as literary theories that have addressed specifically questions of black writing and representation. We will examine the essential themes, aesthetic concerns, and textual strategies that characterize African American literature of the 20th century, attending to the specific link between African American literary production and changes in the social and political landscape of the United States.

Major thematic emphasis will be given to the following topics: passing; the quest for self-actualization; the double-burden of racism and sexism; and strategies for coping with injustice and resisting racism. Further attention will be paid to the ways that literature by African Americans has been used to assert black humanity, revise history, and redress historical injury.

Course Objectives:
• To trace the development of African American literature of the 20th century by attending to issues of content, style, and genre in African American writing.
• To become familiar with major literary figures of the 20th century.
• To understand the social, political, and religious ideas influencing these writings, especially those concerning the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, Black Arts Movement, and Contemporary literature.*
• To appreciate the critical connections between historical eras and events and the formation of narrative.
• To understand African-American literature as illustrative of the canon of American literature as a whole.
• To produce competent oral and written analyses of literature.
Required Texts:

ISBN: 9780916397593
Publisher: Manic D Press

Butler, Octavia. (1979). *Kindred*
ISBN: 9780807083697
Copyright Year: 2003
Publisher: Beacon Press

Ellison, Ralph. (1952) *Invisible Man.*
ISBN: 9780679732761
Copyright Year: 1995
Publisher: Penguin Random House, Inc

ISBN: 9781401210984
Copyright Year: 2008
Publisher: Vertigo

Jones, Saeed. (2014). *Prelude to Bruise.*
ISBN: 97815668993749
Copyright Year: 2014
Publisher: Coffee House Press

Larsen, Nella. (1929) *Passing.*
ISBN: 9780375758133
Copyright Year: 2002
Publisher: Penguin Random House, Inc

Whitehead, Colson. (2011). *Zone One*
ISBN: 9780307455178
Copyright Year: 2011
Publisher: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group

Assignments:

3 – **Critical Reading Responses** – For the critical reading responses, you will review a journal article or book chapter that closely examines the novels we are reading. The format for the critical reading response should be divided into four parts (listed below). Critical reading responses are required for Nella Larsen’s, Passing, Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and Octavia Butler’s Kindred. You should bring an additional copy of your response to share with the class (pair & share). (Details for this assignment will be shared through LATTE).

4- **Mapping the Critical Conversation exercises** – You will conduct rhetorical analysis to track of the remaining readings by rhetorical analysis. We’ll discuss the answers throughout discussions. Mapping exercises will be due at the close of each reading: Gates, Blackman, Jones, Johnson, and Whitehead

1 – **Final Critical Literary Analysis** – 8 – 10 pages Critical Analysis (Details for this assignment will be shared through LATTE)
Grading Policy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical Reading Responses</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mapping exercise</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm Exam</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Critical Literary Analysis</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation/Attendance</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Course Policies:

**Late papers** will not be accepted except in cases of emergency. If unforeseen circumstances place you at risk for submitting a paper after its due date, please contact me in advance to arrange an alternate time to submit your paper.

Emailed papers are not accepted. Please turn in hard-copies of all written papers.

You will have the opportunity to revise one paper over the course of the semester and will have until the last day of class to submit the revised paper. The grade on revised papers will effectively replace the grade given to the first version.

**Attendance & Participation:**

You should commit to attending every class session when the college is open. Three or more unexcused absences will affect your grade significantly, and I will ask you to consider dropping the course. When you are absent, you should show me documentation from athletic and medical personnel. Please tell me at the beginning of the semester about religious exemptions, athletic exemptions, and documented disabilities. If you have questions about documenting a disability or requesting academic accommodations, you should contact Beth Rodgers-Kay in Academic Services (x6-3470 or brodgers@brandeis.edu.) Letters of accommodation should be presented at the start of the semester to ensure provision of accommodations: they cannot be granted retroactively. Unexcused absences affect your grade.

**Laptops/Cellphone** or any other electronic means of communication is strictly prohibited in class.

**Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism:**

You are expected to fulfill your class requirements honestly. Plagiarism is when you use someone else's ideas, language, or work and pass it off as your own. This is theft, and it is cheating. Plagiarism is unforgivable in this class, as in all of your classes in this university. Students found guilty of plagiarism risk failure of the course and appearance before the university’s board of judicial affairs. If you are unsure about how to cite others’ ideas, please see me or http://brandeis.libguides.com/citations.

Please check the LATTE course site for more information on university policy related to exemptions, accommodations, and plagiarism.”
Criteria for Papers:

• Content: Your paper should thoroughly and insightfully address your topic and present your own original analysis. Arguments must be stated in clear, substantive, contestable thesis in the introduction and supported with appropriate evidence throughout the paper. The paper should effectively incorporate source material with spare but effective use of quotation.

• Clarity: Your paper must be written in a lucid and well-organized way. In particular, paragraphs generally should begin with precise topic sentences, followed by clear, well-organized sentences that support the topic sentence. You should use transitional words and phrases effectively to guide the reader through the information. Your paper should have a strong introduction and a satisfying conclusion.

• Format: Parenthetical citations and the bibliography or list of works cited should conform to MLA style. Your paper must include an original and thoughtful title.

• Readability: Your paper should be written in an engaging, concise, thoughtful prose that is free of grammatical and typographical errors. As you write and revise your paper, please think about tone and word choice.
Course Schedule

Note: We will follow this syllabus as closely as possible. If revisions are necessary, I will make them accordingly and notify you of any changes in advance.

Writing about African American Literature Mapping the Critical Conversation - Exercise


W. 8/31 - Gates, Signifying Monkey, Ch. 4 “Trope of the Talking Book”
Gates, Signifying Monkey, Ch. 6 “Blackness of Blackness” – Ishmael Reed (pdf)

R. 9/1 – Library Session –
Critical Reading Response Exercise finding literary criticism
Harlem Renaissance – Van Vechten Collection

M. 9/5 – No Class – Labor Day
W. 9/7– Larsen, Passing, Pt.1 Encounter
R. 9/8 – Larsen, Passing, Pt.2 Re-Encounter

M. 9/12 - Larsen, Passing, Pt. 3 Finale
W. 9/14 – Larsen, Critical Reading Response –due in class-- Pair & Share
R. 9/15 – Ellison, Invisible Man – Prologue – Chpt. 1

M. 9/19 - Chpts. 2-8
W. 9/21 -- Chpts. 9-13
R. 9/22 -- Chpts. 14-21

M. 9/26 - Chpts. 22-24
W. 9/28 - Ellison, Critical Reading Response due in class – Pair & Share
R. 9/29 - Ellison, Critical Reading Response due in class – Pair & share

M. 10/3 – No Class -- Rosh Hashanah
W. 10/5 – Butler, Kindred -- Prologue
R. 10/6 – Butler, Kindred -- The River

M. 10/10 – Butler, Kindred – The Fire
W. 10/12 – No Class -- Yom Kippur
R. 10/13 – Butler, Kindred – The Fall
M. 10/17 – Butler, Kindred – The Fight
W. 10/19 – Butler, Kindred – The Storm
R. 10/20 -- Butler, Kindred – The Rope
M. 10/24 -- Critical Reading Response – Pair/Share
W. 10/26 -- Critical Reading Response – Pair/Share
R. 10/27 – Blackman, Po Man’s Child

M. 10/31 – Blackman, Po Man’s Child
W. 11/02 – Blackman, Po Man’s Child -- Mapping due
R. 11/03 – Pleece, Johnson -- Incognegro

M. 11/07 – Pleece, Johnson -- Incognegro
W. 11/09 – Pleece, Johnson -- Incognegro
R. 11/10 – Pleece, Johnson – Incognegro – Mapping due

M. 11/14 – Whitehead, Zone One
W. 11/16 – Whitehead, Zone One
R. 11/17 – Whitehead, Zone One

M. 11/21 Whitehead, Zone One – Mapping due
W. 11/23 Thanksgiving
R. 11/24 Thanksgiving

M. 11/28 – Jones, Prelude to Bruise
W. 11/30 – Jones, Prelude to Bruise
R. 12/1 – Jones, Prelude to Bruise – Mapping due

M. 12/5 -- Workshop – Writing a Literary Critical Analysis
W. 12/7 – Last Day – Mapping exercises review

Final Exam – TBA – Literary Critical Analysis due
Afro-American Literature of the Twentieth Century
Student Questionnaire

Name ________________________________________________

1. What motivated you to take this class, and what do you hope to gain from it?

2. What familiarity, if any, do you have with African American literature?

3. What in general, do you believe, the study of literature can or should teach you about society, identity, and ethical (socially responsible) citizenship?

4. To what extent do you feel comfortable discussing issues of identity, difference, social inequity, and diversity? To what extent do you feel that these topics are necessary when discussing literature?