

“Living in a nation of people who *decided* that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom *and* mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer.”

— Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

“I seek in fiction some hint that imagination can change the world, that the world is unfinished but fixable—a hint that we are not always doomed to make copies of copies but possess the power to see differently and the guts and good fortune to render accessible to others some glimmer of what our souls experience.

Stories, after all, are a gift. Unless we are willing to imagine what it might feel like inside another skin, we are imprisoned within our own.”

— John Edgar Wideman

African American Literature
English 219-001
Fall 2007
Tues & Thurs 1:20-2:50
Kolf 159

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Thurs 11:30-1:00

In this course we will explore the histories and experiences of African Americans through the window of American literature. We will examine how the lives of black men and women have diverged from, paralleled, and intertwined with the experiences of other “races” or ethnic groups in the United States. Through in-depth analysis of African American literary traditions alongside the elaborate mythologies of race and racial difference that continue to shape our lives in a variety of ways, we achieve a better understanding of American society—its history, its art, and, above all, its people.

Attendance and Participation

Active engagement—with our readings, with our class discussions, and with our paper topics—is the key to success in this course. I expect everyone to participate in our class discussions. Each student should develop his or her own strategies for keeping track of the issues and ideas raised in class. Frequent quizzes will ensure that everyone is keeping up with the reading.

Your attendance and participation average will drop by one letter grade for **each** absence following the first two (please note that this is 25% of your final grade). Each tardiness equals ½ an absence. Journal entries are not adequate substitutes for attending class and participating in our discussions. Late work will not be accepted unless arrangements are made in person prior to the due date. I will not accept written assignments from you after an excessive number of absences.

Reading Journals

This course requires two weekly writing assignments in the form of a reading journal. In your reading journal you will write about each text as you read it for each class period. Journals should record your reactions to and thoughts about the assigned readings. You can include plot summaries if you find them useful, but also be sure to include **you**—your ideas, your opinions, your interpretations. When it comes to writing papers, your journals will be most useful to you if you have been recording specific details, passages, and page numbers. I will collect journal entries throughout the semester, so make sure that each entry has your name on it and that all entries are kept in a binder or folder with detachable pages. You will submit your complete reading journal on the final day of class.

**Final Project: Paper (10-12 pages typed & double-spaced)
Presentation (10-15 minutes, with a 1-page single-spaced & double-sided handout
for the class)**

For your final project you will choose a modern or contemporary event, issue, figure, or cultural artifact that somehow speaks to the issue of race in America. Please take the time and thought to select a topic that truly interests you. Once your topic has been approved, you will do further research. The goal of your final project is to put your research to good use as a way of understanding and interpreting our readings—as well as our discussions of them—this semester; at the same time, our readings and discussions must inform your understanding and analysis of the research. You will be reading our texts **through** your topic and your topic **through** our texts. Topic proposals are due by Tuesday, October 23; proposals should provide a brief overview of the potential topic, a brief explanation of why you want to work on it, and a brief description of potential connections with the texts we have read so far. Because no duplication of topics will be allowed, you are strongly advised to put serious thought and effort into selecting a topic **starting now** and to submit your proposal as early as possible.

The final weeks of class will be devoted to presentations based on your final projects. Students will share their research with the class in formal presentations (10-15 minutes in length) as well as in one-page handouts to be distributed to all members of the class. Presentations and handouts will offer a brief introduction to and overview of your topic while also explaining the connections you make between the topic and our readings. The central goal of your presentation will be to share with the class key ways in which our texts have influenced or shaped your understanding of the topic you select and *vice versa*. A successful and effective set of presentations will enable each of us to leave this class with a significantly expanded range of knowledge concerning race in American culture and history. These final weeks of class also will allow us to revisit the texts we have studied throughout the semester in order to explore exciting new ways of reading and interpreting them.

Required Texts (available at University Books & More)

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845)
Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)
Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945)
Ann Petry, *The Street* (1946)

Required Supplementary Readings (Electronic Reserves, Polk Library)

Phillis Wheatley, Selections from *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*
Etheridge Knight, “Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane”
Robert Hayden, “Frederick Douglass”
Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again”
Sonia Sanchez, “Poem for July 4, 1994” (For President Václav Havel)

Calculation of Final Grades

Attendance, Participation, and Quizzes: 25%

Journals: 20%

Final Project: Paper 35%, Presentation & Handout 20%

Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Appropriate measures will be taken if it occurs. I follow University policies concerning academic misconduct. The following description of plagiarism is found in the University's Student Code of Discipline: "submitting a paper or assignment as one's own work when a part or all of the paper or assignment is the work of another; submitting a paper or assignment that contains ideas or research of others without appropriately identifying the sources of those ideas."

Tentative Schedule

Thurs Sept 6: Paired Interviews & Introductions

Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773)

Discuss First Reading Journal Entry

Begin Course Overview

Tues Sept 11: Conclude Course Overview

Etheridge Knight, "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane" (**e-reserve**)

Due: First Journal Entry

Thurs Sept 13: **Phillis Wheatley**, from *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*: "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c"; "To His Excellency General Washington" (**e-reserve**)

Begin Reports on Group Work

Tues Sept 18: Conclude Group Reports on "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth" and "To His Excellency General Washington"

Wheatley, all prefatory material from *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (Phillis Wheatley's portrait, John Wheatley's letter, "To the Publick," etc.) (**e-reserve**)

Thurs Sept 20: **Frederick Douglass**, *Narrative*, Preface through Chapter 5 (pp. 31-62)

Tues Sept 25: **Douglass**, *Narrative*, Chapters 6-10 (pp. 63-106)

Thurs Sept 27: Douglass, *Narrative*, Chapter 11 through Appendix (pp. 106-25)

Robert Hayden, “Frederick Douglass” (e-reserve)

Tues Oct 2: Discuss Guidelines for Final Project (handout)

Thurs Oct 4: Octavia Butler, *Kindred*, “Prologue,” “The River,” “The Fire” (pp. 9-51)

Tues Oct 9: Butler, *Kindred*, “The Fall” (pp. 52-107)

Thurs Oct 11: Butler, *Kindred*, “The Fight” (pp. 108-88)

Tues Oct 16: Butler, *Kindred*, “The Storm,” “The Rope,” “Epilogue” (pp. 189-264)

Thurs Oct 18: Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Chapters 1-9 (pp. 1-79)

Tues Oct 23: Himes, *If He Hollers*, Chapters 10-13 (pp. 80-121)

Topics for Final Project due by this date

Thurs Oct 25: Himes, *If He Hollers*, Chapters 14-19 (pp. 122-72)

Tues Oct 30: Himes, *If He Hollers*, Chapter 20 to end (pp. 173-203)

Thurs Nov 1: Review Guidelines for Final Project (handout)

Final Project Workshop

Tues Nov 6: Ann Petry, *The Street*, Chapters 1-4 (pp. 1-112)

Thurs Nov 8: Petry, *The Street*, Chapters 5-10 (pp. 113-256)

Tues Nov 13: Petry, *The Street*, Chapters 11-15 (pp. 257-371)

Thurs Nov 15: Petry, *The Street*, Chapter 16-end (pp. 372-436)

Tues Nov 20: Presentations on Final Projects

Thanksgiving Break

Tues Nov 27: Presentations on Final Projects

Thurs Nov 29: Presentations on Final Projects

Tues Dec 4: Presentations on Final Projects

Thurs Dec 6: Presentations on Final Projects

Tues Dec 11: Presentations on Final Projects

Thurs Dec 13: Complete Reading Journals Due

Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again” (e-reserve)

Sonia Sanchez, “Poem for July 4, 1994” (For President Václav Havel) (e-reserve)

Course Evaluations

“The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive. One of the things that distinguishes Americans from other people is that no other people has ever been so deeply involved with the lives of black men, and vice versa. This fact faced, with all its implications, it can be seen that the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement. For even when the worst has been said, it must also be added that the perpetual challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually met. It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.”

— James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village” (1955)

“We cannot successfully choose not to have a past. But we might find a common past that, if we can claim it in all its tragicomic fullness, with all its passionate murders and lasting intimacies, will enable us to do something more than repeat our racial roles, the divisions that steal among us to mock our humanity. Perhaps we can identify the past that haunts us—not to exorcise it but to live with it, and slow the pace of our repetitions, ease the sharpness of our separations, overcome the thoughtlessness of our racial roles.”

— Scott L. Malcomson, *One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race* (2000)