

English 254: African American Literature

Dr. Michael Germana

Spring 2018

Section 001: 11:30-12:20 MWF 320 Clark Hall

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LIKE A STRONG TREE

Like a strong tree that in the virgin earth
Sends far its roots through rock and loam and clay,
And proudly thrives in rain or time of dearth,
When the dry waves scare rainy sprites away;
Like a strong tree that reaches down, deep, deep,
For sunken water, fluid underground,
Where the great-ringed unsightly blind worms creep,
And queer things of the nether world abound:

So would I live in rich imperial growth,
Touching the surface and the depth of things,
Instinctively responsive unto both,
Tasting the sweets of being and the stings,
Sensing the subtle spell of changing forms,
Like a strong tree against a thousand storms.

—Claude McKay

Introduction:

A broad survey of African American literature from its beginnings to the present, this course encompasses a range of topics including: fugitive slave narratives and their uneasy relationship to abolitionist discourse, the racial politics of Gilded Age magazine culture, the intersection of high modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, cultural nationalism and the Black Arts Movement, Afrofuturism, Afropessimism, and much more.

Required Materials:

To purchase from the WVU bookstore:

- Henry Louis Gates, Jr., et al. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Third Edition, Volumes 1 & 2
- Nnedi Okorafor, *Binti*

- Ta-Nehisi Coates and Brian Stelfreeze, *Black Panther*, “A Nation Under Our Feet: Book One”
- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Online Resources:

- PDFs of course texts marked “eReserves” can be found by following these steps:
 1. Visit the University Libraries eReserves page at <https://reserves.lib.wvu.edu>
 2. Click “Log In” on the menu list to the left
 3. Log in using your MyID username and password
 4. Select our course from the list
 5. Select the assigned reading. Readings will appear in the order we will cover them.
- Selections marked “online” are readily available on the Internet—just search for them with your engine of choice.

Course Objectives:

Students enrolled in this course will learn to:

- Identify and analyze major movements in, and defining features of, African American cultural history
- Identify genre conventions and analyze their effects
- Identify and analyze effects of complexity or ambiguity
- Locate texts in social, economic, political, and/or literary history
- Connect texts to other literary or cultural texts
- Define and employ applicable literary critical terms
- Compare and contrast texts that cross a diverse range of genres, perspectives, and historical moments
- Interpret texts within literary, cultural, and historical contexts germane to the study of African America

GEF Objective:

This course satisfies GEF Objective 6: The Arts and Creativity

Assignments:

Connection and Analysis Papers: A tradition is formed through repetition and elaboration, call and response. In each of these four short papers (1-2 pages), you will draw a meaningful connection between two texts: one that we read since the last short paper was due, and another that preceded it at any point in the semester (you can definitely take a long view, if you so choose). What you’re looking for is something that repeats or returns—a riff, an allusion, an extended metaphor, a critical frame, etc.—that the more recent text you chose develops in some way. For the first of these papers, you can choose any two of the texts we will have read since

the first day of class. But for the second paper you will need to connect either Douglass’s “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Chesnut’s “Dave’s Neckliss,” Wells-Barnett’s *A Red Record*, Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, or Toomer’s *Cane* to any text we read before the first paper was due (e.g., you could draw a connection between Toomer’s story “Kabnis” and the spiritual “Go Down, Moses,” which we will have read in week two). Consider tackling these short papers in two parts: one in which you identify what is consistent across the texts you chose (i.e., what repeats), and another in which you discuss what has changed—that is, how the later of the two texts responds antiphonally to its predecessor. For example, you might illustrate how tropes from slave narratives like Douglass’s and Jacobs’s are recycled by Charles W. Chesnut, who wrote “Dave’s Neckliss” over twenty years after emancipation. This pattern itself repeats for each of the four assigned papers.

Midterm Exam: This is pretty straightforward. At roughly the halfway point of the semester you will be tested on the authors, texts, terms, and movements we will have studied since the first day of class. More information on this exam will be provided as midterm approaches.

Final Paper: In this 5-7-page paper, you will write about Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and two other texts: one that predates the novel’s publication in 1952, and another that postdates it. Like in the shorter papers described above, you are looking for a defining feature of the African American literary tradition shared and elaborated upon by the three texts you chose. Only now the challenge is to show how the three texts together constitute a narrative, conceptual, or critical “thread” inseparable from this tradition. So, for example, you may want to show how Ellison riffs explicitly on Frederick Douglass’s autobiography while anticipating the genre conventions of Afrofuturism as represented by Nnedi Okorafor. Ask yourself: what story do these three texts tell, and why does it matter? The short answer is the primary claim of your paper. The long answer, in which you illustrate how this “thread” develops, is the body of your essay. You’ll need to draw your own conclusions, but this is the place to answer the question, “So what?” If what you have said up to this point is true, then what can you deduce about the social and cultural contexts within which these texts are enmeshed?

Grading System:

- Connection and Analysis Papers: 25%
- Midterm Exam: 25%
- Final Paper: 25%
- Participation: 25%

All assignments will be graded on a 100-point scale with grade ranges as follows:

+	100-98	+	89-88	+	79-78	+	69-68		
A	97-92	B	87-82	C	77-72	D	67-62	F	59-0
-	91-90	-	81-80	-	71-70	-	61-60		

Attendance Policy:

Because participation counts for 25% of your grade, you must attend regularly. **You can miss up to five non-exam classes without penalty.** Choose your five days judiciously. Subsequent absences will drop your participation grade one letter grade per day. **A failing grade for the course will be recorded for any student with ten or more absences.**

If you are more than five minutes late for class, you will be counted absent.

Plagiarism Statement:

Plagiarism is the (mis)representation of someone else's work as your own. It may be direct (e.g., not documenting a quoted source) or indirect (paraphrasing ideas, thoughts, etc. without due credit). In either case, neglecting to acknowledge sources for outside material is a serious offence and may result in failure for the assignment and possibly the course. Please see me if you are not sure about how to use or acknowledge certain materials.

Academic Integrity Statement:

The integrity of the classes offered by any academic institution solidifies the foundation of its mission and cannot be sacrificed to expediency, ignorance, or blatant fraud. Therefore, I will enforce rigorous standards of academic integrity in all aspects and assignments of this course. For the detailed policy of West Virginia University regarding the definitions of acts considered to fall under academic dishonesty and possible ensuing sanctions, please see the Student Conduct Code at <http://studentlife.wvu.edu/studentconductcode.html>. Should you have any questions about possibly improper research citations or references, or any other activity that may be interpreted as an attempt at academic dishonesty, please see me *before* the assignment is due to discuss the matter.

Intellectual Property Statement:

All course materials, including lectures, class notes, quizzes, exams, handouts, presentations, and other materials provided to students for this course are protected intellectual property. As such, the unauthorized purchase or sale of these materials may result in disciplinary sanctions under the Campus Student Code.

Inclusivity Statement:

The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion.

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office

of Accessibility Services (293-6700). For more information on West Virginia University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, please see <http://diversity.wvu.edu>.

Contact Information:

If you have questions about the course or concerns you would like to share privately with me, please contact me via email at Michael.Germana@mail.wvu.edu. **But please do not write to ask me for lecture notes or to request a summary of what you missed on any given day.** If you miss class and need class notes, ask one of your classmates.

You are also invited—but not required—to follow me on Twitter at [@michael_germana](https://twitter.com/michael_germana). **When I tweet or re-tweet something relevant to this course, I will use the hashtag #ENGL254. You can and should do likewise if you would like to share something with the class that pertains to our readings and/or discussions.** You may also message me through Twitter at your convenience.

Course Calendar:

January:

- 8 M Introduction/s
- 10 W Ralph Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks" (online)
- 12 F "The Vernacular Tradition Part I" (Vol. 1, pp. 3-10) + introductions to Spirituals; Secular Rhymes and Songs, Ballads, and Work Songs; The Blues; and Folktales (Vol. 1, pp. 10-12, 20-21, 38-39, and 54-56, respectively) + James Weldon Johnson, "O Black and Unknown Bards" (Vol. 1, pp. 784-785)
- 15 M **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day — class does not meet**
- 17 W "Go Down, Moses" (Vol. 1, pp. 14-15) + "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?" (Vol. 1, pp. 17-18) + "God's a-Gonna Trouble the Water" (Vol. 1, pp. 18-19) + "Promises of Freedom" (Vol. 1, pp. 22-23) + "The Signifying Monkey" (Vol. 1, pp. 30-32) + "Stackolee" (Vol. 1, pp. 32-33) + "Backwater Blues" (Vol. 1, p. 42) + "How Long Blues" (Vol. 1, p. 45) + "All God's Chillen Had Wings" (Vol. 1, pp. 57-58) + "What the Rabbit Learned" (Vol. 1, pp. 72-73)
- 19 F Phillis Wheatley, from *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (Vol. 1, pp. 139-150)
- 22 M David Walker, from *David Walker's Appeal*: "Preamble" (Vol. 1, pp. 161-164) + Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America" (Vol. 1, pp. 291-296)
- 24 W Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* Preface-Chapter IX (Vol. 1, pp. 330-362)
- 26 F Douglass, *Narrative* continued Chapter X-Appendix (Vol. 1, pp. 362-393) + **Connection and Analysis Paper One due**
- 29 M Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (Vol. 1, pp. 402-413)
- 31 W Harriet Jacobs, from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Vol. 1, pp. 224-243)

February:

- 2 F Jacobs, *Incidents* (Vol. 1, pp. 243-261)
- 5 M 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America (online) + exam review
- 7 W **Midterm Exam**
- 9 F Charles W. Chesnutt, “Dave’s Neckliss” (Vol. 1, pp. 610-618)
- 12 M Ida Wells-Barnett, from *A Red Record* (Vol. 1, pp. 670-679)
- 14 W W. E. B. Du Bois from *The Souls of Black Folk*: “The Forethought” (Vol. 1, pp. 687-688) + I. “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” (Vol. 1, pp. 688-693) + XIV. “The Sorrow Songs” (Vol. 1, pp. 752-759)
- 16 F Jean Toomer, from *Cane*: “Kabnis” (Vol. 1, pp. 1191-1218) + **Connection and Analysis Paper Two due**
- 19 M Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (Vol. 1, pp. 1304-1305) + “Mother to Son” (Vol. 1, p. 1305) + “The Weary Blues” (Vol. 1, p. 1307) + Countee Cullen, “Heritage” (Vol. 1, pp. 1354-1356)
- 21 W Zora Neale Hurston, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (Vol. 1, pp. 1040-1042) + “The Gilded Six-Bits” (Vol. 1, pp. 1043-1050)
- 23 F Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (Vol. 2, pp. 125-132)
- 26 M Wright, “The Man Who Lived Underground” (eReserves)
- 28 W Gwendolyn Brooks, “the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon” (Vol. 2, pp. 328-329) + “The Rites for Cousin Vit” (Vol. 2, pp. 332-333) + “The Lovers of the Poor” (Vol. 2, pp. 335-337) + “We Real Cool” (Vol. 2, p. 337) + “The Chicago *Defender* Sends a Man to Little Rock” (Vol. 2, pp. 337-339)

March:

- 2 F James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” (Vol. 2, pp. 413-435) + **Connection and Analysis Paper Three due**
- 5 M Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet” (Vol. 2, pp. 79-90)
- 7 W Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman* (Vol. 2, pp. 674-688)
- 9 F Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (Vol. 2, pp. 1180-1188) + Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” (Vol. 2, pp. 643-646)
- Spring Recess---**
- 19 M Public Enemy, “Don’t Believe the Hype” (Vol. 2, pp. 43-45)
- 21 W Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, Scenes 1-4 (Vol. 2, pp. 1426-1447)
- 23 F Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, Scenes 5-end (Vol. 2, pp. 1448-1468) + **Connection and Analysis Paper Four due**
- 26 M Nnedi Okorafor, *Binti*, pp. 9-50
- 28 W Nnedi Okorafor, *Binti*, pp. 50-90
- 30 F **Friday Before Easter—class does not meet**

April:

- 2 M Ta-Nehisi Coates and Brian Stelfreeze, *Black Panther*, “A Nation Under Our Feet: Book One,” Issues 1-2
- 4 W Ta-Nehisi Coates and Brian Stelfreeze, *Black Panther*, “A Nation Under Our Feet: Book One,” Issues 3-4
- 6 F Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Prologue-Chapter 1
- 9 M Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chapters 2-3
- 11 W Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chapters 4-7
- 13 F Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chapters 8-10

- 16 M Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chapters 11-13
18 W Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chapters 14-17
20 F Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chapters 18-21
23 M Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chapters 22-24
25 W Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chapters 25-Epilogue + course evaluations
27 F James Baldwin, "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis" (online) +
concluding remarks

Final Paper is due at the *beginning* of our scheduled final exam timeslot (11:00 a.m. on Thursday, May 3). I will collect these papers in my office (207 Colson Hall), so please bring them there! You may certainly turn your paper in early, if you wish. Just place it in my mailbox in the English Department main office (100 Colson Hall) if you've completed it ahead of schedule.