Special Topics: Introduction to African American Literature
English 265-02 Course Number: 10221
MWF 1-1:50pm Buckman Hall 212

Fall 2009 Office: Palmer 311
Dr. Rychetta Watkins Extension: x3445
Email: watkinsr@rhodes.edu Office Hours: MWF 2-3:30pm or by appt.

Course Description
This course will introduce you to African American literature through the themes of identity, protest and resistance, the vernacular and word play, and blues and jazz. We will read these texts in relationship to their social, historical, and cultural contexts, a fundamental method for interpreting texts about the black experience in America, to consider how the interaction of these contexts shape the literature produced by African Americans. Over the course of the semester, we will read selections from the Norton Anthology of African American Literature along with several additional works: Nella Larsen’s Passing, Shange’s “for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf,” and Sister Souljah’s The Coldest Winter Ever.

As this is a writing intensive English course, we will also discuss the practice and process of discussing, analyzing, and writing papers about literature. We will attend to the elements of fiction, the skills of close reading and analysis as well as issues of mechanics, style, organization, and argument appropriate to African American literary studies. By the end of the course, the goal is that you will have gained an appreciation for African American literature, developed a facility with the basic principles of African American literary studies, and received valuable practice in thinking critically and writing incisively about literature.

Course goals and objectives
This course fulfills Humanities F4 and F2 requirements. What does that mean? Well, this course is considered part of the broader Foundations liberal arts curriculum that is designed to lend focus and cohesion to your undergraduate experience. The goal of any liberal arts curriculum is to create a well-rounded lifelong learner who has an array of interpretive, analytical and critical thinking skills that will, hopefully, facilitate success.

This humanities course focuses on two aspects of that larger curriculum:
F2 “Develop excellence in written communication,” which the college catalog defines as “the ability to express concise and methodical arguments in clear and precise prose.”
F4 “Read and interpret literary texts.” As per the catalog description, the “critical and sensitive reading of significant works refines analytical skills and develops an awareness of the power of language.”

Additionally, this course is also considered writing intensive; thus, we will focus on the process of planning, drafting, and revising essays about literature over the course of the semester. Based on these requirements, we will focus on the following objectives over the course of the semester:
- Understand and think critically about the relationship between African American literature and the American literary tradition.
- Understand how a work engages significant social and historical events of its period.
- Recognize how African American writers engage and adapt “formal” elements of literature and rhetoric.
- Develop an understanding of the basic concepts and principles of African American literary studies.
--Recognize how African American authors negotiate the aesthetic and political functions of literature.
--Develop critical thinking and analytical skills to unpack meaning in texts and tackle problems of interpretation.
--Develop skills of concise, “clean,” and insightful writing.
--Develop an individual “voice” in written assignments. We will use the principles of literary study to develop incisive interpretations that grow out of individual insights.

Why do all of this? The hoped for outcome is that you end up better able to analyze and critically evaluate others’ ideas while also developing a better understanding of and appreciation for the literature of this period. At the end of the semester, we will all pause to consider whether these objectives have been met and consider strategies to consolidate our strengths and develop our weaknesses.

**Required Texts:**
Nella Larsen  *Passing*
Sistah Souljah  *The Coldest Winter Ever*
Ntozake Shange  “for colored girls who’ve considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf”

**Please Bookmark:**
Oxford English Dictionary: [www.oed.edu](http://www.oed.edu)
MLA Formatting and Style Guides: [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/01/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/01/)

**Grade Components**
Participation and attendance (includes in-class writing, conferences and discussion)  10%
2 Short Essay –4 pages 30%
Final Essay Revision Project - 8 pages 20%
Module Tests 40%

**Guidelines for Our Learning Community**
**Attendance** is very important in a discussion-centered classroom. A successful student will strive to attend every class and be ON TIME. Since situations do arise that may cause you to be absent, you will be allowed up to three absences, or “personal days,” for the semester. After those three instances, only absences for documented illness and documented death or serious illness of immediate family members will be considered excused. Foreseeable absences for documented school related travel or activities require at least one week’s notice; otherwise, they will be counted as unexcused. If your absence is excused, you will be allowed one week to make up any in-class assignments you may have missed. Students who have missed class time should first, get notes from a classmate, then review the notes and consult with me to clear up any questions. **It is your responsibility to get class notes and set up and keep appointments to make up missed work.**
**Missing an appointment or deadline for make-up work will result in failure of the assignment.** More than five unexcused absences will result in failure of the course.

**Participation** is determined by more than attendance. Students are expected to contribute regularly and significantly through in-class discussion and responses that are driven by an attentive reading of the materials assigned for each day. We are striving to build a discourse community based on our shared understandings of the texts we encounter, and our community is incomplete
without your thoughtful contributions. Everyone begins the semester with 100 participation and attendance points which may be reduced for a number of reasons. Examples include, but are not limited to: unexcused absences beyond three (-5 each instance), chronic lateness -more than three times (-3, each instance), lack of participation(-3), missed conferences(-10), missed class trip or activity (-10), and not logging on to or contributing to Moodle(-2).

Communication. Your success is important to me. Please visit my office hours if you have questions or concerns about a reading or assignment. Additionally, I will answer most emails within 24 hours of their receipt (except those sent during the weekend), but do not expect an immediate response to any email, especially those sent between 8pm and 8am. I am happy to respond in conference or in writing to drafts received more than 48 hours before the due date within 24 hours of their receipt. Drafts submitted within 48 hours of the due date will only receive feedback in conference if my schedule permits.

Conferences. Throughout the semester, I will hold period conferences with portions of you to help you brainstorm for assignments, review feedback, and check your progress. Missing or being unprepared for a scheduled conference appointment will result in an unexcused absence and 10 point deduction from your participation grade.

Writing Assignments
Each assignment will have its own assignment sheet; these short descriptions are included for reference only. Writing is an integral part of the learning process. Writing helps us engage ideas, retain information, and practice articulating our views on new material. However, writing is itself a process. Thus, the assignments this semester are structured to help us focus in on particular aspects of this process, culminating in a final essay that should demonstrate the skills of analysis, interpretation, and critique practiced over the course of the semester. Extensions must be arranged PRIOR to the assignment due date. Late assignments will be penalized 1/3 letter grade per day. All major written assignments must be completed and turned in under penalty of failure of the course.

Short Essays. The short essays will focus on two skills vital to literary studies – close reading and interpretation. The short essays should be 4 pages in 12 point, Times or Times New Roman font, with one-inch margins all around. Essays must conform to the rules of MLA citation style and must be submitted via email prior to class unless otherwise instructed. Essays should strive to be free of errors of grammar and punctuation. More than 5 errors in grammar, punctuation, or spelling may result in the return of the essay for revision and resubmission.

Final Essay Revision Project. The final essay will bring to bear the skills of close reading, contextual analysis, and research. The assignment will involve reworking, revising, and extending a short essay into an 8 page contextual analysis that incorporates at least 4 outside sources. The revision should expand the length and scope of the original paper into an interpretation that incorporates information about the social, political, or historical context, additional textual citations, and points of argument, in addition to correcting and improving the style and form of the original draft. Acceptable sources include articles from peer reviewed journals, chapters from a scholarly monograph, or chapters from an edited collection. Wikipedia is not now and never will be an acceptable source. You should submit your essay via email prior to class. The essay should strive to be free of grammar and punctuation errors. More than 5 errors in grammar, punctuation, or spelling may result in the return of the essay for revision and resubmission.
Module Tests. Periodically, you will be tested on terms, timelines, locations, titles, and personalities significant to the course. I suggest you keep a journal at the back of your notebook or use a two columned note-taking system in order to keep track of significant factual information.

Keep in Mind.

- All assigned reading should be completed before the scheduled class meeting. In order to be prepared for class discussion, you should: read each selection thoughtfully, jotting down any questions that may arise; read each selection actively, making notes where helpful; and reflect on the discussion questions.
- Additionally, this class will include a lot of discussion. At times, we may not see eye to eye on the political, historical, social, or textual issues under consideration. We do not have to agree, but we will hold ourselves to the *sine qua non* of academic discourse -- considered, reasoned appeal based on evidence. Thus, we will not use or condone homophobic, racist, sexist, or otherwise denigrating language in our discourse community.
- Please refrain from any technodawdling during class. These things detract from the classroom atmosphere, essentially robbing your classmates of the full learning experience and, thereby, violating the Honor Code. Leaving the classroom for repeated cell phone breaks under the guise of bathroom visits is also problematic and disrupts everyone’s classroom experience.
- Situations can and do arise that may require adjustments to the schedule of readings, discussion, or assignments. Please know that this syllabus is subject to change at my discretion.

N.B.: Please keep a copy of all graded assignments. Readings marked with an M will be available on the Moodle site.

Proposed Schedule of Readings

**Week 1: Contextualizing African American Literature**

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<th>Day</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>Introduction; review syllabus and policies</td>
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**Week 2: The Vernacular Tradition**

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<th>Day</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Introduction, “The Vernacular Tradition” 3; Etheridge Knight 1908; “Ethnic Notions” – In class</td>
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<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>“Spirituals” 8; “Gospel” 19; Walker 1617 (Listen to the selections marked with ● in your text)</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>“Sermons and Prayers” 94; excerpt from <em>The Black Church in America</em> (M) (Listen to the selections marked with ● in your text)</td>
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**Week 3: The Vernacular Tradition**

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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Labor Day Holiday</td>
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<td>W</td>
<td>“Folktales”; Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” 1041; from <em>Mules and Men</em> 1053; from <em>Dust Tracks on a Road</em> 1071</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>“The Literature of Slavery and Freedom” 151; Hammon 162; Venture Smith 168; Lucy Terry 186; Horton 239</td>
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**Week 4: The Vernacular Tradition**

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<th>Day</th>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Olaudah Equiano 187</td>
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<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>In-class workshopping on Essay 1</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td><strong>Test 1</strong></td>
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Week 5: Protest and Resistance
M Sep 21 Wheatley 213; Whitfield 483; Essay 1 Due
W Sep 23 Truth 245; Harper 491; Hopkins “Talma Gordon” 651
F Sep 25 Walker 227; Delaney 255; Garnet 354; Dove “David Walker” 2613

Week 6: Protest and Resistance
M Sep 28 Douglass 385; “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass” 387-411; “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” 462
W Sep 30 Douglass “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass” 411-452
F Oct 2 Wells Barnett 675; Dunbar 905; Johnson 791-802

Week 7: Protest and Resistance
M Oct 5 Garvey 995; McKay 1003-1010; Brown 1248
W Oct 7 X 1859; King 1895
F Oct 9 Wright 1399; “Ethics of Living Jim Crow” 1411; “The Man Who Lived Underground” 1436

Week 8: Protest and Resistance
M Oct 12 Baldwin 1696; “Everybody’s Protest Novel” 1699; “Sonny’s Blues” 1728; Brooks 1623-1649
W Oct 14 In-class workshopping on Essay 2
F Oct 16 Test 2

Week 9: Identity
M Oct 19 Fall Break
W Oct 21 Washington 570; Essay 2 Due
F Oct 23 Du Bois 692 - 730

Week 10: Identity
M Oct 26 Johnson, Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Parts 1-8
W Oct 28 Johnson, Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Parts 9-11

Week 11: Identity
M Nov 2 Larsen, Passing: Part 1 (Please read headnote for Larsen in the NAAL, 1085); Rhinelander/Jones case 129
W Nov 4 Larsen, Passing: Part 2; Child “The Quadroons” 171
F Nov 6 Larsen, Passing: Part 3; Hughes “Mulatto,” 227; “Passing” 281

Week 12: Identity
M Nov 9 Test 3
W Nov 11 Shange, “for colored girls. . .” through end; Please read headnote for Shange in NAAL, 2553
Th Nov 12 Performance: “for colored girls. . .” 7:30pm at Hattiloo Theater, 656 Marshall Ave, Memphis
F Nov 13 Shange, “for colored girls. . .”
Week 13: Blues and Jazz  
M Nov 16  “The Blues” 22; Hughes 1288 – 1311 & 1315-1325  
Final Essay Revision Proposal Due
W Nov 18  “Jazz” 55; Ellison “Prologue” 1548; Harper 2070
F Nov 20  NAAL, “Hip Hop” 78

Week 14: Blues and Jazz  
Final Essay Annotated Bibliography Due
W & F Nov 25-27  Thanksgiving Break

Week 15: Rap and Hip Hop  
M Nov 30  Sistah Souljah, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Chapters 8-12
F Dec 4  In-class workshopping  
Final Essay Thesis and Introduction Due

Week 16: The Future of African American Literature  
M Dec 7  Test 4
W Dec 9  Course wrap-up

Conferences on Final Essay  Friday and Saturday, Dec. 11-12 – By appt.
Final Essay Due  Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2009 @ 11am

Merry Christmas! Bountiful Kwanzaa! Happy New Year!