Course Description

This course will introduce students to a broad range of African American literary and cultural texts from the nineteenth century to the present. Starting from the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, we will examine the critical conversations and cultural movements that have been central to African American literary production. This will include the debates between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, the Harlem Renaissance, the Chicago School, the Black Arts Movement, the emergence of black feminism, and the African American crime novel. We will examine an array of texts, including autobiographies, personal essays, novels, film noir and blaxploitation, sociological studies, urban topography, prison literature, poetry, and blues and hip hop music. Drawing from the methodologies, critical and theoretical discourses, and disciplinary practices of cultural studies and literary analysis, we will explore the themes of voice and silence, home and homelessness, and individual and collective African American identity. Furthermore, students will be asked to think about the ways in which gender, class, sexuality, space, and especially race inform the writing of the American self.

Required Reading

*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass
*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs
*When Harlem was in Vogue* by David Levering Lewis
*Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
*Native Son* by Richard Wright
*Pimp: The Story of my Life* by Iceberg Slim, a.k.a. Robert Beck
*Dopefiend* by Donald Goines
*Beloved* by Toni Morrison

Course Objective (CO 10: Diversity and Equity)

Students will demonstrate an understanding of diversity through courses that focus on topics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, physical ability, language, and/or social class with an emphasis on the analysis of equity. Students will apply and evaluate approaches or modes of inquiry used to analyze diversity and equity and the social barriers to these goals.
**Student Learning Outcomes**

After completing this course, students will be able to:

- analyze artistic and critical texts within their historical contexts.
- demonstrate analytic reading skills in oral and written contexts.
- apply critical frameworks to African-American literary texts from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries
- articulate the connection between fiction, poetry, drama, film, essay, and popular culture.
- identify the complex elements important to African Americans in relation to their history, values, politics, economy, or beliefs and practices (CO 10)
- use models and theories of cultural difference to investigate topics in diversity and equity (CO 10)
- demonstrate knowledge of the history, customs, worldviews, or other cultural markers of African Americans (CO 10)
- articulate ways in which social identities such as race, class, and gender intersect in order to influence individual life experiences and/or perspectives in African American culture (CO 10)

**Course Policies**

Each student's participation grade depends upon the degree to which he/she contributes to the intellectual community of the classroom. Students will be allowed two excused absences during the semester. After two absences, the student's participation grade will be lowered one-half letter for each day missed (For instance, an A- would be lowered to a B+). Excessive tardiness will also affect the participation grade. Three late arrivals will count as one absence, so please plan to arrive on time ready for discussion.

Students will write four 6-8 page papers over the course of the semester. It is in your best interest to turn in papers on time. For each day a paper is late, the grade will be lowered one-half letter (For instance, a B- paper turned in three days late would be lowered to C-). Students who wish to write a 25-35 page research paper may do so instead of writing the four shorter papers. Here is the breakdown of your final grade:

- Class participation: 20%
- Paper #1: 15%
- Paper #2: 20%
- Paper #3: 20%
- Paper #4: 25%

**Unit 1: Gender and The Slave Narrative**

August 28th/30th: Introduction to African American Literature
Reading: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
Writing: 250 word response on African American literary tradition
September 6th: Masculinity and Literacy in the American Slave Narrative
Reading: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
   “The First Literary Genre of United States: The Slave Narrative” by H. Bruce Franklin
Writing: 250 word response essay on slave narrative

September 11th/13th: Private Space and the Special Oppression of Domesticity
Reading: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
   “Introduction” by Jean Fagan Yellin
Writing: 250 word response essay on gender and slave narrative

September 18th/20th: American Citizenship and the (E)raced Body
Reading: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
   “The Queen of America Goes to Washington City” by Lauren Berlant
Writing: Paper #1 rough draft due

**Unit 2: Black Cultural Politics in Jim Crow America**

September 25th/27th: Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Machine
Reading: *Up From Slavery*
   “The Hampton Model of Normal School Industrial Education, 1868-1915” by James Anderson
Writing: Paper #1 due

October 2nd/4th: Double Consciousness and the Problem of the Twentieth Century
Reading: *The Souls of Black Folk*
   “After Identity Politics” by Ross Posnock
Writing: 250 response essay on African American political debates of the early 20th century

October 9th/11th: The Turn Toward Black Cultural Politics
Reading: *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*
Writing: Paper #2 rough draft due

**Unit 3: Urbanization and the New Negro**

October 16th/18th: The Harlem Renaissance
Reading: *When Harlem was in Vogue*
   “The New Negro” by Alain Locke
Music: Blues selections
Viewing: *The Jazz Singer* (1927)
Writing: Paper #2 due

October 23rd/25th: Anthropology and the Return to Folk Culture
Reading: *Their Eyes were Watching God*
   “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” by Alice Walker
Writing: 250 word response about the representation of black folk culture
October 30th/November 1st: The Chicago School of Representation
Reading: Native Son
“The City: Suggestions for the Investigation” by Robert Park
“The Black Ghetto” by Horace Drake and St. Clair Cayton
Writing: 250 word response on the black urban experience

November 6th/8th: Noir in the Promised Land
Reading: Native Son
“Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance” by Robert Bone
Viewing: Double Indemnity (1944)
Writing: Paper #3 rough draft due

Unit 4: Black Literature in Postindustrial America

November 13th/15th: Pimping Fiction
Reading: Pimp: The Story of my Life
“The House that Blacks Built” by Peter Gilstrap
Viewing: Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song (1970)
Writing: Paper #3 due

November 20th/22nd: Ghetto Noir and the Politics and Poetics of Hip Hop
Reading: Dopefiend
“The Liberal Retreat from Race During the Post-Civil Rights Era” by Stephen Steinberg
Music: Hip Hop Selections
Writing: 250 word essay about the relationship between black literature and music

November 27th/29th: American Haunting and the Return of the Slave Narrative
Reading: Selections from Playing in the Dark by Toni Morrison
Beloved
Viewing: Candyman (1992)
Writing: 250 word essay on postmodern African American literature

December 4th/6th: Postmodernism and the End(s) of Black Fiction
Reading: Beloved
Introduction to “The Location of Culture” by Homi Bhabha
Writing: Paper #4 rough draft

December 11th: Conclusions
Writing: Final paper due December 18th

Paper Assignments (all fulfill CO 10)

Paper 1: What difference does gender make in the creation of the American slave narrative? As stories of bondage under slavery and the individual’s fight for freedom, the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs both draw upon the power of writing as a way of constructing an American identity. However, as Douglass’s and Jacob’s
respective narratives attest, it is the gender of the subject which determines the kinds of oppression the slave faces, the strategies of survival the slave employs, his/her means of escape, and indeed, the very definition of freedom itself. Instead of making general statements and conjectures, write a 6-8 page paper close reading one or two passages from both Douglass’s and Jacob’s autobiographies, and explain the importance of gender in the writing of the American self. You may focus on any of the following ideas in your paper: the concepts of manhood and womanhood, the significance of the family and the black community at large, the importance of sexuality, the relationships to slaveholding and/or abolitionist whites, the significance of public vs. private spaces, the meaning of the urban North, specters of violence and punishment, the place of literacy, strategies of resistance to slavery, or the relationship between national identity and the legal system.

Paper #2: In his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington espouses a philosophy of industrial education, the surrender of political rights, voluntary social segregation, and black capitalism as a method of uplifting the race of America’s former slaves. In each of their respective masterworks, both W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson explicitly and implicitly critique this viewpoint, offering alternative models of racial uplift which rely on the production of black art and culture as a means of securing equality. Focusing on either *The Souls of Black Folk* or *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, write a 5-7 page paper explaining the importance of art and literature in the ongoing struggle for civil rights. As Washington is the rhetorical stable context for the paper, you should spend the opening page outlining his program, citing and explaining passages from his autobiography. It is only after you have explained Washington’s position that you should move on to close readings of either Du Bois’s or Johnson’s book, taking special care to reveal how the text offers a different vision of social egalitarianism through the creation of African American art.

Paper #3. After the Harlem Renaissance failed to affect the political change sought by its architects, the African American novel split into two distinct forms. For Richard Wright, the crime novel and the rationalized methodologies of urban sociology provided him with the tools to create the black protest novel. On the other hand, Zora Neale Hurston drew upon anthropological studies of black folk culture and the practice of oral storytelling to provide a new vision of the African American female experience. Focusing on either *Native Son* or *Their Eyes were Watching God*, write a 5-7 page paper assessing the success or failure of the novel’s protagonist in achieving freedom. In your essay, you must first define the specific forms of oppression that face either Bigger or Janie (the law, white racism, the black community, family members, the media, forms of labor, etc.), and then you must judge to what degree either of these protagonists is able to overcome the obstacles facing him or her by the end of the novel.