This course will explore literature in what is variously called the “black vernacular”, black
dialect, or Creole. Utilizing a variety of mostly American and Caribbean texts from the
19th century to the present, the course will investigate the politics of black vernacular literature as
both a traditional and radical form of social expression. It will also explore books in written in a
"black voice" by non-black authors. Course readings will cover a variety of poetry, novels, and
critical essays. Topics for discussion will include orality and the vernacular tradition; the class
and racial politics of writing “bad grammar”; racial ventriloquism; and gendered assumptions
about the vernacular voice. Broadly speaking, this course will attempt to answer the central
question: What is the “black voice”?

[Note: I lowercase all racial terms—“black”, “white”, “brown”, etc—but capitalize all nationally
inflected ethnic designations (Nigerian-American or African-American, for example). You may
either capitalize or lowercase racial terms—Black or black, White or white—but whichever you
choose please be consistent.]

Course Requirements

There are five requirements for the course:

(1) All students will be expected to present an original short analysis, anywhere from 5 to 10 minutes
in length, on one of the course readings. The presentation must be typed and ready to hand in on the
date of presentation. These are not graded, but are considered when assessing a final grade for the
course. A presentation that is ranked “superior” may push your final grade higher, but otherwise it
will not negatively affect your grade.

(2) All students must prepare a one-page summary of one of the assigned critical essays and share it
with classmates via email or Canvas by the assigned date. You may combine your summary with
your presentation and key term, if you wish. The essay summary is not graded, but will be considered
when assessing a final grade.

(2) All students must prepare a definition of one key term for class to share with classmates via Canvas
or email. A list of important key terms is listed below.

(3) All students must complete a final paper, around 12-15 pages (or 3000-6750 words) in length, that
addresses several of the readings. You may not discuss a primary text not on the class list unless you
have first obtained my permission. The paper topic will be of your choosing, and it is expected that you will utilize several secondary sources for your analysis.

(4) All students must provide a one-page abstract summarizing the subject and argument of their final paper two weeks before the due date for their final paper; and

(5) All students must provide a rough draft or outline, a page or two in length, on their final paper, one week before the final paper is due.

Failure to complete a presentation or a summary results in a full letter reduction of your final grade (from an A to a B, for example). Failure to complete either the abstract or the rough draft results in a half-grade reduction of your final grade (from an A to a B+, for example). Failure to complete both results in a full-letter grade reduction. Please let me know in advance if you have an emergency or other extenuating circumstances where you require an extension to complete your work.

All books are available at the University Bookstore or online. All other readings will either be on Canvas or linked directly to the syllabus below.

Key Words/Terms

Intertextuality
Orality
Racial ventriloquism
Hybridity aesthetics
Primitivism
Creole
Vernacular
Dialect
Nation Language
Creole Continuum
Spanglish
Code-Switching
Black English/Ebonics
Realism
Afrocentrism
Cosmopolitanism
Novels: *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain (USA); *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker (USA); *Banana Bottom*, Claude McKay (Jamaica/USA).


Play: *Dream on Monkey Mountain*

Short Story: “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie”; Preface, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Diaz (Dominican Republic/USA),


**Course Schedule**


1/28: *Huckleberry Finn*, “Concerning the American Language”. Key words: Vernacular, dialect

2/4: *Huckleberry Finn* cont’d., “Was Huck Black?” Key term: racial ventriloquism

2/11: *Banana Bottom*. Key words: Primitivism, orality

2/18: *Banana Bottom* cont’d. Key word: Creole


3/11: *Dream on Monkey Mountain* cont’d.

3/18: SPRING BREAK

3/25: *The Color Purple*

4/1: “How to Date a Browngirl, etc”, Preface, *Oscar Wao*. Key word: intertextuality, Creole Continuum


4/15: “my graduation speech”, “In defense of the code-switch”, “honorific to black boy”. Key words: Spanglish. **Paper topic due.**

4/22: CATCH-UP DAY. **Paper abstract/outline due.**

4/29: Paper workshop. **One- or two-page paper draft due.**

5/6: **PAPERS DUE. UPLOAD TO CANVAS BY MIDNIGHT.**

5/12: **LATE SUBMISSIONS. ONLY FOR THE DESPERATE!**