What is Black Literature Now?

(Online/Canvas)
Summer Session II – 2022
July 11 – August 17

Topics in Black Studies: 21:014:401:HQ
Topics in American Studies: 21:050:488:HQ
Instructor: Bernie Lombardi
Instructor Email: Bernie.Lombardi@Rutgers.edu
Office Hours: by appointment (Zoom)

This course will function like a summer reading group: we will read fiction and talk about it as a collective via Canvas’s discussion board with several weekly touchpoints. Framing our discussion will be the question: “What is Black literature now?” That is, we will read novels and short stories published in the past few years to explore how writers use the imaginative space of fiction to evaluate the conditions of black life in the twenty-first century. The fiction we will read takes place in the United States, England, and Ghana. Therefore, we will examine black cultures and identities rooted in different historical experiences while paying close attention to how contemporary globalization and diasporas engender cross-cultural interactions and transformations. In addition to geographical and historical diversity, we will consider the ways gender, sexuality, class, age, and generation affect racialized experience, and how these experiences impact black cultural expression. Lastly, we will pay attention to the ways popular media outlets and prestigious literary prizes are responding to and engaging with this body of literature, and we will attempt to determine what this says about the world we live in now.

This term, we will focus on three novels by black millennial writers that explore experiences of being young (20s) and black in predominantly white spaces in the United States and England today (though, as mentioned above, one of the novels is set partly in Ghana).
Course Objectives:

- Interpret black cultural production through literature in the context of the twenty-first century
- Learn how different authors use fiction to evaluate the conditions of black life in the twenty-first century
- Learn how to historicize cultural texts
- Learn how to evaluate a cultural text’s reception amongst various and diverse audiences and to gauge the historical conditions that inform its reception
- Learn about the impact of race on trends in mainstream reading, publication and reception
- Develop a rhetoric for discussing race that manifests sensitivity and care
- Interpret the various intersections of race, gender, sexuality, space, age and class
- Learn to identify an author’s focus and main argument concisely
- Develop close reading and critical thinking skills
- Develop writing skills
- Develop the necessary skills for writing a research paper
- Learn about different kinds of sources
- Develop peer review skills
- Draw connections between readings across themes
- Develop time management skills and the skills necessary to be productive working independently

Note: This syllabus may be subject to change. The instructor will make students aware of changes via email.

Course Requirements

- Required Texts:
  1. Brown, Natasha. *Assembly*
  2. Gyasi, Yaa. *Transcendent Kingdom*
  3. Taylor, Brandon. *Real Life*

These books are available online at Amazon.com and should also be at most libraries. All other texts are posted on the course’s Canvas site.

- Grade Breakdown:

  Participation: 50%
  - Discussion Board Reading Posts (1-3): 20%
  - Discussion Board Reading Responses (1-3): 10%
  - Reception Questions: 10%
  - Other Miscellaneous Discussion Board Assignments: 10%

  Final Paper: 50%
  - Resource Dump: 5%
  - Theme/Thesis Development: 5%
  - Draft of Introduction and Peer Review: 10%
  - Final Draft: 30%
Description of Assignments:

- **Discussion Board (DB) Reading Posts:** On the course schedule, you should see “DB Reading Post #1,” “DB Reading Post #2,” and “DB Reading Post #3.” While most of the course discussion revolves around contextualizing and historicizing the authors and fiction we will read, these three DB Reading Posts are where you will be asked to close read the novels in order to hone your literary analysis skills. For each novel, I will pose two or three questions to guide your reading. I will assign each student one question to answer (students do not get to choose their questions). Your answers are due on the days and times designated on the course schedule. Any late posts will not receive credit. These posts are not formal essays. They should be roughly 1-2 paragraphs. Please write posts in full sentences, as every class participant will be reading them. Students’ posts will guide the class’s discussion of each short story or novel. When submitting a post to the discussion thread, please include “Question 1,” “Question 2,” or “Question 3” in the title. This will make it easier for students to navigate the discussion board.

- **Discussion Board (DB) Reading Responses:** For each novel we read, students are required to respond to two of their classmates’ DB Posts. These are typically due the day after DB Posts are due (See the course schedule for exact due dates and times) (Late policy is same as for DB Posts). Students must respond to a post for each of the two questions that they did not post about the previous day. For example, if a student posted in Question A, he or she should respond to one post for Question B and one post for Question C. Responses can be shorter than DB posts, but again, should be written in full sentences. For each response, students should point out something they agreed with/liked/appreciated about their classmate’s post and explain why. They should also state at least one way in which they disagreed (and why) or explain how they would have answered the question differently. Please note: The (online) classroom is a safe space. All students should be respectful while responding to each other’s posts. In addition, all students should be receptive to their classmate’s constructive criticism. This will enable students to grow as they learn from each other.

- **Reception Questions:** After completing each novel, students are assigned reviews of the novels and/or interviews with the authors to read/watch. They are then asked to respond to a series of questions that I will provide to provoke broader contextualization. The same late policy applies as for DB Posts and Responses.

- **Miscellaneous DB Contributions:** Specifics about these short assignments can be found throughout the course schedule. The same late policy applies as for DB Posts and Responses.
Final Paper: Students are required to write a final research paper due on the last day of the session (Wednesday, August 17 at 10 AM). All papers should be 7-8 pages long and double spaced with 1 in. margins on all sides and in 12 pt. Times New Roman font. You must submit your paper via e-mail as a Microsoft Word document (I do not accept PDFs or Google Docs).

For this paper, you will be answering the question, “What is Black Literature Now?” through a specific theme of your choosing. We will brainstorm possible themes during the first week of class, but examples include: How has mass incarceration impacted black literary production in the past ten years? How are black writers engaging with or responding to the Black Lives Matter Movement in their literature? How do African immigrant writers challenge and expand how we understand an African American literary canon? What roles do gender and sexuality play in defining black literature now? What does it mean when black writers win mainstream American literary prizes? What role has Oprah played in the advancement of black literary production? How is black literature circulating internationally and what effects does this have on this historical moment and for an international black community? How are black millennial writers redefining (black) literature, culture, and/or identity in the United States?

You are required to use at least five sources when writing your paper. Two should be scholarly and three should be from a reputable online source such as the New York Times or O Magazine. We will develop a communal bibliography for you to draw from in the first few weeks of the class. During that time, I will be more specific about what constitutes a scholarly source and a reputable online source. Although I expect that you will mention/discuss specific literary authors and their works in your paper, you are not required to do any close readings of specific literary texts. However, you can if you so choose.

We will have several touch points throughout the course concerning the final paper, including a peer review. All requirements and due dates are listed on the course schedule, but here is a simple breakdown:

July 14: Paper Topics Brainstorm
July 14: Contribute 3 online articles to “Resource Dump”
July 19: Contribute 2 scholarly articles to “Resource Dump”
July 21: E-mail me 1-2 sentences stating your finalized paper topic/theme
July 26: E-mail me a draft of a thesis statement
July 29: E-mail me your revised thesis statement
August 4: Post first draft of your final paper’s introductory paragraph
August 9: Peer Review due to partner
August 12: E-mail me with any questions regarding the final paper
August 17: Final Paper Due at 10 AM
Extra Credit Assignment (Optional): For this assignment you can choose a literary text that we do not discuss in this class and write a book review. You can choose a novel, short story, or poem to write about. Your literary text must have been first published between 2015 and 2018. All reviews should be 2 pages long and double spaced with 1 in. margins on all sides and in 12 pt. Times New Roman font. You must submit your review via e-mail as a Microsoft Word document (I do not accept PDFs or Google Docs). You should consider New York Times book reviews as models for writing your book review. This assignment is due Monday, August 15 at 10:00 AM. I will not accept late submissions. In addition, you must let me know if you are completing this assignment and which literary text you are using no later than Thursday, July 28 at 10:00 AM. If you do not do this, you will no longer have the option to complete this assignment.

Note on Assignments: In the event that students know an assignment will be late, they should inform the instructor at least three days prior to the assignment due date. If the instructor considers a student’s reasoning legitimate, he can choose not to penalize for lateness (this is completely up to the instructor’s discretion). If students are ill or unable to complete an assignment due to a serious family matter, they should provide the instructor with appropriate documentation, such as a doctor’s note.

Other Course Policies:

Students should never hesitate to contact the instructor with questions regarding the course content. This is an open and safe space for continuous dialogue, and there is no such thing as a “stupid” question. The instructor will try and get back to students within 24 hours (many times, sooner) Mondays-Fridays. However, he may not respond to emails on Saturdays and Sundays.

Students should have a plan to ensure that they will have access to the internet on a daily basis throughout the course. Technical problems, failed internet connections, and computer crashes are not excuses for not completing course work. Students should make a plan for what they will do if they have any technical problems.

Students should always keep an open mind and respect opposing views. Many of the topics this course covers are sensitive and require intellectually mature and respectful participants. Being respectful and open-minded is the best way to learn and grow. Individual and intellectual growth should always be goals while taking courses in college. If students ever feel disrespected or uncomfortable during course discussions, they should not hesitate to contact the instructor.

Policy on Academic Integrity (Cheating and Plagiarism)

Rutgers University treats cheating and plagiarism as serious offenses. The standard minimum penalties for students who cheat or plagiarize include failure of the course, disciplinary probation, and a formal warning that further cheating will be grounds for expulsion from the University. If I find that you have used other people’s ideas (e.g., Wikipedia, Amazon reviews, book jacket descriptions, etc.), I will not accept the assignment because I will not be able to consider it your own work. You will get a failing grade (0 points) for that assignment and will not be able to make it up.
You are expected to be familiar with and adhere to the Academic Integrity Policy, available at http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/. Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Any use of the ideas or words of another person without proper acknowledgment of credit will result in penalties up to and possibly including a course grade of F. Likewise for cheating on exams and quizzes. Note that the uncited use of uncopyrighted material such as Wikipedia entries still constitutes plagiarism.

The department REQUIRES that the following honor pledge is written and signed on every exam, paper, or other major course assignment that is submitted for grading: “On my honor, I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance on this examination (assignment).”

- Accommodation and Support Statement

Rutgers University Newark (RU-N) is committed to the creation of an inclusive and safe learning environment for all students and the University as a whole. RU-N has identified the following resources to further the mission of access and support:

For Individuals with Disabilities: The Office of Disability Services (ODS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter barriers due to disability. Once a student has completed the ODS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and reasonable accommodations are determined to be necessary and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be provided. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at ods.rutgers.edu. Contact ODS at (973)353-5375 or via email at ods@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Individuals who are Pregnant: The Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance is available to assist with any concerns or potential accommodations related to pregnancy. Students may contact the Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance at (973) 353-1906 or via email at TitleIX@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Absence Verification: The Office of the Dean of Students can provide assistance for absences related to religious observance, emergency or unavoidable conflict (e.g., illness, personal or family emergency, etc.). Students should refer to University Policy 10.2.7 for information about expectations and responsibilities. The Office of the Dean of Students can be contacted by calling (973) 353-5063 or emailing deanofstudents@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Individuals with temporary conditions/injuries: The Office of the Dean of Students can assist students who are experiencing a temporary condition or injury (e.g., broken or sprained limbs, concussions, or recovery from surgery). Students experiencing a temporary condition or injury should submit a request using the following link: https://temporaryconditions.rutgers.edu.

For English as a Second Language (ESL): The Program in American Language Studies (PALS) can support students experiencing difficulty in courses due to English as a Second Language (ESL) and can be reached by emailing PALS@newark.rutgers.edu to discuss potential supports.

For Gender or Sex-Based Discrimination or Harassment: The Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance can assist students who are experiencing any form of gender or sex-based discrimination or harassment, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, or stalking. Students can report an incident to the Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance by calling (973) 353-1906 or emailing TitleIX@newark.rutgers.edu. Incidents may also be reported by using the following link: tinyurl.com/RUNReportingForm. For more information, students should refer to the University’s Student

For support related to interpersonal violence: The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance can provide any student with confidential support. The office is a confidential resource and does not have an obligation to report information to the University’s Title IX Coordinator. Students can contact the office by calling (973) 353-1918 or emailing run.vpva@rutgers.edu. There is also a confidential text-based line available to students; students can text (973) 339-0734 for support.

For Crisis and Concerns: The Campus Awareness Response and Education (CARE) Team works with students in crisis to develop a support plan to address personal situations that might impact their academic performance. Students, faculty and staff may contact the CARE Team by using the following link: tinyurl.com/RUNCARE or emailing careteam@rutgers.edu.

For Stress, Worry, or Concerns about Well-being: The Counseling Center has confidential therapists available to support students. Students should reach out to the Counseling Center to schedule an appointment: counseling@newark.rutgers.edu or (973) 353-5805. If you are not quite ready to make an appointment with a therapist but are interested in self-help, check out TAO at Rutgers-Newark for an easy, web-based approach to self-care and support: https://tinyurl.com/RUN-TAO.

For emergencies, call 911 or contact Rutgers University Police Department (RUPD) by calling (973) 353-5111.

The Writing Center has remote tutoring available: http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/writingcenter

For more resources at Rutgers, Newark, visit: https://myrun.newark.rutgers.edu/covid19
Course Schedule:

Week 1: July 11 – 15

Monday, July 11

1. Introduce yourself on Canvas by **4 PM.**

   Include your name, major/minor, where you’re from, an interesting fact about yourself, what interests you about the course, and any questions or concerns you may have

2. Contribute to the Canvas DB thread titled “Brain Dump: What is Black Literature Now?” by **4 PM.**

   Before we get started with the readings and discussions, I’d like to get a sense of what the title of the course means to you. Consider the following questions in roughly one paragraph: What is black literature? Why talk about black literature in the context of “now”?

Tuesday, July 12


2. Listen: “The Writers’ Room: Millennial Fiction” on NPR (44 min 43 sec)

   https://www.npr.org/2021/04/08/985451830/the-writers-room-millennial-fiction

3. Add a second contribution to the Canvas DB thread titled “Brain Dump: What is Black Literature Now?” by **10 AM.**

   This is the introduction to a collection of essays attempting to define this contemporary moment of black American literature. After reading the essay, revisit the Canvas DB thread “Brain Dump: What is Black Literature Now?” Look at your initial post from yesterday and see if and why your thoughts have changed since reading the essay. Add a second post to this thread where you: (1) Summarize how Li answers the questions: What is black literature? Why talk about black literature in the context of “now”? (2) Describe how Danielle Evans and Kiley Reid describe black millennial fiction and the experiences of black millennial writers in the NPR audio clip; how does black millennial fiction capture our contemporary moment? (3) Describe what you’ve learned from these two pieces. Were you surprised? Enlightened? Angered? Confused? Explain why. Do the experiences described resonate with yours?
Thursday, July 14

1. Contribute to the Canvas DB thread titled “Paper Topic Brainstorm” by 10 AM

Please list 3 possible themes for your final paper. After posting, be sure to look through your classmates’ contributions. When finalizing your topic, you are not bound to the themes you, yourself, contributed.

1. Contribute 3 online articles to the Canvas DB thread titled “Resource Dump” by 10 AM.

Each person is required to post 3 online articles (newspaper, blog, review articles) relevant to the final paper. For each article you post, include a 2-3 sentence summary. The “Resource Dump” is a communal space where you can share resources with each other. You will be able to draw from the “Resource Dump” when writing your final paper and creating your bibliography.

Friday, July 15

1. Read: Yaa Gyasi, *Transcendent Kingdom*: Chapters 1 - 9

1. Contribute to the Canvas DB thread titled “*Transcendent Kingdom*: Initial Impressions” by 10 AM

Write one paragraph stating your initial impressions on Chapters 1 - 7 of *Transcendent Kingdom*. When stating your impressions, include thoughts on the novel’s relevancy for this class. That is, remember the overarching theme, “What is Black Literature Now?” How does the novel speak to this theme? What perspectives does it introduce to our discussion of the “black novel” in the United States? The black millennial novel?

Week 2: July 18 - 22

Tuesday, July 19

1. Read: Yaa Gyasi, *Transcendent Kingdom*: Chapters 10 - 42

2. Contribute 2 scholarly articles to the Canvas DB thread titled “Resource Dump” by 10 AM.

Each person is required to post 2 scholarly articles relevant to the final paper. These articles must consider the theme of black literature in the
twenty-first century. They must be peer-reviewed articles from academic journals, and you must locate these articles using the Rutgers Library online database. **For each article you post, include a 2-3 sentence summary.** Like the three online articles posted last week, you will be able use any scholarly article posted in the “Resource Dump” for your final paper.

**Thursday, July 21**


4. DB Reading Post #1 due by **10 AM**

5. E-mail me 1-2 sentences stating your finalized paper topic/theme by **10 AM**

**Friday, July 22**

1. DB Reading Response #1 due by **10 AM**


4. Contribute to the Canvas DB thread titled “Reception: *Transcendent Kingdom*” by **10 AM**: Questions TBD

**Week 3: July 25 - 29**

**Tuesday, July 26**

1. Read: Brandon Taylor, *Real Life*: Chapter 1 - 3

2. Contribute to the Canvas DB thread titled “*Real Life*: Initial Impressions” by **10 AM**

Write one paragraph stating your initial impressions of *Real Life*. When stating your impressions, include thoughts on the novel’s relevancy for this class. That is, remember the overarching theme, “What is Black Literature Now?” How does the novel speak to this theme? What new
perspectives does it introduce to our discussion of the “black novel”? The black millennial novel?

3. E-mail me a draft of a thesis statement for your final paper by **10 AM**

**Thursday, July 28**

1. Read: Brandon Taylor, *Real Life*: Chapter 4 – 6

2. Let me know if you are submitting the Extra Credit Assignment and which literary text you are reviewing by **10 AM**. If you don’t e-mail me by this date, you no longer have the option to submit this assignment.

**Friday, July 29**

1. Read: Brandon Taylor, *Real Life*: Chapters 7 – end

2. DB Reading Post # 2 due by **10 AM**

3. E-mail me your revised thesis statement by **10 AM**

**Week 4: August 1 – 5**

**Tuesday, August 2**

1. DB Reading Response #2 due by **10 AM**

2. Read: “I Didn’t Write this Book for the White Gaze’: Black Queer Author Brandon Taylor on His Debut Novel” in *The Guardian*
   https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/05/brandon-taylor-author-real-life-interview

3. Watch: “*Real Life* Watch Party” (8 min 15 sec)
   https://thebookerprizes.com/author/brandon-taylor

4. Contribute to the Canvas DB thread titled “Reception: *Real Life*” by **10 AM**: Questions TBD

**Thursday, August 4**
1. Post the first draft of your final paper’s introductory paragraph to the Canvas DB thread titled “Draft 1 of FP Introduction” by 10 AM

You are required to peer review another student’s introductory paragraph by Tuesday, August 9 at 10 AM. You can e-mail your comments and corrections directly to your partner, but you must cc me in the e-mail in order to receive credit. I will pair students together.

Friday, August 5


(I have a different edition, so I don’t know the exact page numbers, but you’re basically reading the first half and stopping when you get to the heading “Transcendence (Garden Party)”)

2. Contribute to the Canvas DB thread titled “Assembly: Initial Impressions” by 10 AM

Write one paragraph stating your initial impressions of Assembly. When stating your impressions, include thoughts on the novel’s relevancy for this class. That is, remember the overarching theme, “What is Black Literature Now?” How does the novel speak to this theme? What new perspectives does it introduce to our discussion of the “black novel”? The black millennial novel?

Week 5: August 8 - 12

Tuesday, August 9

1. Send your peer review partner comments and corrections on their introduction by 10 AM. Remember to cc me in the e-mail in order to receive credit for this assignment.

Thursday, August 11

1. Read: Natasha Brown: Assembly: Finish (read from “Transcendence (Garden Party)” to the end.

1. DB Reading Post #3 due by 10 AM
Friday, August 12

1. DB Reading Response #3 due by **10 AM**

2. Read: “A Black Woman in Finance Regains Her Agency” in *NYT*

3. Read: “Assembly by Natasha Brown review—a modern Mrs Dalloway” in
   *The Guardian*
   https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/12/assembly-by-natasha-brown-review-a-modern-mrs-dalloway

4. Watch: “Natasha Brown’s Writing is a Reflection of the Times” on YouTube
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beMTF0XBo-M

5. Contribute to the Canvas DB thread titled “Reception: Assembly” by **10 AM**:
   Questions TBD

6. E-mail me with any questions regarding the final paper

**Week 6: August 15 - 17**

**Monday, August 15**

1. Extra Credit due by **10 AM** (Optional)

**Wednesday, August 17**

1. Final Paper due by **10 AM**