What is Black Literature Now?

(Online/Blackboard)
Summer Session II - 2021
Syllabus

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

This course will function like a summer reading group: we will read fiction and talk about it as a collective via Blackboard’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 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 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. Gyasi, Yaa. *Transcendent Kingdom*
  2. Leilani, Raven. *Luster*
  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 Blackboard 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 short interviews with the authors to read/watch. They are then asked to respond to a series of questions that provoke broader contextualization. These questions are listed on the course schedule. 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 18 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 recent 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 15: Paper Topics Brainstorm
July 15: Contribute 3 online articles to “Resource Dump”
July 22: Contribute 2 scholarly articles to “Resource Dump”
July 23: E-mail me 1-2 sentences stating your finalized paper topic/theme
July 27: Contribute to the Blackboard DB thread titled “Black Authors”
July 30: E-mail me a draft of a thesis statement
August 5: E-mail me your revised thesis statement
August 6: Post first draft of your final paper’s introductory paragraph
August 12: Peer Review due to partner
August 13: E-mail me with any questions regarding the final paper
August 18: 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 16 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 Friday, July 30 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.

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/academic-integrity-at-rutgers/. 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.

Policy on Disabilities:

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus’ disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form. For more information please contact the Office of
Disability Services in the Paul Robeson Campus Center, in suite 219, by phone at 973-353-5375 or by email at odsnewark@newark.rutgers.edu.

➤ 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.

COURSE SCHEDULE TBD