

"Between Afropessimism and Afrofuturism"
ENGL 3315/CRN 13839: African American Literature
AFST 3390/CRN17519: Topics in African American Studies
Hudspeth Hall 300
T/H 9-10.20am

Instructor: Dr. Marion Christina Rohrleitner
Office: Hudspeth Hall 321
Office Hours: T/H 10.30-11.30am, 1.30-3pm, and by appointment (preferably via zoom)
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This cross-listed junior level course offers the exciting opportunity to engage in depth with contemporary African American literature and culture through the critical lenses of Afrofuturism and Afropessimism. In recent years both terms have entered public discourse given the success of musicians like Janelle Monáe, as well as blockbuster films such as *Black Panther* and *Get Out*, which are on opposite ends of the Afrofuturist/Afropessimist spectrum.

Ytasha Womack has described the work of Afrofuturists as follows: "Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future and combine elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs" (9). Afrofuturism shares with other contemporary critical approaches an investment in the importance of the creative imagination and a utopian mindset to overcome racism and other forms of oppression. Afropessimism, in contrast, is a line of critical thought which, according to Frank B. Wilderson III, helps explain the structural underpinnings of ongoing violence perpetrated against Black people in the United States and around the globe; in contrast to other minoritized subjects, Wilderson argues, African diasporic peoples occupy an innately and eternally precarious condition which Orlando Patterson has described as "social death." In essence, both approaches are invested in offering ways to understand the circumstances that have been shaping Black lives in the United States as well as globally, and to highlight the agency, and institutional limits to agency, of African diasporic peoples in what Saidiya Hartman has called "the afterlife of slavery."

Our syllabus includes a range of genres to do justice to the complexity of African American literature. Whereas our class is focused predominantly on contemporary African American fiction, we will start class with acknowledging the impact of selected canonical 19th and early 20th century African American literature on contemporary Afrofuturist and Afropessimist work. We will read novels, short fiction, memoirs, poetry, and essays by a diverse set of contemporary African American authors who speak to some of the most pressing social, economic, political, and cultural issues in the United States today: police violence, voting rights, the teaching and remembering of the legacy of slavery, access to healthcare and reproductive rights, police violence, and environmental injustice, to name but a few. I will supplement the assigned primary literary texts with relevant film clips, music, dance, and visual art to highlight the impressive scope of African American culture and its contributions to Afrofuturist and/or Afropessimist perspectives, and to demonstrate how Afrofuturism and Afropessimism are at the heart of current debates about civil rights, national identity, history, and political and environmental activism.

Required books (note that insist on paper copies, not ebooks)

Toni Morrison. *Beloved*

Octavia Butler. *Kindred* (2003) ISBN 978-0807083697

Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Between the World and Me* (2015). ISBN 978-0812993547

Claudia Rankine. *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014); ISBN 978-1555976903

Solomon Rivers. *The Deep* (2022): ISBN 978-1534439870

Tochi Onyebuchi. *Riot Baby* ISBN: 978-1250214751

Additional required readings:

Occasionally I will supplement the assigned primary texts with poems, short stories, or scholarly essays marked with an asterisk (*) on the syllabus. Additional primary texts will be made available to you on Blackboard; I will ask you to find the assigned secondary sources (usually scholarly articles) on JSTOR or MLA/EBSCO, so you can practice researching online and we make use of the library's digital subscriptions. Carefully read these additional texts, print them out or bring an electronic version to class, look up terminology and references, and summarize the author's argument so you can recall, reproduce, and engage with the in-class discussion. Reading, preparing, and answering questions on these sources feed into your participation grade.

Course Requirements:

Your final grade consists of 5 parts:

1. Regular attendance and active participation in discussions in class and online
2. Quizzes
3. Film Review
4. Project Proposal and Annotated Bibliography
5. Final Project

Course requirements:

Readings

This is a reading, writing, active viewing, and thinking intensive course. Students are expected to do all the required readings before the class in which they are due and bring the discussed text and copies of any assigned secondary sources (articles, reviews, etc.) to class. As a fair warning: Be prepared to read between six novels and watch six full-length feature films over the course of the semester. If you cannot make a significant time commitment, this may not be the right class for you – but I promise it will be worth your time!

Attendance and active participation

25%

Regular attendance and active participation in class discussion are essential to your success in this course.

Attendance

Every student may **miss three classes** without giving me an explanation and without suffering any repercussions (i.e. I neither need, nor necessarily want, to know why you were not able to come to class – you are all adults and I trust you make smart decisions). Choose your freebies wisely and plan ahead; it might be wise not to use up all freebies in the first two weeks, since emergencies with family, cars, and health may happen later in the semester. It is your responsibility to catch up on missed work and turn in assignments, such as response paragraphs, on time, even and especially after you missed a class. Missing a fourth class will result in a deduction of 50 points. If you miss a fifth class, I will drop you for excessive absence, regardless of the circumstances. If you anticipate any emergencies during any point of the semester that will force you to miss more than three classes, and/or if you have CASS accommodations, please make sure to set up an appointment with me ahead of time, so we can find a workable solution.

Active Participation

In class: By active participation I mean coming to each class on time, with your books and printouts or electronic copies of additional assigned texts in hand and with concrete questions or comments about the assigned readings and films, volunteering questions and responses to both me and your classmates in discussion, engaging in group work, and being active listeners to my lectures and your classmates' comments. You can earn up to 200 points for active participation in class discussions and group work throughout the semester.

Online: Every Thursday afternoon I will post questions on the readings and/or films assigned for the following Tuesday on blackboard (BB) in the assignment section. I expect you to post a **total of 5 submissions** over the course of the semester. Articulate your work in a concise (200-300 words) but thoughtful way and always **incorporate at least one direct citation** into your response via parenthetical documentation. Responses must be submitted online via blackboard **by 10.30am** the following Tuesday, so I have time to read your submissions prior to our class to have a better understanding of what your ideas on the assigned texts and films. **Questions must be submitted online by noon on Monday**, so your peers have enough time to think and respond to them. In these submissions you apply and hone your literary and film analysis skills in preparation for your final project. You can earn up to 60 points for each successful submission, which must directly respond to the question posed via close readings and evidence from the primary text. Please do not submit these assignments as an attachment but copy and paste your work in the provided space on BB. If you do not have access to the internet at home, plan ahead and do this work on campus. The quality and number of these response papers factor into your participation grade and prepare you for class discussion. No late submissions accepted!

These 5 submissions consist of one paragraph about your expectations for the course and prior experience with dystopian narratives (due by 10.30am on September 3), 2 responses and 1 question on 3 different units, and a summary of what you learned in this class (due by 6pm on Dead Day, December 6). The 2 responses and 1 question need to be spread out over the course of the semester, so you post **a response or question for each of the three units**. This encourages you to manage your time well and gives you the opportunity to create deadlines that best fit your schedule.

Note: You may of course always submit your questions and responses early if you want or need to keep your weekends work-free. Responses and questions must not be submitted retroactively and are always due before we discuss the assigned section on which you articulate your question.

Quizzes

15%

Instead of administering midterm and final exams, I will administer four quizzes over the course of the semester, each exam covering one unit. These quizzes make sure you read and view the assigned materials, are familiar with central themes, basic terms of literary and film analysis, and are actively engaged with the key debates in class. You can earn you up to 75 points per quiz. More detailed information will follow.

Film Review

20%

To allow you to practice your writing skills across the curriculum will ask you to submit a professional, journalistic-style review of a feature film, TV show/episode, or documentary that is thematically connected to our class, i.e. engages with dystopian themes. Ideally, the review will be about a dystopian film based on a novel or short story, but this is not required. The review must not be on any of the assigned films – I will offer a list of suggestions to you in the second week of classes, but also welcome your own ideas. You will model your film review after film reviews in outlets such as *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, or *The Nation*, closely following the length, layout, focus etc. of your model. Submit a link to the source after which you model your review together with you own. The deadline for your review depends on which film you choose and to which primary text (novel or film) it is closely connected. The reviews are due as a word.docx attachment on BB by noon the **Friday** of the week we last discuss the primary text to which your film is connected. Please feel free to discuss your ideas with me early on during office hours.

Project Proposal and Annotated Bibliography

10%

Your assignment consists of two parts, to be submitted as one word.docx

1. A **proposal** consisting of two paragraphs in which you clearly state which specific text/film you are focusing on and what your tentative thesis/argument about the specific representation of Afropessimism and/or Afrofuturism is in your selected primary text (novel, short story, poem, film) is. You will showcase how your essay contributes to existing scholarly conversations about the text of your choice or adds to the existing body of Afropessimist or Afrofuturist narratives. Ideally, focus on one of the key terms and/or key debates and offer a different and/or dissenting view.

2. An **annotated bibliography** featuring at least 4 scholarly articles taken from JSTOR and/or MLA/EBSCO. I will post a sample project proposal and annotated bibliography on BB 2 weeks before the deadline. Your project proposal and annotated bibliography are due as **one document** as a word.docx attachment on BB by **noon on Wednesday, December 4**. You are also required to bring 3 hardcopies of your proposal to our last class day, so you can workshop your work with your peers. The purpose of this exercise is to increase accountability and responsibility for your scholarly work and to share your work with and receive feedback from a larger and well-informed public of peers. I strongly encourage you to come by for office hours to discuss your ideas and sources with me prior to submitting your proposal to maximize effectiveness. I will provide constructive feedback as quickly as possible.

Final Project

30%

A **research paper** on one (or possibly more) of the texts and films assigned in this class in which you articulate an original argument about cinematic depictions of dystopian worlds that engages theories of adaptation theory and demonstrates your skills as a scholar of literature and film. Your paper will be 8-10 pages long (Times New Roman font size 12, double spaced), excluding the works cited list, which forms the last page of your document. You are required to use at least 4 scholarly sources taken from academic journals focusing on 1) dystopian narratives and 2) film studies. More details will be posted 2 weeks on BB before the deadline.

The firm deadline for submission of your final project is 6pm on Wednesday, **December 11**.

Grade breakdown:

Attendance and Participation: 500 points =25%

Quizzes: 300 points=15%

Film review: 400 points = 20%

Project Proposal and Annotated Bib: 200 points =10%

Research paper: 600 points=30%

Total: 2000 points

A= 1800-2000 (90-100%)

B= 1600-1799 (80-89.9%)

C= 1400-1599 (70-79.9%)

D = 1200-1399 (60-69.9%)

F = 0-1199 (0-59.9%)

Accommodations policy:

The University is committed to providing reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. If you have a documented disability and require specific accommodations, you will first need to contact the Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS) in the East Union Bldg, Room 106, within the first two weeks of classes. Students who become pregnant may also request reasonable accommodations, in accordance with state and federal laws and regulations and University policy. Accommodations that constitute undue hardship are not reasonable. To make a request, please register with the UTEP Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS).

The Center for Accommodations and Support Services can be reached in the following ways:

Web: <http://www.utep.edu/cass>

E-Mail: cass@utep.edu

Phone: (915) 747-5148 voice or

TTY Fax: (915) 747-8712

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I am happy to make any reasonable accommodations for students with challenges and limitations due to disabilities, including learning disabilities, pregnancy, etc. Please see me before or after class in the first two weeks, or make an appointment, to discuss any special needs you might have so that I may assist you in the best way possible. Thank you.

Title IX:

Please note that accordance with state and federal laws and regulations and University policy I am obligated to report any instance of sexual harassment or abuse to the university's title IX office. If you experience or witness such an event and choose to confide in me, I am by law not allowed to keep this information confidential.

Scholastic Integrity and Plagiarism:

Academic dishonesty is prohibited and is considered a violation of the Handbook of Operating Procedures (HOOP). It includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, and collusion. Cheating may involve copying from or providing information to another student, possessing unauthorized materials during a test, or falsifying research data. Plagiarism occurs when someone intentionally or knowingly represents the words or ideas of another as one's own. Collusion involves collaborating with another person to commit any academically dishonest act. Any act of academic dishonesty attempted by a UTEP student is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. All suspected violations of academic integrity at The University of Texas at El Paso must be reported to the [Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution \(OSCCR\)](#) for possible disciplinary action. To learn more, please visit [HOOP: Student Conduct and Discipline](#).

Plagiarism is an offense against academic honesty and any instance of plagiarism will immediately be handed over to the Dean of Students without exception, who will decide on your penalty. Be aware that I take all instances of plagiarism very seriously. Each plagiarized assignment will automatically receive 0 points. I do not accept revisions or late submissions, or assignments that do not meet the minimum length requirement of original work, therefore you will fail each plagiarized assignment. Every time you use someone else's ideas or words in your papers you must reference the source. **This includes AI.** This is true for both direct quotes and paraphrasing. The same rules that apply to print sources also apply to web-based sources. If you have any questions or uncertainties, contact me well before your paper is due. I also strongly encourage you to consult the following useful website for further information: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/2/>.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The use of AI technologies or automated tools, particularly generative AI such as [ChatGPT](#) or [DALL-E](#), is **not allowed** for assignments in this class. Each student is expected to use their own critical and creative thinking skills to complete tasks and not rely on computer-generated ideas. You may use AI for purposes of brainstorming, but not for purposes of composition/writing/analysis. Any direct use of AI-generated materials submitted as your own work will be treated as plagiarism and reported to the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution (OSCCR).

Email

It is your responsibility to activate your UTEP webmail and blackboard accounts within the first week of classes. It is generally a good idea to check your email once a day; this is even more crucial if we should have to move our class online at any moment during the semester. If you do not have internet access at home, plan and check your blackboard when on campus. Responding to emails sent by your professor in a timely manner (usually within 24 hours during the week) is good professional practice and will be part of your participation grade. When sending an email, remember to always put a relevant subject in the subject line, to address me in an appropriate way, and to sign your emails with your full name, so I know who you are and in which context you are writing me. This is a professional setting, and I expect everyone to act and write accordingly. Please note that **I do not read or respond to emails on the weekend.** I will also only send emails during the weekend in case of an emergency. Thank you!

Extra Credit:

Students may submit up to three extra credit assignments on BB. Each assignment can earn a maximum of 20 points and needs to be submitted on BB up to a week after the relevant event (i.e. lecture, film screening, gallery opening, etc.) took place. I will offer a plethora of opportunities for extra credit over the course of the semester, both on and off campus.

Syllabus¹

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| Tuesday, August 27 | Introduction to the course: expectations, assignments, key terms. Some examples of Afropessimism and Afrofuturism * Interview with Alondra Nelson. Afrofuturism.net https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFhEjaal5js |
| Unit One: Theoretical Underpinnings | |
| Thursday, August 29 | Afropessimism in music, visual art, and cinema * Vinson Cunningham. "The Argument of 'Afropessimism'" * Greg Tate. "Afropessimism and Its Discontents" ** Cambridge Companion https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/ |
| Tuesday, September 3 | Afrofuturism in music, visual art, and cinema * Mark Dery. "Black to the Future" * Belinda Deneen Wallace and Jesse W. Schwartz. "Afrofuturism" * This American life/Chicago Public Radio – "We are in the future" (2017) https://www.thisamericanlife.org/623/transcript |
| Thursday, September 5 | *Frederick Douglass. "What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?" *Ta-Nehisi Coates. "The Case for Reparations" |
| Unit Two: Afropessimism and Historical Fiction, or, Bamboozling the Slave Narrative | |
| Tuesday, September 10 | Quiz #1 <i>Beloved</i> (TBA) |
| Thursday, September 12 | <i>Beloved</i> (TBA) |
| Tuesday, September 17 | <i>Beloved</i> (TBA) *Richard Perez. "The Debt of Memory: Reparations, Imagination, and History in Toni Morrison's <i>Beloved</i> " |
| Thursday, September 19 | <i>Kindred</i> (TBA) |
| Tuesday, September 24 | <i>Kindred</i> (TBA) *excerpt from <i>Antebellum</i> |
| Thursday, September 26 | <i>Kindred</i> (TBA) *Megan Behrent. "The Personal is Historical: Slavery, Black Power, and Resistance in Octavia Butler's <i>Kindred</i> " |

¹ Subject to change

Unit Three: Reclaiming Roots, Creating Routes: Afropessimism in Memoirs, Essays, Poetry, Film

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| Tuesday, October 1 | Quiz #2 *from Saidiya Hartman. <i>Lose Your Mother</i> *Markus Nehl. "Rethinking the African Diaspora: Saidiya Hartman's <i>Lose Your Mother</i> " |
| Thursday, October 3 | * James Baldwin. "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" (1-10) *Frederick Cornelius Harris. "James Baldwin, 1963, and the House that Race Built" |
| Tuesday, October 8 Thursday, October 10 | <i>Between the World and Me</i> (5-71) <i>Between the World and Me</i> (73-152) *Eva Puyuelo Ureña. "Between Hopelessness and Despair: Afropessimism and Black Nihilism in 'Ta-Nehisi Coates' Works" |
| Tuesday, October 15 Thursday, October 17 | <i>Citizen: American Lyric</i> (3-79) No Class. I am attending the ASAP conference in NYC. Read and watch ahead for next week |
| Tuesday, October 22 | <i>Citizen: American Lyric</i> (80-161) *Shermaine M. Jones. "I CAN'T BREATHE: Affective Asphyxia in Citizen: An American Lyric" |
| Thursday, October 24 | <i>Get Out</i> (Dir. Jordan Peele, 2017) |
| Unit Four: | Afrofuturism and Black Science Fiction |
| Tuesday, October 29 | Quiz #3 *W.E.B. Du Bois. "The Comet" *Mark Bould. "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF," <i>Science Fiction Studies</i> , vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, pp: 177-186. |
| Thursday, October 31 | * from <i>Black No More</i> |
| Tuesday, November 5 | <i>The Deep</i> (1-105) *from M. NourbeSe Philip. <i>Zong!</i> |
| Thursday, November 7 | <i>The Deep</i> (106-155) *Dany Steur. "Inhuman Kinship at Insensible Depths: Relating to the Non-Relational in Drexciyan Afrofuturism" |
| Tuesday, November 12 Thursday, November 14 | Black Panther. <i>Wakanda Forever</i> Black Panther. <i>Wakanda Forever</i> |
| Tuesday, November 19 Thursday, November 21 | <i>Riot Baby</i> (1-130) <i>Riot Baby</i> (131-173) *from Christina Sharpe. <i>In the Wake</i> |
| Tuesday, November 26 | * from N.K. Jemisin. <i>How Long 'Till Black Future Month?</i> * Mark Sinker. "Loving the Alien" |
| Thursday, November 28 | Indigenous Peoples' Day/Thanksgiving |

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Tuesday, December 3

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Quiz #4
*From Janelle Monáe. *Dirty Computer*
<https://vimeo.com/268498567>

Wednesday, December 4
Thursday, December 5

Submit project proposals and annotated bibliographies on BB by noon
Review and Workshopping paper proposals and annotated bibliographies

Friday, December 6

Dead Day
Submit final online submission on BB by 6pm

Wednesday, December 11
Wednesday, December 18

Final projects are due as a word.docx on BB by 6pm. No extensions.
Grades are due to be submitted by instructor

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