

**"Between Afropessimism and Afrofuturism"**  
**ENGL 3315/CRN 19043: African American Literature**  
**AFST 3390/CRN 11892: Topics in African American Studies**  
**Hudspeth Hall 300, M/W 1.30-2.50pm**  
**Fall 2022**

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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* - who 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 imagine and a utopian mindset in an effort 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 subject, 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 US 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 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 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, 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 (available for purchase at the UTEP bookstore and online):**

Shirley Anne Williams. *Dessa Rose* (1986); ISBN 978-0062011251  
Toni Morrison. *Beloved* (1987); ISBN 978-1400033416  
Octavia Butler, Damian Duffy and John Jennings. *Kindred: A Graphic Novel* (1979/2017); ISBN 978-1419728556  
Saidiya Hartman. *Lose Your Mother* (2007); ISBN 978-0374531157

James Baldwin. *The Fire Next Time* (1963); ISBN 978-0679744726  
Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Between the World and Me* (2015); ISBN 978-0812993547  
Claudia Rankine. *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014); ISBN 978-1555976903  
N.K. Jemisin. *How Long 'Till Black Future Month?*(2018); ISBN 978-0316491372

**Note: I ask you to purchase a hardcopy with the corrects ISBN number rather than ebooks;** the online pagination, if it exists, is often out of sync with the pagination I provide on the syllabus, and this makes a focused discussion and shared close reading very difficult if not impossible. In addition, studies have shown that students tend to retain printed work much better. You may of course rent the assigned texts or buy used or new hardcopies in the bookstore or online. Make sure to **always bring a copy of the book we are discussing to class** so you can actively participate in class discussions.

### **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:**

### Readings

This is a reading and writing intensive course. Students are expected to do all the required readings before the class in which they are due and bring the relevant book to class. If you do not enjoy reading and writing, and engaging with complex theoretical ideas, this may not be the right class/major for you; however, if you do, you will have a great time.

Your final grade consists of 4 parts:

1. Regular attendance and active participation in discussions in class (in person and/or zoom)
2. 7 submissions on the discussion board on BB (at least 2 each for all 3 units)
3. Project Proposal and Annotated Bibliography
4. Final Project

### **Attendance and participation 45%**

#### **a) Attendance and active participation in class: 10%**

Regular attendance and active participation in class discussion, group work, and writing assignments are essential to your success in this course and form the baseline for passing the course. By active participation I mean coming to each class **on time**, with your book in hand and with concrete comments about the assigned readings, volunteering questions and responses to both me and your classmates in discussion, actively engaging in group work, and being active listeners to my lectures and your classmates' comments. **We are still in a pandemic, so it is understood that we may have to move back and forth between online and in person instructions; if we have to move online, the same participation rules apply to our zoom meetings.** You can earn up to 200 points for active participation in class discussion.

In general students **may miss up to four classes** (the equivalent of two weeks) without giving me an explanation and without suffering 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 conscientious and mature decisions). Choose your freebies wisely and plan ahead if you know you have to miss a class. 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 prior to the day when the assignment was due. If you anticipate or experience an emergency that will prevent you from attending class more frequently, please make sure to contact me immediately so we can discuss options. I am aware that we are still in a pandemic, so communication about your status is paramount; there is flexibility as long as you keep me in the loop.

**b) Participation in online discussion: Response paragraphs and questions** **35%**

- You will submit a **total of 7** entries on the discussion board over the course of the semester: Post 3 questions and 4 responses in total (note that you must **engage with all three units!**)
- **Response paragraphs:** Every Wednesday afternoon, starting in the second week of classes, I will post a question, or a series of questions, on the readings assigned for the following Monday on blackboard in the assignment section on Blackboard (BB). I expect you to answer these questions in a concise but thoughtful manner and to proofread your response paragraphs (RPs) before you submit them **by noon on Monday**. To get full credit you must submit a **total of 4 response paragraphs** over the course of the semester. It is up to you which questions you respond to; your choice depends on your own interests and your schedule, however you **must engage with all 3 units** and **respond to at least one of your peers' questions at least once** (see below).
- **Questions:** Starting every **Friday by noon** you have the opportunity to articulate a question on any of the readings assigned for the following Monday. I expect you to submit a **total of 3 questions** over the course of the semester, **one for each unit**. These questions and your responses are the best possible preparation for our discussion in class. You may submit your question as early as noon on Friday, but no later than noon on Sunday to give your peers ample time to read and think about your question.

Your responses and your questions need to feature **150-200 words**, and **include at least one direct, parenthetical citation** from the text(s) you choose to discuss. Provide a word count at the end of each entry. Questions are due by noon on Sunday (but may of course be submitted as early as Friday noon), responses are due by noon on Monday; you may respond to my or your peers' questions. **No late submissions will be accepted!** Please do not submit your work as an attachment but copy and paste your work in the provided space. I do not have a TA, so I will not be able to provide extensive comments on all of your response paragraphs, but I will carefully read and evaluate each submission. If you wish to discuss your work with me in more detail, please come to office hours or set up an appointment with me. You can earn up to 100 points for each complete and successful question and response, for a maximum total of 700 points.

**III. Project Proposal and Annotated Bibliography** **15%**

A proposal, to be workshopped with your peers, forms the first step towards a successful final project. You will either write a traditional research paper on any of the assigned primary text or write a personal essay on any of the thematic foci of our class, or produce a creative project (a short memoir, or a chapter of your memoir). For the proposal, submit 2 paragraphs detailing the focus and if applicable primary text as well as the main research questions guiding your research or creative project. Also submit annotations on at least 4 scholarly sources; at least 3 of which you need to have found on your own on JSTOR/MLA or in an edited scholarly collection or monograph. You will also need these scholarly annotations if you choose the creative project. More details to follow. Due date is by noon on Wednesday, November 30. Absolutely no extensions. Please submit a short informal email about your project (which type of assignment, primary text, focus or tentative thesis) by noon on Friday, November 25.

**IV. Final Project: Research Paper or Creative Option plus scholarly reflection 40%**

Your final project needs to be a research paper that features 2000 to 2500 words (8-10 pages) and offers a innovative thesis on Afrofuturism/Afropessimism in contemporary African American literature and culture, and needs to focus on one of the assigned primary texts. Alternatively, you may produce a creative piece of writing inspired by one or more of the primary texts on our syllabus, accompanied by a 3-4 page scholarly reflection on your creative process and engagement with Afropessimism and Afrofuturism as theoretical lenses. More details will follow. The final project is due as a word.docx on BB by 6pm on Wednesday, December 7th. No extensions can or will be given.

**Make-up and extra credit**

As a matter of principle, I do not allow students to “make-up” for missed classes, response paragraphs, or papers. I will, however, offer opportunities to earn extra-credit, which will help improve the grades of those who missed assignments and/or have a poor attendance or participation record. Extra credit assignments include, for example, attending film screenings, relevant lectures on campus, and readings or art exhibitions on and off campus. To receive extra-credit you need to write a one page (Times New Roman 12, double-spaced) response paper about the event. You will submit your extra credit as an attachment on Blackboard within a week of the event. Each high-quality and fully completed extra credit will work towards improving your participation grade and counts as 30 points. You may submit a total of 3 extra credit assignments, for a possible total of 90 extra credit points.

<u>Grade breakdown</u>	A= 1800-2000 or 90-100%
Attendance and participation in class: 200 points	B= 1600-1799 or 80-89.9%
Discussion board online: 700	C= 1400-1599 or 70-79.9%
Project Proposal: 300 points	D= 1200-1399 or 60-69.9%
<u>Final Project: 800 points</u>	<u>F = 0-1199 or 0-59.9%</u>
TOTAL: 2000 points	

**Pandemic guidelines**

If you experience symptoms or are exposed to someone who tested positive for Covid-19 and cannot get a negative test result before class, please let me know right away, so I can either move class online or find another solution. If you test positive for Covid-19, please immediately report to [covidaction@utep.edu](mailto:covidaction@utep.edu). Following the recommendations of the CDC and the overwhelming consensus of the scientific community I encourage you to wear masks that cover your mouth and nose in class (ideally N95 masks which protect both you and your peers the best). Be aware that regardless of your vaccination status you can still transmit Covid-19; asymptomatic carriers tend to spread the virus the most. Many of your peers (and professors) may be parents of small children who cannot yet be vaccinated, take care of vulnerable elderly family members, or are immunocompromised. If we take the slogan of "Miners Protecting Miners" seriously we will accept this minor inconvenience to protect others and ourselves from harm.

**A word on blackboard and email netiquette:**

You need to check your blackboard and your email frequently, ideally once a day. If you have any problems accessing blackboard, contact the IT help desk first. I prefer to be contacted on webmail via [mcrohrleitner@utep.edu](mailto:mcrohrleitner@utep.edu). Responding to emails sent by your professor in a timely manner (usually within 24 hours during the work week) is good professional practice and will be part of your participation grade. When sending an email, remember to always put the course title in the subject line, address me in an appropriate way, and sign your emails with your full name. I will not respond to emails that do not fulfill these basic requirements of professional communication. Note that I do not read or respond to emails on weekends and holidays. Emails sent after 8pm will be read the following morning.

Cell phones etc.

All cell phones need to be turned off and put away during class time. If you need to be reachable via cell phone due to an emergency, please let me know about this circumstance before class begins and put your cell phone on vibrate only.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is an offense against academic honesty. Any suspected instance of plagiarism will immediately and without exception be handed over to the Dean of Students, who will decide on your case. Be aware that any academic institution, and especially an R1, must 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 even partially plagiarized assignment. Every time you use someone else's ideas or words in your papers you must reference the source. This is true for both direct quotes and paraphrasing. The same rules that apply to print sources also apply to web-based sources. You may safely assume that if you find a source on the Internet, so will I. If you have any questions or uncertainties, do contact me well before your paper is due. I also strongly encourage you to consult the following useful website for questions regarding how to cite correctly and how to avoid plagiarism:

[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/mla\\_style/mla\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide/mla\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide.html?\\_ga=2.19623804.558179429.1522454400-1709346682.1522454400](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_formatting_and_style_guide.html?_ga=2.19623804.558179429.1522454400-1709346682.1522454400)  
[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/using\\_research/avoiding\\_plagiarism/is\\_it\\_plagiarism.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/using_research/avoiding_plagiarism/is_it_plagiarism.html)

Students with special needs:

If you have a documented disability and require specific accommodations, please contact the Center for Accommodations and Support Services in the East Union Bldg., Room 106 within the first two weeks of classes. They will then get a hold of me via email. The Center for Accommodations and Support Services can also be reached in the following ways:

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

Phone: (915) 747-5148 voice or TTY

Fax: (915) 747-8712

E-Mail: [cass@utep.edu](mailto:cass@utep.edu)

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

## Syllabus<sup>1</sup>

Monday, August 29

### Introductions

- \* C. Brandon Ogbunu. "How Afrofuturism Can Help the World Mend"
- \*Vinson Cunningham. "The Argument of 'Afropessimism'"

Wednesday, August 31

- \* Mark Dery. "Black to the Future"
- \* Greg Tate. "Afropessimism and Its Discontents"
- \* Alondra Nelson on Afrofuturism

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<sup>1</sup> Subject to change. Modifications and updated versions of the syllabus will be posted on BB.

**Unit One: Afropessimism/Afrofuturism and Bamboozling the Slave Narrative**

Monday, September 5	Labor Day, no classes
Wednesday, September 7	*from David Walker. "Appeal" (1829) *Frederick Douglass. "What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?" (1852) *Ta-Nehisi Coates. "The Case for Reparations"
Monday, September 12	*from Harriet Jacobs. <i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</i> (1862) *Sojourner Truth. "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851) *Saidiya Hartman. "Seduction and the Ruses of Power"
Wednesday, September 14	<i>Dessa Rose</i> . (11-72)
Monday, September 19	<i>Dessa Rose</i> (73-160)
Wednesday, September 21	<i>Dessa Rose</i> . (161-237)
Monday, September 26	<i>Beloved</i> (3-105)
Wednesday, September 28	<i>Beloved</i> (106-199)
Monday, October 3	<i>Beloved</i> (200-275) *Barbara Christian. "Beloved, She's Ours."
Wednesday, October 5	<i>Kindred: A Graphic Novel</i> (TBA)
Monday, October 10	<i>Kindred: A Graphic Novel</i> (TBA)
Wednesday, October 12	<i>Kindred: A Graphic Novel</i> (TBA) *Nicholas Miller. "Transmedial Posthumanisms: Unmaking the Black Body in Octavia Butler's <i>Kindred</i> and Its Graphic Novel Adaptation"

**Unit Two: Reclaiming Roots and Creating Routes: Afrofuturism/pessimism in Memoirs, Essays, Poetry**

Monday, October 17	<i>Lose Your Mother</i> (3-83)
Wednesday, October 19	<i>Lose Your Mother</i> (84-153)
Monday, October 24	<i>Lose Your Mother</i> (154-237) *Markus Nehl. "Rethinking the African Diaspora: Saidiya Hartman's <i>Lose Your Mother</i> "
Wednesday, October 26	<i>The Fire Next Time</i> . "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" (1-10)
Monday, October 31	<i>The Fire Next Time</i> . "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind" (11-106) *Frederick Cornelius Harris. "James Baldwin, 1963, and the House that Race Built"
Wednesday, November 2	<i>Between the World and Me</i> (5-71)
Monday, November 7	<i>Between the World and Me</i> (73-152)
Wednesday, November 9	<i>Citizen: American Lyric</i> (3-79)
Monday, November 14	<i>Citizen: American Lyric</i> (80-161) *Shermaine M. Jones. "I CAN'T BREATHE: Affective Asphyxia in <i>Citizen: An American Lyric</i> "

**Unit III:**

Wednesday, November 16

**Afrofuturism and Black Science Fiction**

\*W.E.B. Du Bois. "The Comet"

\*Mark Bould. "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF," *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, pp: 177-186.

Monday, November 21

Wednesday, November 23

Friday, November 25

*How Long 'Till Black Future Month?* (TBA)

*How Long 'Till Black Future Month?* (TBA)

submit email by noon with your tentative thesis and primary text

Monday, November 28

Wednesday, November 30

Friday, December 2

*How Long 'Till Black Future Month?*(TBA)

\*from Janelle Monáe. *The Memory Librarian*

Workshopping final project proposals and review

Dead Day

Wednesday, December 7

Wednesday, December 14

Final projects are due as a word.docx on BB by 6pm. No extensions.

Grades are due to be submitted by instructor